

**Interviewee: Bill Connell**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 17 July 2004**

**Location: kitchen table of the Connell residence in Edina, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, September 2004**

**Edited by: Thomas Saylor, June 2005**

Bill Connell was born in 1924 in Bakersfield, California, but grew up in Seattle, Washington, where he graduated from high school in 1942. In August of that year, Bill enlisted in the US Navy and was selected for training as a pilot.

Pilot training took Bill to several stateside locations, and lasted through the beginning of 1944. By mid-1944, Bill was pilot of a Curtiss SB2C Helldiver (a carrier-based dive bomber aircraft) and stationed in the Pacific on the aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown* (CV-10).

On 4 July 1944, while flying a mission over the Japanese-held island of Chichi Jima, in the Central Pacific, Bill's plane was shot down over the ocean. He parachuted to safety and was picked from the water by the crew of a Japanese naval vessel.

Bill was held for eight days on Chichi Jima, then flown to Japan; he was placed in Ofuna Naval Interrogation Center, where he remained for nine months. Subsequently Bill was transferred to Camp Omori, where he spent time in solitary confinement. He was liberated in late August 1945, when US forces landed in Japan after the Japanese surrender.

By his own account, Bill spent decades recovering from his ordeal as a POW. He remained in the US Navy, retiring in 1959; after that, he worked more than twenty years for State Farm Insurance. Bill lived in Minnesota after retiring from the Navy in 1959. This interview took place in 2004 at his residence in Edina, Minnesota.



US Navy Curtiss SB2C-4 Helldiver bombers from Bombing Squadron VB-3, Carrier Air Group 3 (CVG-3), assigned to the aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown* (CV-10), fly over the US invasion fleet, during strikes on Iwo Jima on 22 February 1945.

Bill Connell flew this type of plane, from the USS *Yorktown*, during summer 1944.

Source: Official U.S. Navy photograph 80-G-304753, now in the collections of the U.S. National Archives.

**Interview key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**W = Bill Connell**

**[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation**

**(\*\*\*) = words or phrase unclear**

**NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity**

**Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.**

T: Today is 17 July 2004. This interview is for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project, based at Concordia University, St. Paul. My name is Thomas Saylor. This is our interview with Bill Connell. This interview is at Mr. Connell's residence in Edina, Minnesota. First Bill, on the record, thanks very much for taking time to speak with me today.

W: You're welcome.

T: Bill, you were born in 1924 in Bakersfield, California. Is that right?

W: That's correct, yes.

T: You said you grew up in Seattle. Went to high school there.

W: Yes, I did. Graduated June of 1942.

T: How soon after that were you in the Navy?

W: I enlisted in the Navy on August 29, 1942. Being eighteen years old, I knew that I was going to be drafted, and I had gone downtown to Seattle and I had gone to four different military recruiting offices and gotten all the papers. I brought them home and I laid them out on the dining room table for my dad, and I asked him which service that I should enlist in. He said, "I don't want you to enlist in any of them." I said, "Well, Dad, I'm going to get drafted. I'd much rather enlist." He said, "All right. I want you to go downtown tomorrow and go to the Naval Aviation Cadet Recruiting Office." I looked at him and I said, "With my grades? You want me to apply for the Naval Aviation Cadet Program?" And he said, "Yes." So I went downtown and I passed the physical without any problem and got through the academic test, and lo and behold I was sworn in as a Naval Aviation Cadet. So then I went home and I just waited for the Navy to call me and tell me what to do.

T: So the enlistment process took all of a day or less?

W: Just one day.

T: Walk in, and walk out a cadet. Did the idea of being a pilot appeal to you?

W: Yes and no. Having been raised in Seattle, in the days before World War II there used to be an annual celebration called Fleet Week, and the Navy would bring in quite a large number of naval ships, battleships, cruisers, destroyers and so forth. They would anchor them in Puget Sound and then they would have open house on those ships. This was in the summertime, and those of us that lived close by could practically walk down to the piers, and we would go out and visit the ships. I was very impressed with the Navy. So that basically I was interested in the Navy. The reason my dad suggested the Naval Aviation Cadet Program was for two reasons. First of all, he knew it was going to take me almost a year to qualify, and secondly a friend of his son had gone through the training. So he thought that would be a good idea for me. And it was kind of appealing to me to be a pilot in the Navy. That's how it all came about.

T: Earning your wings: what do you remember about the whole pilot training process? What sticks in your mind about that?

W: Well, the fact that when we started, of course we were all pretty much the same, but we knew that if we were successful in completing the syllabus that we would be commissioned either an ensign in the Navy or a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps and we would have earned the Navy wings of gold, which in of itself is kind of small organization. Those of us that were in the program were very, very interested in completing the program and becoming naval aviators.

So we did this in three stages. The first stage was what they called Pre-Flight School, at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa. We went there for three months and we participated in athletics, military training and academic training. Then, having completed that syllabus, we were then sent to various bases where we learned to fly the primary trainer. I happened to go to Oletha, Kansas. That took about three months.

Having completed that syllabus, then I was ordered to Pensacola, Florida. Now some of the youngsters went to Corpus Christi, Texas. The Navy had two places. I just happened to go to Pensacola, Florida. Pensacola, Florida, is known as the Annapolis of the air. It's not like a Naval Academy, but they have the same name. It's very impressive when you first drive up there, the gate and the water, and the base is fantastic. All of us were very impressed with that. Then when there we went through a number of different syllabuses. We learned to fly a bigger airplane. We learned to fly formation. We were exposed to instrument flying. Then the final phase was actually fleet training, where we went into gunnery and night flying and we made field carrier landings. Not on board a ship, but we practice field carrier landings on the runway. Then having completed that we were then designated as an ensign or a second lieutenant and given our Navy wings. It's a thrill to realize that you've accomplished something that very few people have accomplished during the war where they were turning out pilots by the dozens. But still and all, it was still a very small organization and being able to qualify was very satisfying.

**(1, A, 58)**

T: Not everybody made it. I mean there were many washed out.

W: Oh, no. First of all, we had a lot of fatalities. Then of course there were a lot of people that simply weren't psychologically adapted to flying an airplane.

T: I guess you only learn that by trying sometimes.

W: That's right. To give you an example, at the final base that I was at where we were doing this fleet training, we lost twenty-six cadets in one month.

T: To accidents?

W: Accidents. Yes.

T: In one month?

W: One month. It earned the nickname of, we referred to it as "Bloody Barren." Barren Field was the name, but "Bloody Barren." And it's still referred to this day. Because we were asked to do things that, if it hadn't been wartime, they wouldn't have asked us. But we flew day and night. We worked eight days and then we had two days off. Then we worked eight more days. We flew morning, afternoon and evening. Night flying.

T: Probably tired.

W: Yes, we were. It was very stressful in that respect. They subjected us to everything. So obviously there was a lot of accidents.

T: Any close calls for you personally?

W: Not while I was going through flight training. I had a very close call later, when I went through Operational Training down in Delan, Florida. It was a night over water navigation flight. There were three of us. Three airplanes. I was to lead the second leg. We flew out away from the coast and we got ready to make our turn on the second leg and we have to change formations, and all of a sudden I became totally disoriented. I could not tell which way was up, which way was down, which way was left, which way was right. I found myself in a spiral headed for the water. But I just didn't know what to do. Fortunately for me, one of the other airplanes was equipped with a flare and the pilot dropped the parachute flair. Then I could determine which way was up and which way was down and I began to circle that flare until I had a chance to calm down a little bit. We had some minor exposure to instrument flying, and I just remembered the principles and I applied them and I gained control of the aircraft and flew back to the coast of Florida. Once I got back there I knew where I was at and flew back to the base.

T: So there's a sense of not knowing really if you're flying up or flying down?

W: You see the instruments in front of you, but you don't believe them because the sensation in your body is exactly opposite of what the instruments are saying. And all of a sudden you're sitting there saying, those instruments gotta be wrong. You don't know what to do.

**(1, A, 90)**

T: Of course with it being dark you don't have the daylight to...

W: It was black out. You were out in the ocean. It was blacker than hell. There's no streetlights or anything. And fortunately this guy dropped the flare or I'd have gone right in the water. So fortunately he did and I was able to recover, and when I got back to the base and of course they had reported me missing. The two other guys had gone on. The instructor came up to me and says, "You did a good job. I've got something to tell you." I said, "Yes, Sir. What's that?" He says, "You're leading the next flight." (*chuckles*) So twenty minutes later I was in the air again leading a flight.

T: No time to sit and stew about it, was there?

W: I regained my confidence and I never had that problem again. That made a big difference.

T: How did you end up flying the SB2C Helldiver?

W: Well, first of all, when we all graduated from flight school the Navy indiscriminately decided who was going to fly what type of an airplane, whether...

T: They picked? Like down the line?

W: Whether it was a dive bomber, whether it was a torpedo bomber, or whether it was fighters. And it just so happened that I was assigned to dive bombers, and I went to Delan, Florida, and I went through dive bombing training where I flew the SBD and I actually qualified on a carrier in Great Lakes with the SBD. Then I went out to the Pacific and I went to the Hawaiian Islands. Once I got there with the other replacement pilots we transitioned from the SBD to the SB2C.

T: How much of a difference is there in those planes?

W: There's quite a difference in those two airplanes, because the SB2C is a considerably bigger airplane. It has, for instance, an interior bomb bay. It has, as I say, it's a much larger airplane. Will fly faster and will fly further. But basically it's the same concept. It's a two man airplane. A pilot and a crewman. You could carry a bigger load of bombs. Basically that's why they adopted that airplane. So that airplane was used from about 1943 until the end of the war, and it was used for a

short time after the war, but then they also had a new airplane coming out and they switched to the newer model. Different model.

T: What unit did you serve with? I know you were on the aircraft carrier USS *Hornet*.

W: I was with Dive Bombing Squadron 2, VBS-2. And I went aboard towards the, just the last couple days of June of 1944 at Eniwetok, as a replacement pilot. We steamed north for about four days and then we were ready for this raid on the island of Chichi Jima. It was a diversionary raid, being that we hoped the Japanese would think that we were going to invade the island of Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima, but after we had been there two days, and the bombing raids were over and successful, the fleet immediately turned around and steamed south again and that's when they went down to the island of Guam. That's when they invaded Guam.

T: You mentioned the last couple days of June that you got on the *Hornet*. It was the 4 July that you were shot down.

W: Yes.

T: How many missions had you flown by that time?

W: I had never flown a mission.

T: It was your first mission?

**(1, A, 135)**

W: Absolutely the first mission I'd ever flown. I was assigned the first mission in the morning of July 4. It was a predawn takeoff. In other words we took off at night, and I had never done that before. I had never flown with the squadron before. I had never flown the aircraft with a full load of bombs before and I'd never made a dive bombing run with the aircraft before. So it was all a very, very learning experience. Unfortunately, I didn't get to complete the mission and I wish I could have, but I didn't.

T: What do you remember going through your mind as you got ready to take off on that first mission?

W: I was pretty busy getting everything set in the cockpit. The one thing that I was concerned about was that I was in position to take off, because we made what was known as a deck launch. We didn't get catapulted. We just made a deck launch.

T: So you rev the engine up or...

W: Yes. We just poured the coal to it and went down the runway. Rolled down the deck. But right before they launched me my intercom had gone out, and so that I could not communicate with my rear seat man. Now I could have downed the airplane, but that would have delayed the launch and a whole bunch of other things and I thought well, since there were nine of us in the flight, we were going out and making one bombing run, that I really wouldn't have any occasion to talk to my rear seat man. So I went ahead and took off and made the mission. And I didn't have any occasion to talk to my rear seat man. I didn't know the man. I'd never even seen him before.

T: You weren't a crew, as it were. You were the pilot. He was the rear seat man.

W: That's right. Had we survived I wouldn't be a bit surprised that he would have been my regular crewman from then on out. But unfortunately he did not survive the flight. Then of course I was captured and then in a prisoner of war camp.

T: Was it possible to communicate without the intercom between the two of you?

W: Not very easily, but with the canopy closed you could yell back and forth, yes. You could. But it's a lot easier if you have a microphone. When I was hit by anti-aircraft fire and I regained my senses, I glanced out at my right wing and six feet of my right wing was missing, but I thought that I could still fly the airplane. I attempted to and I just simply couldn't regain control of the airplane. Now I didn't realize it at the time, but I was told later that when the shell exploded very close to the airplane it blew the airplane right in half, so that me and the front end of the airplane went one direction and my rear seat man and the tail went a different direction. So that's why I couldn't regain control of the airplane.

T: I see. You were only flying half of it, it sounds like.

W: I was just falling from the air like a falling leaf. Just flip-flopping back and forth. It didn't take me very long to realize that I couldn't fly the airplane and I yelled as loud as I could for him to bail out, not knowing he wasn't there. I waited a minute or two and then I bailed out.

T: So it was level enough for you to get out of the canopy.

W: It was flip-flopping. As a matter of fact, when I first tried to get out I got hung up on the edge of the cockpit. But fortunately the airplane, as I say, was flip-flopping. It flipped me right back into the cockpit and then I sort of got my feet underneath me and dove out like you do diving off the edge of a swimming pool. Then after I fell for, oh, ten or fifteen seconds, I knew I was clear of the airplane and then I deployed the parachute.

T: How long were you in the air from the carrier to the island?

W: Oh, we were airborne for probably about an hour. We weren't that far. One hundred and fifty miles away. On 3 July the task force had launched what was known as a fighter sweep, and the fighters went up and engaged the enemy aircraft and totally destroyed the enemy aircraft. There was no air cover whatsoever. So when we were over the island of Chichi Jima before we entered our dive there was no enemy aircraft to be seen anywhere.

**(1, A, 190)**

T: Just anti-aircraft fire from the ground.

W: Just anti-aircraft fire. And it was extremely heavy. They didn't really tell us that, but I found out afterwards that the island of Chichi Jima was extremely well fortified, the reason being was they had a radio station there that was in constant contact with the island of Honshu [main island of Japan]. So they could talk to the island of Iwo Jima and get the information from them, and also from Chichi, and relay it to Tokyo. And it was built for the very reason that we wanted to destroy it, because they knew that when the B-29s were flying from Tinian and Saipan [in the Marianas] to Japan they were going to go right over Chichi, and as long as that radio station was there it was just like a telephone to the headquarters in Japan notifying them that the raid was coming in.

T: Yes. When and how many and all that stuff.

W: But unfortunately for us we could not destroy that radio station. And the reason being was that it was built by the Japanese of solid concrete. The walls and the ceiling were over two feet thick and the, what's known as rebar, the steel rods that they put in concrete, were just like spaghetti. Now the building is still standing to this day. And after the war the Marines went in there with dynamite and tried to destroy the building and they still weren't able to blow it down. It's still standing to this day. The insides are all gone.

T: What did you know about the building as you were flying there?

W: Didn't know a thing about it. As it turned out that was our primary target. But as it turned out there were two small freighters entering the harbor when we got there and they became our primary target. So we attempted to sink those two ships. We were successful in sinking one of them.

T: Did you drop your bombs before you were hit?

W: I dropped them, but I don't know where they went (*chuckles*). I wasn't in a dive. I just triggered them off and I don't know where they went. I was on the first raid on July 4 and there were I think five or six raids that day. As I say, on the first raid we heavily damaged one of the freighters and it sank. I believe the other one, later on, it was destroyed as well. It's a very small harbor and they couldn't maneuver. They

couldn't maneuver, and so we had them sort of locked in their situation and so the aircraft, we were diving right at them and then they couldn't avoid us.

T: As your plane was hit [and] as you exited the plane, you mentioned going out and eventually you pulled the ripcord and the chute opened. As you're floating down there, when did it occur to you that you might become a prisoner of the Japanese?

W: Well, first of all, it was unfortunate for me that I was hit just as I was entering my dive. I had just become inverted when the explosion occurred and it wasn't long before I realized I couldn't fly the airplane, and I was right over the harbor. As I said, it was a fairly small harbor. When I deployed my parachute—I never did see the airplane after I bailed out. The Japanese were shooting at me from this ship that we were bombing. I could see the tracers coming up to me. So I was kind of interested in that, and I didn't really spend a lot of time looking around at the scenery. But it didn't take me long to realize that I was going to land right smack in the middle of this harbor. There was just no place for me to go.

Once I got in the water we had some aircraft that were circling the island and one of them came in and dropped a five-man life raft to me. The Japanese promptly machine gunned that. Now I had a little one-man raft that we sat on and once I got out of my parachute and what have you, I thought about inflating the raft but I thought to myself well, if they had machine gunned that one raft the chances are pretty good that they would machine gun my raft, and I'm right by it. And there was no place for me. I couldn't paddle out of there anyway. They had submarine nets across the entranceway. I'm sure that they would have been shooting at me all the time. So I just realized that there was no place for me to go, and that I was going to be captured. I was in the water about, I would say, forty-five minutes at most. They finally sent what's commonly referred to as a yard craft. It's a small naval boat about the size of a tugboat. They came out and didn't have much trouble finding me, because the harbor was so small. Then they of course fished me out of the water. They took my backpack and they took my firearm. They proceeded to work me over pretty good.

**(1, A, 266)**

T: Were these guys in uniform or were they civilians?

W: Oh, no, these were sailors. In uniform. Yes. Work uniforms. I could tell they were sailors. There was a crew of about, oh, eight or ten individuals on this craft. When they got me up on deck they beat up on me pretty good. Then they finally tied me up with—I looked like a mummy. They had a piece of line about an inch in diameter and they wrapped it around me in a coil from my knees to just about my shoulders so I could not move my arms. I could just barely hobble. They put me up on the bow of this vessel. Just threw me on a pile of rope and I laid there until we went back to shore. Then they finally got me stood up and they unwrapped me and then they put handcuffs on me with my hands behind my back. Put a blindfold on me. Took me up on this ramp, and about that time the second raid was coming in.

So they put me in the sidecar of a motorcycle and they drove me around the north end of this harbor which, here again, it wasn't very big. We went into a highway tunnel. It was constructed of concrete and it apparently was used as one of the main air raid shelters for the island, because as I was there I couldn't see out completely, but I was able to kind of work the blindfold up just a little bit off of my eye. I could peek out from underneath the blindfold and there were a lot of people in this tunnel. Civilians as well as military personnel. Everybody stayed there during the second raid.

Once the all clear was signaled, then they drove me out of the tunnel, up the highway about half a mile at most, and they took me out of the sidecar and they took me over and they tied me to a tree. They tied me in such a fashion that my hands were behind my back, and when they finally kicked my feet out from under me my buttocks were still about six to eight inches off the ground. So I was basically hanging by my arms with my arms tied behind my back or handcuffed behind my back. I was in that position for approximately twelve hours. All during daylight hours. The first couple of hours the pain was excruciating and it was very, very hard to bear. But finally my shoulders just became numb. I couldn't feel anything. So I hung that way for approximately twelve hours.

When they finally cut me down and I looked at my hands, my hands were so swollen that I couldn't see between my fingers. My hand looked like I had a softball in my hand. Then they moved me down the road a piece, about a quarter of a mile, to a second tree. This tree, the trunk of the tree leaned on an angle of about forty-five degrees. They tied me to that tree and at least I was sitting on the ground and I could lean back against the trunk. I was sitting there for the rest of the night. About two hours after they had moved me there was a loud commotion going on and I couldn't understand what was taking place. But finally I felt a rifle barrel placed right between my eyes. One of the guards that was there couldn't speak good English, but he could speak just a little bit and he informed me that this gentleman that had the rifle intended to shoot me. That I had killed his son that day. I don't think it was me that killed his son. But his son was killed during one of the raids. So finally they took the rifle away from him and chased him away. Then about half an hour or so later he came back and tried to do it again and then they finally got rid of him for the night. So I was there sitting on the ground leaning against this tree until the next day. Then they finally came and got me, and they moved me up to the administration building.

T: Did anyone talk to you? I mean any kind of questioning or interrogating?

W: Not at this point.

T: So you've just been moved or held or tied up.

W: I just was punched and kicked and shoved and yelled at that I couldn't understand, because they were all yelling in Japanese. So there wasn't much conversation at all. But the second morning, as I say, they took me up to this administration building and then they tied me to another tree. There at least I was

on the ground sitting at this tree. I was blindfolded of course, and handcuffed. The young children that were on the island thought that I was kind of a curiosity, so they were up there in this courtyard looking at me and they would let fly with their feet every once in a while and kick me. It was just young kids. But there was one young man about thirteen, fourteen years old, and he really nailed me right alongside the head with his hobnail boots and he just about knocked me unconscious. But then the guards would chase them away.

So then on the morning of the third day they came and got me and took me inside this administration building. They took me to a fairly large office and they sat me down in a straight back wooden chair and tied me to the chair and they took my blindfold off, and I was sitting opposite a desk and there were three Japanese Army officers seated at the desk. They began to question me. Now they would ask a question in Japanese and there was a native of the island, I later found out his name was Fred Savory, who could speak good English. He was my interpreter. So he would ask me the question and in those days we were informed to give the enemy just our name, rank and serial number, which I attempted to do. Every time I would answer a question with my name, rank and serial number—

**End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 381.**

T: Here you are, as we pick up the conversation, really the third morning you've been there, and you're finally being asked some questions and trying to give your name, rank and serial number. This is not going over very big.

W: No. So that went on pretty much all day long. They would question me for about an hour, hour and a half. Then they'd take me outside and sit me down again. Then they would come and get me and take me back inside again. So I must have been questioned at least three times during that day, for approximately an hour, hour and half each time.

T: What kind of things did they want to know from you?

W: The Japanese thought because I was an ensign in the United States Navy that I was privileged to know strategy and tactics of what the Seventh Fleet was going to do. Where in fact I knew absolutely nothing. Being an ensign all I did was, I was there to fly an airplane and drop bombs. That's all I was supposed to do. But they just couldn't understand that. They asked me questions. Then they began asking me questions about the airplane that I was flying. How fast would it go? How high would it go? How far I could go? And of course, I really wasn't that knowledgeable about the airplane, because I only had about thirty-six hours of flight time in the airplane total. But I knew a little something. But the information that I was able to give them wasn't of any help to them. Then they began asking me questions about the ship. Now having only been on the ship five or six days, I wasn't very knowledgeable about the capabilities of the aircraft carrier either. But, as I said, if I didn't give them the answer these guards would work me over pretty good. So I finally got it through my head that I should be able to tell them some information

that really wouldn't do them any good, but that might satisfy their questioning. So a lot of the answers I gave I just made up in my head and I gave them answers that I knew couldn't do them any good.

T: But by at least telling them something they stopped the physical...

W: Yes. They stopped the physical abuse. Or at least they slacked off a lot. This went on for about, oh, another three days.

T: Kind of repetitive sessions.

W: Yes. They even asked me the same questions over and over again.

T: The same questioners?

W: Yes. But I now had been there about five days or six days.

T: What's going through your mind through these three, four, five days as you're being questioned or sitting tied to trees?

W: To be honest with you, I had the thoughts that I was not going to survive. I pretty well made up my mind that I probably would get executed, because there were lots of cases of atrocity that the Navy had told us about.

T: That's one thing I wanted to ask about. Really what kind of training had you had from the Navy of, if you're captured here's what you can expect?

W: None.

**(1, B, 414)**

T: Was it just rumors you had heard pretty much?

W: Just rumors. They didn't give us any official information. They didn't give us any idea of what to expect or how to conduct ourselves. It was name, rank and serial number. That was it. And of course, as I said, there were rumors about atrocities on other islands and so forth. And I really didn't think I was going to survive. But I was determined that I wasn't going to give in, and that I was going to live every day that I could hoping for the best. And as it turns out, about the morning of the third or fourth day an Army major visited with me and he apparently was supposedly in charge of me. Wasn't very friendly, but he was in charge. As a matter of fact, I think it was the morning of the third day he finally came and says, "Do you want something to eat?" I hadn't had anything to eat for three days. I wasn't really very hungry and I said, "Yes, I'm kind of hungry. I could eat something." So he brought me a rice ball about the size of a baseball and it had raw fish in it and I just could not eat that because I wasn't used to eating raw fish. I finally told him I couldn't eat it.

Then he sent that back to the galley and they brought me a rice ball without any fish in it and I was able to eat that without any problem. So I was probably fed once a day for four or five days that I was on the island.

T: Did the questioning stop after so many sessions? Were they apparently satisfied, it seems like?

W: I was there on the island a total of about seven days. They questioned me primarily for that three days. They would question me occasionally after that, but not extensively. I spent the rest of the time just tied to a tree in a sitting position.

T: Did you see any other Americans while you were there?

W: Yes. About the fourth day I was on the island, and I was blindfolded, but just so I could peek out from under the blindfold. I was in a compound tied to this tree and probably seventy-five feet away from me I glanced up and I noticed a United States Navy enlisted man, because he had on dungarees, being escorted across this compound by a guard. He was limping as if he had been hurt. I didn't know who it was or anything about it. It could have been my rear seat man, but I wouldn't have recognized him anyway. But it wasn't, it was another man.

T: As a rear seat man he would be enlisted, right?

W: Oh, yes. And that's the only other American I saw. Now it turns out that he was one of the eight individuals that the Japanese executed. Of course I didn't know that until after the war. But that's the only time I saw another American. And it was just for a few seconds that I saw him.

T: You never communicated with him.

W: Oh, no. I never had a chance to talk to anybody. But then this Army major came to me and said that they had decided that they were going to fly me to Japan.

T: He told you this in English?

W: Yes. He could speak a little English. So I guess it was the morning of the seventh day or eighth day, I don't know, they came and got me and loaded me into a motorcycle sidecar and they drove me down to the south end of this island, where they had a very primitive fighter field. It was very short runway. And as I say, all of the aircraft had been destroyed. It turns out that they had an American built DC-3 airliner, and it was sitting there on the strip. They loaded me in this thing and they flew me from there down to the island of Iwo Jima, where Mount Suribachi is. They offloaded me and they stuck me on the tarmac. About two hours later they came and got me and they put me in the back end of a twin engine medium bomber that the Japanese used, and we called it the Betty. Then they flew me from there up to

Japan. Now I don't know where I landed in Japan, but it was about a two hour train ride from wherever we landed to where we got off of the train.

T: Were you with other Americans at Iwo Jima or on this airplane that you know of?

**(1, B, 466)**

W: There was nobody at all. The only American I saw was that enlisted man for just that short span of a few seconds. We got off [the plane] and I stayed overnight at this base where we landed at. The next day these two guards came and got me. We walked to the railroad station. Got on a train full of civilians, and we drove for about two and half hours and we stopped at this very small village. We disembarked the railroad and we walked for about half an hour and we came to this POW camp called Ofuna. Now Ofuna was really just a very small camp. It only had three or four buildings on it. It was a Naval interrogation camp, and we never had over approximately seventy-five prisoners there at any one time. That's all they could handle.

T: So a contrast to larger facilities.

W: Yes. As it turned out they kept me there for approximately nine months. They decided to move us when the camp got filled up and they had to make room for new prisoners, so they took eighteen of us and transported us from Ofuna up to a POW camp called Omori, which was right on the outskirts of Tokyo Bay. Right just not far from the city.

T: And a larger facility too.

W: Oh, yes. Much larger. There was approximately 550 prisoners there. Unfortunately they confined the eighteen of us in a very small portion of one of the buildings, and we were totally isolated. We could not communicate with any of the prisoners. The eighteen of us were kept all by ourselves and when we'd go on a work detail, just the eighteen of us would go. Because one of the eighteen of us was a naval pilot that had been shot down in February of 1945 over Tokyo they declared him a war criminal, and because we had an opportunity to talk to him and be with him they declared the seventeen of us as war criminals.

T: Did they tell you this? They told you, you were being declared a war criminal?

W: Oh, absolutely. Not only that but they told us that almost every day. That if the Japanese lost the war that we were to be executed. As a matter of fact, in the other portion of this building that we were confined in the B-29 crews were kept there, and they told them the same thing. That they would be executed.

T: Let me go back to Ofuna. When you arrived there. Describe that camp from your own eyes as you come in there. What did you see?

W: When I walked through the gate there was sort of the administrative building. There was an office and they took me kind of through that building to the bathhouse. This guard had me strip and they got me into a hot tub and gave me a bath. Then they gave me some old used Japanese work uniforms. It was a pair of like cotton trousers and a pullover top. I still was allowed to keep my shoes that I had on.

T: The rest of your uniform was now gone?

W: No. No. I just had a flight suit. They allowed me to keep that. But it was dirty and they had it washed. It got through being washed and was given back to me later on. But then they took me from there and they put me in a cell, and I was kept in solitary confinement for approximately sixty days. After I had been in confinement for about three weeks they allowed me to go outside and sit on a bench, and I could not talk to the other prisoners but I could at least sit outside. As the prisoners would walk around this compound they were talking to one another, but they in fact were talking to me. So as they would get within about twenty feet of me they would start saying who they were and what they were and so forth. The very first individual that I came in verbal contact with was Pappy Boyington, the Marine major, and he identified himself and then the other person he was walking with identified himself as Red Bullard. He was a lieutenant commander in the Navy and had been shot down.

T: Those are people whose names that you knew? Boyington and Bullard.

W: I knew who Boyington was, but I did not know who Bullard was. Well, at any rate, then another two guys came by. The one guy identified himself as Lieutenant Dan Galvin, and the other one recognized himself as Ozzie Long, and that was the crew that was shot down two weeks before I was, from the *Hornet* and from the squadron that I was in, and they were shot down over the island of Chichi Jima. It just so happens that they had been sent to Japan, and I assume that once the Japanese Army or whoever it was that was in charge found out that I was from the *Hornet* and from Dive Bombing Squadron 2 that's what saved my life, and that's why they decided to send me to Japan because now they had two separate crews to question. And they did. They questioned Dan Galvin and myself for approximately nine months.

**(1, B, 531)**

T: The questioning. Did that start right away or were you in solitary confinement a while before any questioning began?

W: Oh, I guess I was there in the camp about at least a month before they started questioning me. Then finally they just started questioning me. But in the meantime I was able to communicate with Dan Galvin when I was outside sitting on the bench.

As I said, when he would go by he could talk and I could hear him. But I could send Morse Code with my hand tapping it against my body making a closed fist as a dit and I opened my palm was a dash. So I could send very short messages, a word or two, and I identified myself to Galvin and also that I was from Dive Bombing Squadron 2. Now I did not know him. Didn't know him from Adam, because I was his replacement pilot.

T: Sure. So you wouldn't know him.

W: When I told him I was from the *Hornet* and Dive Bombing Squadron 2 he thought I was a spy, because I hadn't been there when he was there. Anyway, we finally got that worked out. Then he and I both knew they were going to question us, and so he would underestimate any answer he gave and I would overestimate every answer I gave. So they compiled all this information during a nine month period, and finally they called us in together, which they'd never done before. They asked me a question and I looked at this individual that could speak really good English and I said, "I'm sorry that I just cannot answer that question. Lieutenant Galvin is my senior officer, and he has to do all the talking for us." Now that's exactly what the Japanese Navy would have said. And they accepted that answer. They kept asking us questions, and we kept sticking to that rule and they finally just gave up and said, "You're all done." Two days later they sent us out to another camp.

T: This questioning was ongoing then.

W: Oh, absolutely. As a matter of fact, the day that Galvin and I were in there together this individual that could speak good English brought out a scrapbook that was approximately eight inches thick and they had pictures of the USS *Hornet* from the day the keel was laid in, I believe it was the Brooklyn shipyard, until the day the ship was commissioned. They knew more about that ship than I will ever know. Because whoever it was that was spying for them took pictures, had all of the newspaper clippings. They had everything that they could get their hands on, and the Japanese had it.

T: And you were barely on the *Hornet* long enough to get your gear stowed.

W: Didn't even know which end was up (*laughs*).

T: At the camp there, after being in solitary confinement...and let me ask about that. What was that like for all those many weeks?

W: Well, at first the days went by reasonably fast, but after you'd been in solitary confinement for about a week and you're just sitting on the floor on what they call a tatami mat—you didn't have a chair to sit in, you sat on the floor—time began to drag and so you had to start—at least I did—I started to think about different things to keep my mind active.

T: Consciously to do that, to keep your mind active.

W: Just thinking about things that I did when I was a kid and thinking about my parents and thinking about things I did in high school, thinking about flying. Anything I could concentrate on. That helped immensely. Then I could do some calisthenics in the room. Pushups, sit-ups. Which also helped.

T: So mental and physical gymnastics, in a way.

W: Basically that's exactly right. As long as you do that you keep the mental process functioning and you don't go into depression and you don't sit there and worry about what might happen. You don't have time. You're thinking about other things. You can't help but think about what's going to happen, but...

**(1, B, 583)**

T: When you did that, were you the kind of person who feared the worst, or was optimistic about what was going to happen?

W: I was living day to day. I was optimistic in a way and pessimistic in another way. I was optimistic that I was surviving day to day, but I was very pessimistic as to how long I would be there. Now once I got out and joined the normal population of the camp and was able to talk to the other POWs, we primarily were all pretty much thinking the same thing, of how long we were going to be there. We had "Home Alive in '45" and the "Golden Gate in '48" and all that kind of stuff.

T: So there was talk about the future.

W: But we were allowed to walk around the compound as much as we wanted, and we would go in twos and threes, and we talked ninety-five percent of the time about food. Food. We had people there that were from the south part of the country and the West Coast to the East Coast and southwest and we talked about how our mothers cooked different meals and all this. Food was primarily our main concern, because we didn't have any. We weren't getting any.

T: Here we have young men for whom the topic of conversation might typically be women or girls, and it's food you're telling me.

W: You would think that would be true, but there was absolutely no talk of women or sex. It was food and survival. That's all we thought about.

T: What kind of food was being provided by the Japanese while you were there at Ofuna?

W: Our diet: they fed us three times a day. They would feed us about a cup full of grain and there was some rice, some barley. Whatever else they had. I don't know

what it was. But it wasn't just plain rice. We would get about a cup of that. Then they would serve us a clear soup. It was basically hot water. Had a little what they called bean paste or soybean paste that was dissolved in there. And then sometimes they would put in just a sliver or two of a vegetable like a potato. Sometimes a potato peel. Sometimes you would get a little piece of carrot. That was it. We had that three times a day, and then we could have all of the hot water that we wanted, because each day we had a different team that was responsible for first of all, getting the food, dividing it up into equal parts and then also getting the hot water. Each day we'd have different guys do that.

T: So the food was collected from a central location and brought back to the barracks.

W: We just went to the galley, which was just a few steps away, and they would put that in small metal containers and then they would bring that to the barracks and they would dish it up into these little metal, like a plate or a cup. They tried to even it all up so everybody got the same amount. That's all they did.

As soon as that was done then they started bringing these teapots full of hot water, and we had this hot water. We used it for a number of things. First we drank it. But we also could use it as a heater. When it was cold outside we would put our hands around these metal cups to hold, or we'd put them between our bare feet to hold and get what warmth we could out of them. Because we had no heat in these buildings. We could look right through the walls. There was no walls at all. It was just like—we called it ship lapped or just rough lumber, and you could just look right through the cracks to outside. There was no insulation whatsoever.

T: How many men to a barracks?

W: There were three barracks. The first barracks was the biggest, and it was just a one-story building with a central passageway down the middle. They had rooms on each side. They were like cells, but they were all wood. They never closed the doors, because there was no place for us to go anyway. That way the guards could look in as they walked up and down.

The first building would hold, oh, maybe I suppose, thirty prisoners. Then the middle building was just a little short stubby building, and that would only hold about ten people. Then the other building would hold another thirty or thirty-five. So then they could double up. The population never got much over seventy-five prisoners.

**(1, B, 658)**

T: That's a really small location.

W: Oh, yes. Very small. There was a latrine. What we called the *benjo*. Then there was an outside wash trough where we could brush our teeth in the morning. They

did provide us with a toothbrush and dental powder. It wasn't very good, but we could scrub our teeth a little bit. But other than that, that's all we had.

T: Did you receive or remember receiving Red Cross parcels at all while you were there?

W: In the nine months that I was at Ofuna we got one Red Cross parcel.

T: For individual or did you split it?

W: No. They were each individual's. You had canned butter in there and they had cigarettes. These little packages that held four cigarettes. You'd get two of those little packages in the Red Cross parcel. What the heck else was in there? *(pauses three seconds)* They had some instant coffee. There really wasn't very much in these things, but the Japanese had quite a few of them, but they wouldn't give them to us.

A rather interesting story about that. They came in quite large boxes and the individual package was about ten inches long, eight or ten inches wide and about two or three inches deep.

T: An individual box.

W: A box. But they took the spares and they put in the end of this first Number One building what would have been a cell, but they put them in there and they locked it up. But what they forgot was—Boyington and one or two of the other older prisoners, they liked to have a drink of alcohol. Oh, and I forgot to tell you—there was two of these small boxes of raisins in each Red Cross parcel. So these guys decided that they would crawl under the building at night. Knock loose a couple of boards, climb up into the room. They would take the raisins. They would open these boxes up and they would take the raisins out and then they would restack the boxes so that they would keep a certain number of boxes unopened. So when the Japanese would go in there they couldn't see that some of these boxes were open. And these guys somehow fermented those raisins and made alcohol out of them *(laughing)*.

T: In the camp there.

W: Yes.

T: So having these packages, parcels, the parcels that you got, was one of the only times you remember getting anything outside of the standard diet the Japanese provided.

W: That was it. The only other thing we got was at Christmas time in 1944, they gave each of us a small sweet potato. We each got a small sweet potato. That was it. Other than that we didn't get anything.

T: What about the Japanese? Were there guards or interrogators that you got to know by face or by name?

W: Oh, yes. We had nicknames for all of them. Metal Mouth—we called them everything under the sun. And surprisingly, the guards at this first camp at Ofuna were quite young. I would say they were sixteen and seventeen years of age.

T: So even younger than you, and you weren't very old by this time.

W: I was only twenty. But they were very, very young. And some of them were very mean. I mean, they were just downright mean.

**(1, B, 718)**

T: Sadistically mean you mean?

W: They had permission to do just about anything they wanted to us other than injure us to the point like break a bone or cut us to any degree. They could hit us with their fist or with the walking stick that they carried or they could stick us with the bayonet on the rifle but they just jabbed us enough to—sometimes they would just barely break the skin. But they wouldn't penetrate your body. But they would hit us with the rifle butt as well. That was some of them.

We had a few that were very, very good to us. Surprisingly we had three guards in our camp that were Christians, and they told us that they were Christians. They got us to pledge that we would never reveal that to the rest of the guards or to any of the members, because they would have been punished very severely if the Japanese hierarchy knew that they were Christians. The three of them were pretty good, but they had to be very, very careful of what they did, because if one of the mean guards saw one of these guys doing something nice to us he'd report it.

Now another thing they did to us: about every ten days to two weeks they would assemble all of us out in this little parade ground we had.

T: Now did you have—

**End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.**

T: You mentioned being assembled, Bill. Did you have roll calls on a general, on a regular basis?

W: Not a roll call, but every morning they assembled us out in the compound and we had to bow to the emperor and we had a little saying that we had to repeat. And of course we repeated some other things too. But we did that every morning. Had to face to the...

T: Had the same saying every morning?

W: Yes. We had to face east and we bowed to the emperor. Then of course they had us perform calisthenics every day.

About every ten days to two weeks they would assemble us out there and we had a Navy hospital corpsman, Japanese hospital corpsman, who was a chief petty officer. He didn't run the camp, but he was one of the more senior people. And all during this ten days the guards would keep track of any violation that we were guilty of and they'd write it in a little book. Then they would have us all assembled and they would call your name out and you'd have to go and stand in front of everybody and then this chief petty officer would read off the offenses. And of course you had no way of knowing that you had committed an offense of any kind, because half of the rules we didn't even know about.

T: These were all in Japanese anyway, right?

W: Oh, yes. And they would call us out and he would read us off and then they would yell a term called *jetske*, meaning you assumed the position. You spread your legs apart, bent your knees, put your hands behind your back and stick your chin out. He would tell the guards of what punishment that we were to receive, and they would then hit us with the closed hand. They didn't punch like we did. They used this part of their hand (*holds hand out, palm forward and fingers clenched*).

T: The flat part of the palm.

W: Yes. That's hard. And they would slap you with that. And you'd get five or ten of those slaps, and you'd grit your teeth, and they could knock you to the ground with just one blow they were so strong. Then after they did that to you, then they would attack us with a club, a regular club, about the size of a baseball bat. It was about maybe an inch and a half, two inches in diameter. They would swat us across the buttocks and the thighs. They could lift you right off the ground. They could hit you that hard. And you'd get so many swats for that. Then they would call another guy out and do the same thing.

T: This happened regularly? Every ten days or so?

W: Oh, regularly. It wasn't every ten days, but it was either ten days or two weeks. We would have this assembly and we'd all get our little comeuppance. So they beat on us that way.

Give you an example: during the time I was there we had a first lieutenant in the Marine Corps by the name of Bill Harris. He was a Naval Academy graduate, and he graduated either second or third in his class and his father was a Marine general by the name of Fielding Harris. One of the more senior Marine generals during World War II. And Bill Harris was a brilliant student. So we would steal the Japanese newspapers in the morning. They would deliver a newspaper to the front office and we would steal it in the morning and take it back and Bill Harris would look at it. Now he couldn't read Japanese, but he could look at the pictures of the maps and he could pretty much tell where these islands were and then he finally

began to put words together. Not too well, but at least a little bit. Anyway, we'd done that for about six weeks and they caught him. Or they caught he and Pappy Boyington with the newspaper. They took them out and they beat them just unmercifully. I was surprised that either one of them survived.

**(2, A, 41)**

T: No kidding.

W: They were so beat up that they couldn't walk for almost ten days. They were pretty much a bloody mess when they got through with them. I can remember one of the interrogations I had. The guy asked me, "Did Pappy Boyington get preferential treatment?" I said, "He certainly did not." He got treated worse than anybody. Fortunately for me, I was one of the guys that would go out and steal the newspaper and then I had to take it back, and fortunately I never got caught. But they got caught with the paper. Then of course that put a stop to that.

T: What kind of things could you expect to be punished by the Japanese for?

W: If you failed to acknowledge a guard and you didn't address him properly. If you made a mistake of—you couldn't wear your shoes in the barracks. So you had to take the shoes off. I made the mistake one day of stepping on the ground with my bare feet after I had taken my shoes off, and they just worked me over for about a half an hour because of that. So there was all kinds of little things, and you never were sure just what the hell was going on.

T: The interrogations. Were the guards present for those interrogations?

W: No.

T: That was a different group of Japanese.

W: Yes. These were intelligence officers. The guards were outside, but they weren't in the office with us, no. They were just young kids, and they were there just to harass us really. There was no need for them to even have guards.

To give you an example: at Ofuna we had an eight foot wooden fence that went around the camp. There was one young guy, he was determined that he was going to escape. So at night he climbed over this fence. There's no problem with that. They had two by fours across it. He just climbed over and jumped over the fence. He was gone for two weeks.

T: It's amazing he stayed away that long.

W: And finally he came back. We said, "What the hell? Why are you here?" He said, "I couldn't find anything to eat. You can't escape in this country." It's so populated. It's either rice paddies, and the rice paddies come right up to the houses, there's no

front yard or nothing. And he says, "Even at night there's people out walking around. You can't move. I had to hide in bushes day and night. I never got more than a half a mile from this camp. I finally just came back." They worked him over, but they didn't do anything other than that.

T: Does that mean that escape is one of those things that never crossed your minds?

W: Oh, no. We thought about it, because we weren't very far from a military airbase. We could see the airplanes taking off. There was a lot of talk about the possibility of trying to leave the camp and go over there and steal an airplane. But then we got to thinking, where are we going to fly it to? Fly it to China? Fly it to Korea? Japanese. Couldn't fly it across the Pacific. So there was no place to fly it to.

T: So really the eight foot fence was almost more security than they needed.

W: Oh, yes.

T: That's interesting. The months you were there, nine months, did you see interrogators on a regular basis where they...did they ask you questions consistently?

W: They would question myself and Dan Galvin about twice a week.

T: So you could expect another session.

W: Yes. We never had a set schedule, but about twice a week they would come and get us and take us over and question us. We just sat in a little room about this size here. We'd be in there anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour.

T: And were those sessions fairly consistent as far as who did the questioning and what they asked?

W: Oh, yes. This one interrogator, intelligence officer, he did all the questioning. The whole time.

T: Did he have a name? Did he identify himself or...

W: I have his name somewhere, but we called him Handsome Harry. He was a fairly good looking Japanese. He was completely westernized, and so we called him Handsome Harry. We had nicknames for everybody.

T: So the interrogators, they didn't identify themselves, but you gave them names.

W: We never knew any of their names.

T: He was educated in the States, you said.

W: Oh, yes. He went to college at Columbia and he spoke fluent English. You'd never know that he wasn't raised in this country.

T: Were there work details there at Ofuna or were you essentially just...need to take care of your own time during the day?

W: In Ofuna we had no work details.

T: A lot of dead time.

W: Yes. We never got outside the camp. We always were inside.

Now when we went to Omori we had work details up there. As a matter of fact, the eighteen of us would go out anywhere from a quarter of a mile to a half a mile from camp after a bombing raid and what wasn't burned up, we would clean up. Because the roofs were made of slate. And we would pick up all the slate. Make piles out of it and collect all of the hardware, whatever, and make piles out of it. Then we had like a pick and we would turn over the ground that hadn't been touched in years and kind of plow it up and dig it up, and then we would plant vegetables, supposedly for the camp. We didn't get any of them, but we raised vegetables for the camp.

T: So working at Omori was something you hadn't done at Ofuna.

W: No. Then after we had done that for a while, then they had us go out on a real work detail. We were about two and a half to three miles from camp, and we were digging caves. The island of Honshu was just absolutely honeycombed with caves. Everywhere there was a hill and it was possible to dig a cave, there was a cave. What we were digging, we had dug three shafts, no. We dug a big slit trench that was about twenty feet long, twenty-five feet long, about five feet wide and when we got finished it was about eight feet deep.

T: That's a big trench.

W: A slit trench. Then we dug three shafts straight back from that until we got in about fifteen feet. Then we proceeded to dig another shaft at ninety degrees to that. Then when we got that done, then we offset these things and dug three more shafts that were offset so you had to come in, go over here, and go in. That would cut down any blast effect. We were in the process of doing that and we would go out in the morning. The eighteen of us would work.

**(2, A, 116)**

T: So this eighteen group that came from Ofuna was kept together.

W: All the time. And we would work half a day. About three and a half, four hours. Then we would march back to camp and then the B-29 crew, which was a lot of those guys, they marched out and they worked in the afternoons.

T: So parallel groups, but you didn't meet.

W: No. They never let us meet, no. They kept us apart. Then on August 15, 1945, when we were out there working we noticed that—it was a rural area. The houses were well spread apart, because there was a lot of rice paddies and so forth. All of the houses had their radio wide open [on], and they have the sliding panels. They had the whole house wide open. There was somebody giving a speech, and we couldn't understand what it was. It turns out it was the emperor announcing to the Japanese population that the war was over. So the guards came and got us and said, pick up all the tools. We even took the light bulbs out of the sockets. We took all of those things and we were going back to camp. They made sure that we were lined up in four files and the people on the outside files had tools in their hands. Shovels, picks, whatever. We were marching back to camp. We had to go through two small villages on the way back.

T: The eighteen of you.

W: Yes. When we first entered this first village some of the people were smiling and happy, and others were very, very bitter. The guards were a little bit afraid that we might get attacked. But fortunately we didn't, and we got back to the main highway that runs from downtown Tokyo out to what used to be the Hanita Airport. That was the main highway. We were walking down that highway and some of the old timers, they had worked down in the rail yards unloading boxcars. They were on a truck because they couldn't walk that far. They were whizzing by us, jumping up and down, screaming their heads off that the war was over and we thought they must be crazy. We didn't believe them. We got back to camp. We did discover that the war was over. But then we began to be very apprehensive in that, because the guards had said that if the Japanese lost the war that we would be executed.

T: So even the war being over didn't end your sense of foreboding about what might happen.

W: Oh, no. So the rest of that afternoon we were very apprehensive of what was going on. That night none of us slept very much, because we were up talking about what we would try to do if the Japanese attempted to execute us. We would go down fighting, so to speak. We didn't know exactly what we would do, but we were going to do something. But lo and behold, we woke up the next morning and we went outside and all the guards were gone. There wasn't a guard to be found.

T: They vanished?

W: They just vanished. They even left their rifles leaning against the side of the buildings.

T: Almost like they disappeared.

W: They just left the camp. Totally.

T: How did this eighteen group, how was that group selected from Ofuna? Was it just a random thing?

W: Just by random, yes. Most of us had been there for quite some time. But this one Navy pilot that I told you about, he had only been there a short [time], couple three or four months.

T: Right.

W: But most of us had been there anywhere—like I was there nine months. Some of them six months. Six to nine months.

T: Who were these guys? Essentially pilots like yourself? Carrier based aircraft?

W: The making up of the eighteen, there was naval aviators, there was two or three Army Air Corps pilots. There were three or four enlisted submarine members that had been captured. As a matter, we had a rather diverse...

**(2, A, 163)**

T: It sounds like it. You've got stragglers from here and there that the Japanese had picked up.

W: Yes. There was no rhyme or reason to it. They just sent us up there. I think they just decided that they'd gotten all the information they were going to get, so get rid of them.

T: Among the seventy-five of you there at Ofuna, were there groups among the prisoners themselves? I mean people that you were perhaps better friends with or you hung out with more than others?

W: Oh, yes. In that we just got to know each other. There was no animosity toward anybody. But like the crew, the USS *Tang*, which was a submarine that was sunk, there were only ten survivors, and the ten of them, including the commanding officer, came to Ofuna, and they kind of hung out together because they were from the same ship.

T: Someone like yourself who didn't know anybody when you got there...

W: I didn't know a soul. I just made friends. As a matter of fact, one of the friends I really made was an enlisted man that had been shot down the same day I was and was captured and was sent to Ofuna. So he and I kind of palled around together.

T: Was he shot down at Chichi Jima as well, or somewhere else?

W: He was shot down close to Iwo Jima. On the same day. I became very good friends with Pappy Boyington, the reason being was that he was from Seattle, Washington and so was I.

T: Right.

W: And we just sort of hit it off together. And there was a couple of other guys. There was a man by the name of Charles Coffman. He was in the Army Air Corps. I think he was a navigator. After the war he became a member of the Michigan Supreme Court.

T: Are these guys that you kept in touch with after you got back?

W: Unfortunately no, because one of the reasons being that I stayed in the Navy for twenty years and so I was on the move periodically with my family and I just wasn't in a situation where I could really maintain a contact with all of them. They all went different ways. We were from all parts of the country.

T: Do you ever wish you had kept in touch with some of these guys?

W: Yes. I would have liked... This young man by the name of Kent. He was an enlisted man that I got to know. I did visit him. A few years back my first wife and I were out on the West Coast, and we went up to Wooddale, Washington. He lives there. He retired from the Navy and he's living there. So I looked him up and we had a nice visit with him. And I bumped into this Lieutenant Galvin down in Memphis, Tennessee. He was stationed there and I was going to school there and I just happened to bump into him one day. But I didn't really maintain close contact with the other guys.

T: When you saw Galvin there at Memphis, how many years after 1945 was that?

W: It was 1953.

T: So a number of years, eight years after.

W: Yes.

T: Did you find yourself talking about your POW experiences at all?

**(2, A, 200)**

W: Not really, no. He and I really weren't too close because, for some reason, I don't know why... *(trails off)* Part of the reason was, I was just a replacement pilot. I wasn't one of the original group of guys that formed the squadron. As I say, I was only in the squadron for five days. So we didn't have anything in common. He was from New York City and I was from out on the West Coast, so we weren't very compatible in that respect.

T: Right. It's almost like this unit existed and you weren't even part of it really. I mean, you were there long enough to leave it.

W: That's pretty much it. Yes.

T: That's interesting. So the eighteen of you were kind of randomly selected out and transported on a train or how...

W: Yes. We walked from the camp over to the railroad yard. It was just a short, it didn't take more than forty-five minutes from Ofuna to Tokyo. Then they took us by, we actually got off the train. We weren't in downtown Tokyo, but we walked, they walked us out to the Omori camp. We were just strolling along. Probably took us about an hour to walk out there.

T: When you heard you were to be leaving, were you concerned, nervous about leaving this camp that was now a known quantity?

W: We were just nervous about—we didn't know where we were going.

T: They didn't tell you.

W: No. And obviously there was a lot different kinds of camps we could have gone to. But we were a mixture of both commissioned officers and enlisted, so we assumed that we were going to go someplace where there was a mixture. Some camps were all officers. Some camps were all enlisted men. But the Japanese did not recognize the Geneva Convention. So they felt that officers were required to work. So there were a lot of camps where they put the officers together, and they all worked. So when we got to this headquarters camp, of course we really didn't know anything about what was going on. They had us outside and we stood outside for three hours.

T: When you arrived.

W: When we arrived, and then because they hadn't quite finished building the wall in this building they were going to put us in. When that was done, then the commandant came out and he addressed us and told us that we were war criminals. We were going to be kept separate and that if the Japanese lost the war that we

would be executed. So then they just walked us over to this building and put us in there and walked away. We were there.

T: Were all eighteen of you in one room as far as quarters?

W: Just one room. The room was about the size of our living room. As I say, there was a long building like this that they built a wall across it and there was a doorway and there was a guard posted there.

T: So the wall was this last minute addition to take what was one building and make it two really.

W: Yes. They divided it. We were in one third and the B-29 guys were in the other two-thirds. When we got there, there were no B-29 guys there at all. But they had us separated like that.

T: And those guys arrived later then?

W: Yes. They started bringing them in from downtown Tokyo, and as the crews got shot down they kept adding to them.

T: When did you arrive there? Do you have an idea of what month it was?

**(2, A, 253)**

W: Let's see. It was about April of 1945. No, May of '45. And then we were actually liberated in the first part of September.

T: So you spent the better part of four months there anyway.

W: Yes. Oh, yes.

T: When you got there, from your perception was Omori an improvement over Ofuna or not, as far as the conditions?

W: It was an improvement in that we were able to go on work details. In other words, we were able to get out of the camp and get away from the confines of the camp. So we were closer together because we didn't have individual cells. We were just all together. So we were a little closer together in that respect. But the food wasn't any better or the treatment any better. But we weren't outside, because we couldn't go outside.

T: You were confined to this room unless you were on work details.

W: Yes. When we worked. And to go to the *benjo*, or the bathroom, we had to go back here to this wall and ask the guard for permission to go to the *benjo* and he gave us a little wooden chit—

T: Like a hall pass from school?

W: That's right. And we had to carry that in our hand, because we had to go out the front door, go all the way to the back of the building where the *benjos* were. We had to have that ticket with us. So we weren't subjected to as much harassment by the guards, because we were inside most of the time and the guards, they didn't want to come in there. They were afraid of us. Afraid we might attack them.

T: Do you think they were afraid? Did you get that perception?

W: Yes. Yes. So that part was...

T: Did the interrogations continue at Omori?

W: No. Not at all.

T: So no more questioning.

W: No.

T: So in a sense, your life has changed from a camp of seventy-five and no work details and regular interrogations, to a smaller room of eighteen, no interrogations, and some regular time outside the camp for work.

W: Yes. So it was better in that respect, that we weren't harassed by the guards and that we did have the work details, which was a relief of sorts. That we were able to get out away from the camp.

T: Now were you concerned at all about seeing Japanese civilians and what they might do to you?

W: Surprisingly no. We had a number of occasions where the Japanese civilians tried to help us. Give you an example: we were working on this one project of clearing debris, and there was just a fence and a soybean field right next to us where we were working. All of a sudden an object came flying over this fence and landed fairly close to where we were. We didn't know what it was so we walked over and looked down and it was just a little bag. They picked it up and, lo and behold, there was some roasted soybeans in there. And then pretty soon another bag came over. Before the afternoon was over we had about four of those little bags that we picked up, and they were very tasty by the way, because we were hungry. It turns out it was two young Japanese children that apparently their mother had fixed this up,

and they came out and threw these over the fence to us. If they got caught they would have got in a lot of trouble.

Then also, when we were working on this detail right across the street from where we were working, there was a fish market.

T: You were in an inhabited part of town here. You could see people around.

**(2, A, 314)**

W: It had been bombed out. All of a sudden this guy walked across the street, and he had about two fish that he gave us. We had a big old five gallon can that we threw the fish in there with some water and some of the stuff that we were raising, like greens. Spinach or whatever. We cooked it up and we ate it. We'd eat anything. It didn't make any difference. That was kind of nice that he did that. So no, we didn't have any fear of Japanese civilians at all.

T: That sounds like you had these specific examples of times when they were helpful. They weren't antagonistic towards the American POWs.

W: No, they really weren't. There were some cases. I'm sure you wouldn't want to be out walking around by yourself. But no, a lot of the people were very sympathetic in that regard. Because we were a sorry looking mess. We were dirty and skinny.

T: From the camp there at Omori, could you see or hear American airplanes, B-29s coming over?

W: Oh, absolutely. The B-29s...[General] Curtis LeMay changed the bombing tactics of the B-29s. When they first began to bomb Japan the B-29s were coming over anywhere from twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand feet in the air and their accuracy from that height wasn't very good. So Curtis LeMay changed the whole tactics. He decided that they were going to make their bombing runs at about twelve thousand feet, at night. They were like sitting ducks up there, because the Japanese fighters were coming in on them and the ack-ack [anti-aircraft fire] was coming at them. They shot down an awful lot of B-29s. But they were far more accurate bombing the city of Tokyo.

He also came up with the procedure where they would drop these incendiary bombs, and they were about close to three feet long and about four to five inches in diameter. Hexagon in shape. They were filled full of napalm. The B-29s were loaded in such a manner that they would drop a stick of those, which was maybe thirty-five or forty of these things, and one five hundred pound bomb. Then they would drop another stick and another five hundred [pound bomb], so when the five hundred pound bomb would destroy the Japanese houses, because they were just made of bamboo and paper and all that stuff. Then of course the incendiaries, they burned like crazy.

I can remember one night, it was in late April or early May of 1945, that I had to get up and go to the bathroom. I had my little ticket in my hand and I went out. And when I went out I looked up and of course the raids were going. As far as I could see to the south, using a panoramic view, and as far as I could see to the north there was a wall of flame. It was at least three hundred feet high, and the whole city of Tokyo was on fire. It was like a firestorm.

T: This was plainly visible from your camp there, because it's right on the water.

W: Oh, sure. I could feel the heat of the fire. That's how close we were.

T: Were you concerned that those fires, the flames might reach your camp?

W: No, not really. No. But another thing, an experience we went through was, before the war was over the US Navy Fleet was right off the coast of Japan and the battleships were firing—

**End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 384.**

T: So you couldn't see the battleships firing them, but you could certainly hear the shells...

W: No. No. You could hear the shells going over head, and then when they would hit they were landing, oh, probably three or four, five miles from us, and the whole ground would shake (*makes rumbling noises*). It's amazing. Those things are...oh!

T: So although you weren't getting news, it was clear how the war was going.

W: Oh, certainly. Once the Navy began flying missions we knew that the fleet was right off the coast. Not over one hundred miles away. Then when the B-29s began coming in, and then when we heard the sixteen inch shells going over we knew that they were close by. They were just off the coast.

T: How did that, I mean, in a sense, if you'd been told that if the Japanese lose the war it could mean the end of your life, in a sense you're rooting for the good guys, but the good guys winning could be the end of your life.

W: It was a morale booster to know that our forces were that close to us. Of course there was that fear of execution, but we were so happy that they were getting that close and we knew that the war had to be over some time. How we really found out was that all of a sudden—which normally didn't happen—a new prisoner came into our group. Instead of being eighteen there turned out to be nineteen of us.

T: And you had been the same eighteen for a long time.

W: Yes. And this young man came in. When it came meal time we served him his share of the food and he wouldn't eat it. We said, "Hey, Buddy, you better eat or you're going to starve to death. This is all you're going to get." He said, "I'm not eating that slop!"

T: Was he new to the camp?

W: Yes. And he said, this was is going to be over in eight days. By God, it was over in eight days. He knew they had dropped the atomic weapon. We didn't.

T: He had just been shot down, this guy?

W: Yes. He was just shot down. He was only in the camp about a week. But he knew that the atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima and he knew the one had been dropped on Nagasaki. He said this war is going to be over in just a matter of days. And it was just about seven or eight days later that the Japanese capitulated and signed the surrender papers, or agreed to sign.

T: When did you finally feel safe, that the end of the war was not going to mean the end of your life?

W: Actually it was about midway through that first day when we woke up and there were no guards there and they had left their rifles. Now we had four senior officers in the camp—there were two Air Force colonels, a Navy commander, and Pappy Boyington, who was a major in the Marine Corps. They formed a provost marshal group and there were enough enlisted Marines that were from the Philippines that they had enough weapons to arm those guys, and they patrolled the outskirts of our camp for two reasons. A lot of the old time prisoners wanted to get out and go into town and raise a lot of heck. The more senior people knew that they couldn't allow that. Secondly, they wanted to patrol the perimeter of the camp to make sure that no die-hard Japanese military tried to get in to harm us. So they patrolled the camp for about three days, and there was no incidents of any kind so they did away with that.

T: So kind of a limbo period where the Japanese have gone but the Americans haven't arrived.

W: Basically that's right. From August 15 until September 3 or 4. I can't remember just when. I think they signed the papers on the *Missouri* on the 2 or 3 of September, and we were liberated right after that. But about the third day, like the 18 August, a Navy fighter flew right over our camp and he was wiggling his wings and he made a big circle and he came back over and he was only about one hundred feet off the ground and he threw an object out of his airplane. It landed right in our camp. We went and picked it up. It was his shirt. He had a package of cigarettes that he had tied up in the middle. That was the beginning of a barrage. From then on some

Navy planes would fly over and drop us very small loads of things, and then the B-29s came and they...

T: Omori is not very big. So you've got B-29s right over your camp?

W: Oh, yes. They would drop packages in canvas and burlap about the size of this table. A little longer than this table.

T: That's eight or ten feet long.

W: Just loaded with anything: clothing, food, medical supplies. You name it, they dropped it. And we had so much stuff there that you couldn't possibly imagine.

**(2, B, 432)**

T: It's gone from famine to feast.

W: Oh, God, yes. They put it all in a big building. We all went in and we got new shoes and picked out pants and shirts and hats. But we were all full of lice. So when they finally came and got us and took us out to the hospital ship, they had us take all our clothes off because they had to burn it. They were all full of lice.

T: So you had it, what, a week or two or something like that?

W: That's about all. Then they gave us Navy enlisted clothing, consisting of dungarees and, no matter what your rank was, you wore a white hat. Everybody had a white hat, a shirt, pair of pants, and a pair of Navy shoes. We all looked alike. Nobody knew. Of course the ship was just full of reporters wanting stories. But they...

T: Were you approached by reporters even at that early stage?

W: I wasn't, no. But a lot of the guys were. But the first night none of us went to sleep. We could walk anywhere we wanted on the ship and they gave us free cigarettes, all the cigarettes we wanted. We just smoked cigarettes, one right after the other. I must have smoked a half a carton of cigarettes the first day. As I say, then things began to calm down a little bit. I was in a room with...well, first of all, when we first got aboard they took us down, stripped us. We all took a shower and then they doused us with DDT or whatever it was for the lice and they gave us these uniforms. Then they sent us up and we were interviewed just for a matter of a couple of words. And our physical consisted of, "Do you feel okay?" (*chuckles*) "Yes." "Okay."

T: What kind of questions did they ask? This is the Navy now.

W: They just wanted to identify us, who we were, where we came from. That didn't take long. Then, as I say, the physical was just a question. "Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?" Because they were just processing one right after the other. Then they assigned us to this room. Then after we'd been into the room they took us down and they were going to feed us. They simply weren't prepared for us. Our first meal consisted of fried ham, fried eggs, fried potatoes. And we could eat all we wanted. That was just the worst thing you could put in your stomach.

T: Did you keep it down?

W: No! Some did, some didn't. A lot of us got sick. Then they served us ice cream in soup bowls. And we could eat all the ice cream we wanted. I must have eaten two pints of ice cream. Obviously I got sick.

Then we went back to our room and there were six of us junior officers in this one room. We were there, I think it was about the second day, and there was a knock on the door and I was in a Navy hospital gown, my behind hanging out. I walked over to open the door and looked out and all I could see was stars. There was Admiral Nimitz, Admiral Halsey, Admiral Spruance, and about four rear admirals...

T: Standing at your door?

W: Right at the door. And Nimitz says, "Can we come in?" I said, "Yes, Sir!" And he came in. Of course the room was packed with people by this time. I had this front tooth missing (*points to tooth*) and Halsey saw that and he wanted to know how it happened. Then he said, "If I had my way we'd have an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I'm going to ride that damn white horse." (*laughs*) And Nimitz wouldn't let him.

T: The white horse is Hirohito's horse, right?

W: Yes, that was what he was referring to. Halsey—Nimitz was of course an older man, and he kind of resembled a grandfather to all of us, the way he treated us.

**(2, B, 472)**

T: You were twenty or twenty-one years old, right?

W: And he was talking to us. He was very concerned about how we were being treated, and were we being taken care of properly. That's what his concern was. Halsey was pretty much a man's man. He was also concerned about our care, but he was a lot gruffer and rougher. He was a combat admiral. I think I mentioned this to you, that when the war was over and they wouldn't let us be liberated because they were so afraid that some of the die-hards would come and he got fed up with that, he called [Harold] Stassen and he simply told Harold Stassen, "You get some Marines and you go in there and get my boys!" Because we were his boys. He thought the

world of all of us. He did things in the war that were very contrary to standard operating procedures. One night, I wasn't one of them, of course, but some of the guys were out on a mission. They got back late. They were low on fuel. It was nighttime. He said, "Turn on the lights!" He lit up those carriers like a Christmas tree so the guys could make landings at night.

T: What was it like for you? You knew who these guys were. What was it like to have them suddenly standing right in front of you?

W: Oh! I was flabbergasted. I never thought in my life that I would see Nimitz and Halsey together.

T: Unannounced. You didn't know they were coming.

W: No, we didn't. Heck, no. I looked up and saw these stars and all I could see was stars there for a while. Of course they came in our room and talked to us and were so kind and considerate and compassionate. They all wished us well, and then they went to another room. I did see Halsey one other time. When I was going through a refresher training course down in Oppalaca, Florida, which is just on the outskirts of Miami, he came down with his entourage and we had a big gala reception at the Officers Club. We were all in whites. So we all got to say hello to him. There was a number of us there that were on the ship when he was on there and we reminded him about that. He looked at us. And of course we'd all put on weight. He said, "Gosh, you sure look different now." He was a great guy.

T: What kind of physical shape were you in when you ended your time in Omori?

W: For about thirteen months I wasn't bothered by anything, but the last month I was in captivity I began to slowly demonstrate the effects of beri beri, where your lower extremities swell up with water. That began to happen, and all of us were just running out of juice, because I had gone from 165 pounds down to 110. So I was pretty skinny. Of course we all suffered from malnutrition. As I say, when I got aboard ship and—it was funny how it happened. I looked down at my—I had on these high-top boots and my ankles were just hanging over the sides of the boots because my ankles had swollen up so much. So right away they took note of that, and of course we were on the ship for a few days.

Then they put us back ashore again at an abandoned Japanese airfield [Atsugi, by Tokyo] and we stayed there for three or four days. Then the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne came in and loaded us up and we flew home. We flew from Japan down to Guam, and from Guam we flew to Kwajalein. From Kwajalein we flew to Johnson Island, and from Johnson Island we flew to Hawaii, and then from Hawaii we flew to California. I was in the hospital there, the Oakland Naval Hospital, for about five or six days and my dad came down from Seattle and my aunt came up from Los Angeles.

T: Was your mom still alive at this time?

W: My mom was alive, yes. But my folks had separated during the war, so she did not come down to greet me. But then they decided they were going to fly me back to Seattle. They flew me up at night. When I landed at Seattle there was an ambulance there to pick me up, and they were supposed to take me out to the Seattle Naval Hospital. There were two enlisted corpsmen there and I got in the ambulance and I said, "How about taking me home, guys?" And they said, "Oh, no. We can't do that. We have to take you to the hospital." I said, "I just gave you a direct order. Take me home." I lived in the part of Seattle, northern Seattle. So they finally said okay. They took me to Seattle, and my mom and my sister didn't know I was coming.

**(2, B, 526)**

T: Oh, boy!

W: I walked up and knocked on the door, and when my sister answered the door all hell broke loose. My mom had lost a son. When I was two my brother was six, and a guy ran over my brother and killed him. So she thought she had lost her other son. And when I showed up that made a big difference. *(pauses three seconds)* I was home for about three or four days and I finally got a call from the Seattle Naval Hospital.

T: That's right, you had never showed up there.

W: Never showed up. "Do you know you're AWOL?" I said, no, I didn't know I was AWOL. "Well get your butt out here!" So I had to go out to the hospital. Then I went through a real physical and everything.

T: For the first time, it sounds like.

W: Yes. I was really attached to the hospital for about seven months. After about a week they felt that I was well enough to where I didn't have to stay in the hospital, but I had to come out every Tuesday morning for a checkup.

T: Yes. Otherwise you could stay at home?

W: Yes. I had to go out every Saturday morning to stand inspection. Of course I was hitting the bars pretty good in those days. I would get all dressed up in my blue uniform and go to my—I had a room, everything, right in the hospital. I was supposed to be standing up to greet the commanding officer. I'd lay on my bunk and put my hat on my chest and be laying there *(laughing)*. He'd walk in and say, "Hi, Bill! How are you doing?" I would say, "Hi, Captain!" And we'd have a little chat. He was really a nice guy.

T: Things relaxed once the war was over, didn't they?

W: Oh, yes. He said, "Don't get up. You just stay right there. You feeling okay?" I said yes. He said, "Okay. I'll see you next Saturday." That went on for a long time.

T: When you first saw your dad or your mom, how much did they want to know about your POW experience, Bill?

W: At first none.

T: Did they ask you any questions?

W: No. My dad was just so happy to see me that he wasn't concerned about the treatment that I had received. He was just concerned that I was home, and was I feeling good.

T: The same with your mom, you say? There was really not much discussion of your POW experience?

W: No. Not hardly at all. Because I didn't feel—I wasn't in a psychological condition to talk about my experiences then. As a matter of fact, I wasn't really able to talk like I'm talking now until about, really about ten years ago.

T: So the middle of 1990s. Nearly fifty years afterwards.

W: Yes. And the surprising thing was that when I finally realized that I just wasn't a very nice guy. I was drinking too much. When I finally realized that I heard about a sort of a self-help group out at the VA hospital.

T: Here in Minneapolis?

W: In Minneapolis. I had already retired from the Navy. So I went out there. I became part of this group. There was about twelve of us, and we had a social worker that met with us. And the first meeting we all sat there and looked at each other. Nobody said anything. Then the second meeting one guy began to talk a little bit. Then on the third meeting we all just broke up and started talking. There were people from the Pacific Theater and from the European Theater, and it is really surprising that our feelings were very similar.

**(2, B, 569)**

T: In what ways?

W: About really not being able to talk about the experience. The conditions were different. The European POWs, and here again it depended upon which camp they were in, but if they were confined to a Luftwaffe run camp they were treated reasonably well.

T: Comparatively especially. Yes.

W: If they got into some of these camps that the SS were handling, the treatment was not very pleasant. Then of course the Japanese camps, none of us had it very nice. Particularly the guys from the Philippines. They were just...oh, boy, they really...they went through hell. I have a friend. After I retired from being a State Farm agent and I lost my first wife, I went to work out at Minnesota Valley Country Club. I ended up working there for eleven years. It turns out that one of the members is an ex-POW. He was captured on Bataan, and he went through the Bataan Death March. Now it's rather interesting—his name is Douglas MacArthur.

T: Let me ask about Douglas MacArthur, the ex-POW. Do you feel in a sense that your experience, being captured later in the war, was qualitatively different than theirs in any way?

W: Yes. Definitely. Those individuals that were captured in the Philippines, because they put up a pretty stiff fight even though they didn't have a whole lot of equipment, and the Japanese were still extremely bitter and vicious at that time of the war. Because it was right at the beginning. During the Bataan Death March there were prisoners that were executed if they halted or anything. Any excuse, the Japanese would either bayonet them or shoot them. Right on the spot. Then the treatment they received in their prison camps were just terrible. And a man like MacArthur, he was eventually transported to parts of Japan. How those guys were able to survive for forty-two months is just beyond me. For the lack of food, lack of medical care. It was just...I don't know how any of them survived.

T: Do you feel yourself, ironically, fortunate in a way?

W: Oh, definitely. When I compare notes with some of the fellows that I've come in contact with, yes, I feel very fortunate in that I wasn't mistreated worse than I was, and that we did not get executed like they promised they were going to do. So, yes, I feel very fortunate that I survived the war. I think most of the guys that were prisoners in the Pacific Theater feel the same way. No matter who they were. They were all very fortunate that we survived.

T: Bill, how much for you was luck a matter of your own survival?

W: Well, I think circumstances played a bigger part than I did. I did what I was told, and I wasn't a willing participant in some of the things that they tried to make us do. We did everything we could to cause them grief. But fortunately I didn't get caught doing some of the things that I shouldn't have done. Had I been caught, like for instance, getting that newspaper, I would have probably been shot right on the spot with that one. But fortunately they didn't catch me doing that. In that regard I was very fortunate.

T: What do you think was the most difficult part of your POW experience? I mean the way you experienced it.

**(2, B, 629)**

W: The worst thing for me was not so much the mistreatment, it was the lack of food. We all suffered from hunger pains and malnutrition. Then we had one young man that was one of the eighteen of us that apparently was injured in Ofuna, and he suffered some internal injuries. Because he was a small man. Enlisted Army weatherman that was just on a flight for observation purposes, and the plane was shot down and he was captured. They picked on him unmercifully because he was smaller than they were. Most of us were a head taller than the Japanese. But this kid was even smaller than the Japanese and they picked on him unmercifully. They beat him at night. They carried like a cane made out of bamboo. They would walk down the passageway and our doors were always open, and they would go into his room and just hit him while he was sleeping. I think that perhaps they damaged his kidneys or something, because when we got to Omori he was pretty good for the first couple of months but then he began to complain and began not to eat. Boyington became very, very concerned about him and was watching him and everything. Boyington was a fantastic individual.

T: He went with you as one of the eighteen.

W: Yes. He tried to get this young man to eat and finally the kid just gave up and died. It really affected all of us. I want to say this about Pappy Boyington: he was an ideal combat leader of men.

T: So in difficult situations he was a guy you'd want to count on.

W: Rough and he was tough and no matter what they asked him to do, he would do it, and he led his men as well as anybody that you could think of but yet he was very compassionate, very concerned for his men. He didn't show it all the time, but he was. When we were at Ofuna, as I said, we had some surviving submarine enlisted men.

T: From the *Tang*.

W: They were very young. Some of them almost gave up, and when Greg [Boyington] would hear about that he would call them aside and lead them over into a quiet corner somewhere and he would talk to them and he was a rough guy, no question. And he would read them the riot act. He says, "You're not going to quit on my watch! You're not going to give up! I won't stand for it!" And he straightened a lot of them out and he saved some of their lives, because he got them to eating again and thinking straight. He could do that. He was just that kind of a guy. He was rough and tough. He couldn't be in the Marine Corps in peacetime. He just wasn't any good as a peacetime officer. But God, he was good at what he did.

T: The situation was right for him, even as a POW.

W: I've always said that if I was unfortunate enough to have to go to another war, he would be my ideal skipper. I would love to fly for him because he's that kind of a guy. Was that kind of a guy.

T: Now when you got back from this you mentioned you didn't talk to your folks much about it initially. Did that change with time, as you saw your folks over the years?

W: I wasn't around my folks all that much, because I stayed on active duty and I wasn't home. I did talk to my first wife a little bit about it, but not nearly as much as I have recently. I think part of it resulted from the fact that I quit drinking, I quit smoking, and I took part in that self-help group out at the VA for about six months.

T: When was that? When did you do that?

W: That was in the late '70s. Once I went through all that I was able to start changing and releasing some of my feelings. Now part of my Navy duty when I was still on active duty, I served on board the USS *Bennington* for six months at sea and we pulled into Japanese ports on a number of occasions. Of course there weren't any Japanese military. It was all civilians, and I just came to realize that they were no different than we were during the war and it turns out that I have absolutely no animosity towards the Japanese people whatsoever. I think they're a fine race of people.

T: So you saw them as civilians there after the war. It didn't cause any kind of a reaction for you.

**(2, B, 711)**

W: Then I was stationed out at Iwakuni, Japan, which is a Naval Air Station, and I was there for about a year and a half. Part of my duties, I was made the operations officer for the base because my boss was boosted up to be the executive officer. So I took his place. Some of the duties was, I had to meet with the Japanese fisheries department because we were right on the inland sea and we had some pollution problems. I got to talk to these business people who were on this committee. I just realized that they were just like people in this country. Then I got to know some Japanese civilians out in town. So it turned out that whatever animosities that I might have had, I got rid of them.

T: Through contact. Really once you saw them as individuals, real people.

W: Yes. Then, once I went through that transition, then I was able to start releasing some of the feelings that I had. First I began to talk about some of the funny things that happened to us, as POWs. Eventually I got to talking about the other things.

T: So it worked from the easier memories to the more difficult ones.

W: Yes. Yes. To give you an example: one day when we were up at Omori, they took six of us. One guard took six of us and we had like an oxcart, two-wheel cart, and we pulled it out to this area, oh, probably a mile from camp and we loaded corrugated sheets of metal. Roofing material. Corrugated. We loaded it on these carts. So we loaded the carts up to where we thought that they were a full load, so we stopped and we tied it down. And of course he'd been sitting over there in the corner smoking a cigarette and he came back and saw that we had quit loading and oh, boy! He just got madder than hell. He lined us all up and he was going to really work us over. He was a little short guy and we were all fairly good, so when he yelled at us to *jeske*, to assume the position, and we bent our knees a little bit and stuck our chin out and every time he'd take a swing at us we'd just sort of straighten up just about a quarter of an inch and he'd miss us. He got so tired so swinging at us that he finally quit. Then he gave us each a cigarette, and by the time we smoked the cigarette it was time to go so he just, he didn't have us load any more on there. So we had to pull those back.

T: What an interesting experience.

W: Yes.

**End of Tape 2. Tape 3, Side A begins at counter 000.**

T:...energy. I don't know.

W: It does. It really does. I think that part of it is going to church and being a Christian and having been out there after the war and getting to know a few of those people. So it just changed my mind. Now I will fully admit that if I happened to come across one or two of those guards that I had I might feel a little differently.

T: Okay. So certain specific Japanese...

W: Yes. Yes.

T: Bill, you mentioned religion. At the time you were a POW, would you have considered yourself a particularly religious person?

W: No. I was a Christian, but my family weren't church-goers, so as a kid growing up I went to Sunday School but I did it on my own. My mother and father didn't go to church and so I really wasn't a real active church-goer. Then of course during my confinement, it's the old saying, "there's no atheist in the foxholes."

T: Is that true in your own respect?

W: Oh, absolutely. There's no question about it. When I was first captured there were a number of occasions I said a few prayers to the good Lord and asked him to assist me in getting through this, and it turns out I assume he helped me a little bit. But then I have become much more of a church-goer now in my later life than I was before. It was kind of interesting that, when I first got married and I began having kids, my father-in-law who was a devout Lutheran, old Norwegian, he called me aside one day and we were talking. "Bill," he said, "I've got a favor to ask of you." I said, "What's that, Dad?" I always called him Dad. He said, "Would you make sure that your kids are raised as Lutherans?" I said, "Yes, that's fine. I can do that." So I did. My wife, of course, she was Lutheran. We made sure they all went to church and went to confirmation and all that stuff. I couldn't, because while I was in the Navy here at Wold-Chamberlain [Field] and my kids were going through confirmation I worked every Saturday and Sunday. Because we trained the reservists on weekends. And then we had Mondays and Tuesdays off. So I couldn't attend the church on Sunday. But then since I married Winnie, she and I go to church every Sunday now and we enjoy it. I don't know. It's just, in a way it's a very peaceful influence on my life.

T: In what ways do you think your POW experience changed your faith in the long run?

W: I think it made me more aware of other people. Primarily the Japanese. But it also includes just about anybody. It used to be that I was very argumentative, very opinionated, and I just wasn't a very nice guy. Once I, as I say, once I got involved with that self-help group and I did quit drinking it had a big influence on my life. I began to realize that there are other things, or there are things in this world that are very important, and religion is one of them. So I think that it taught me...now that I still have a flash-type temper, but now when I find myself really ready to explode I try to turn around, walk away from whatever it is. And it only has to be for thirty seconds or so and then it gives me a chance to think and to calm down and then I can come back and carry on a normal conversation.

T: The way it sounds you had trouble with that thirty years ago or something.

W: Oh, I still have trouble with it. The Veterans Administration, they refer to that as the delayed stress syndrome. There's an awful lot of people that are affected by that, and they're discovering now that the soldiers and Marines over in Iraq are suffering from that quite a bit. But the military medical services as well as the VA are becoming much more adept at treating that.

T: Does that mean when you were first an ex-POW in the late '40s or early '50s that they didn't do much to help you?

W: No. They didn't have the faintest idea. Neither did the Navy. I couldn't go to the flight surgeon and complain about that, because then they would have come to the conclusion at that time that I was psychologically not adept for flying. That would have been their decision. Not that something else was causing it. That's what they would have said.

T: So you really had no one to go to.

W: No. To the best of my knowledge up until about ah, until the late '70s there wasn't anybody to go to or anything.

T: The whole time you were in the Navy. You retired in 1964. The whole time you were in the Navy, it was in a sense you were an ex-POW, but get on with your life?

W: The Navy didn't give diddly about that. There was no concern. Nobody really cared about it.

T: So there was no one to talk to or to listen to you.

W: No. No.

T: Now you were married. What year were you married? First married?

W: My first wife and I were married March 26, 1946.

T: And you had four children.

W: Yes.

**(3, A, 61)**

T: As your children were growing up, what did they know of your POW experience?

W: Hardly anything. They knew that I was, but there was no concern about it. No talk about it at all. They knew that I was a naval aviator on active duty. They knew that I was in the Navy. But they didn't pay an awful lot of attention to it.

T: With your kids, growing up, was it more do you think a case of they didn't ask or you didn't tell?

W: A little of both. Little of both. Of course they were with me when—I had them in Japan. And I had them on Guam. We were at Pensacola. San Diego and here. So they were around the Navy a lot. They just took it for granted. It wasn't any big deal. They had their friends and they had their activities and all that business. And I was gone a lot. Flying here and there. On the ship.

T: As an ex-POW there in the years after the war, how much did you notice things like flashbacks or even nightmares about what had happened to you?

W: Well, surprisingly, the first twenty-five years after the war I had a lot of that. I really did. Even today when I sleep, I don't sleep soundly. I toss and turn. I wake up, oh, every hour and a half at night. I wake up. I fall back asleep again, but I wake up. And part of that is developed from the fact that I was a POW. That we didn't sleep soundly. We were always afraid one of these guards were going to come in and do something to us while we were asleep. So that we were semi-awake I guess.

T: So it's something that you developed a different sleeping pattern that stuck with you.

W: Yes. That stuck with me forever.

T: Dreams. Are there...

W: Oh, sure. I still dream every now and then. About life at Ofuna and things that didn't happen that could have happened.

T: Like what?

W: Execution. Beatings that I saw. Things that didn't happen to me, but I dream about them anyway.

T: Things that could have happened.

W: Yes. Sure.

T: Do you relive the crash of your plane at all? Does that come in your dreams?

W: No. No. That all happened so fast that I guess it just didn't have a chance to make an impression on my sub-consciousness. Now when we were going through flight school we all knew that there might be a possibility that we would have to bail out of an airplane for whatever reason. We never made a parachute jump, a practice jump.

**(3, A, 97)**

T: So bailing out of your plane was your first jump?

W: Sure. Yes. But they did tell us a few things about what you should do if and when that situation developed, and so when it came time for me to bail out of the airplane I didn't even think about it. I knew exactly what to do. So when I finally got out of the airplane I just fell for a couple minutes and I just reached over and pulled the ripcord and the chute opened. I glanced up and there was the canopy.

T: So that part was pretty easy.

W: That part was easy. But then I saw the tracers coming up at me. They were shooting at me from the ship that was going by. I was damned afraid that they would hit me. As a matter of fact, I have the intelligence report in the bedroom, and in that report it says that they observed me bailing out and that the ship was firing at me and [it states that] the chances are he was dead before he hit the water.

T: This is what the intelligence report said.

W: Yes. It's printed right there in the Navy records.

T: But the crash of the plane isn't something that comes back in your dreams?

W: No.

T: Nor the whole bailing out. It's more the Ofuna episodes.

W: Yes. The actual getting shot down, it all happened so fast that it didn't really make much of an impression on me. I just knew that I was hit. I couldn't fly the airplane. I knew I had to get out if I was going to survive, and I bailed out.

T: Can you estimate, I mean from the time the plane was hit until the time your chute opened—which goes through a lot of stages—how much time are we talking about?

W: Oh, I'm sure it wasn't more than four minutes at the most.

T: And everything packed into those four minutes.

W: See, I had become inverted. When you're making a dive bombing run you actually invert your airplane and then you pull through this way (*holds out hand flat, rolls from palm down to palm up*). You can't do this (*hand flat, palm down, moves hand ahead and down*). You can't just push over.

T: You can't just roll...

W: No. Because then you start corkscrewing.

T: So you have to almost roll the plane on its top and then...

W: Yes. You actually do a split-S. You just roll it over, upside down, and then just pull...basically what you're doing is, you're looking down. You let the airplane fall this way (*holds out hand flat, rolls from palm down to palm up*). Just fall upside down.

T: I've got it now.

W: Then you gradually pull the nose through to the target. Hold it until you see the right altitude. Release your bombs, and pull on out. Because if you do this (*hand flat, palm down, moves hand ahead and down*)...

T: Just go over into a dive.

W: Yes, if you do that you start corkscrewing and you cannot stop the corkscrew. You keep trying to get on the target and you never can get...you can't do it.

T: I see.

W: So at any rate, I was just inverted when this shell—must have been fairly close to me—blew up. There's a piece of armor-plating that sits underneath the pilot. There is no armor-plating back where the crewman sits because he's in the rear part of the fuselage which is just aluminum and he is encircled by a big ring around him. There's two twin .30 caliber machine guns mounted there that he can hold onto.

T: That swivel around this ring.

**(3, A, 133)**

W: That swivel around, and in order for him to be in there he has to have his parachute hanging on the side of the airplane. Because he can't wear it while he's in there. So in order for him to bail out, he's got to actually push the guns forward, reach down, grab his chute and stand up. He has to almost stand up to get outside of that ring. Hook the parachute on and then jump out.

T: A lot of stuff.

W: It's almost impossible.

T: And you were wearing yours.

W: Yes. I just roll out of the airplane.

T: I see. He has to put his on.

W: So he either was injured severely when this thing exploded that he might have been dead after the shell went off. I don't know. Or he could have been incapacitated so that he couldn't get out or he couldn't get out because the tail was flopping around and centrifugal force kept him in there. I don't know.

T: You couldn't see him from your...

W: No. I could not see him. Nor did I know he was gone. I didn't know the tail was gone until I....

T: That's amazing. Really. The whole back of the plane was missing.

W: Yes. That's why I couldn't fly it. And I didn't know that. And that's also included in this intelligence report that I have. So I assume that he never got out of the airplane. As I say, I did not know him.

T: You really didn't even...you hadn't met him before that day, right?

W: I had never met him. I went out in the morning. It was pitch black. I jumped up on the wing and said hi, and jumped to the front cockpit and that's all I ever said to him. Of course had I survived, I probably would have gotten to know him quite well, but it just—that type of situation developed not only with me with the other people.

T: Was he experienced or was this his first mission as well?

W: No. No. He was an experienced gunner, yes. I don't know how experienced but, yes, he'd been in the squadron for a while.

T: Attached to you just by the draw.

W: Yes. Basically that was it.

T: The last question I had to ask you is this: when you think of your POW experience, what would you identify as the most important way that it changed your life?

W: What was the most important thing that changed my life?

T: What was the most important way that that experience changed you? Or changed your life?

W: I think that having gone through the training that I went through and being commissioned and made a naval aviator, but then having gone through the POW experience, I matured and aged an awful lot quicker than young men of my age bracket, so that when I was say, twenty-eight, twenty-nine years old I was a lot more mature in my thinking than other individuals, because I realized how lucky I was to be alive. But I learned a lot about human nature while being a POW. How we had to divide the food up equally. Why we pretty much had to look out for one another. And we all had a common enemy. I think that that had a big influence on my life.

T: So when you were twenty-five or thirty years old, you in a sense felt yourself older than other twenty-five or thirty year old men because of your life experiences?

W: No. Not older. Just that I was more experienced. Of course, I was still in the Navy and I had a wife and some children. I think I was just much more mature. I wasn't quite as nutty as a lot of young guys are. We still had a good time and did a lot of things that maybe we shouldn't have done. We knew there was a limit and we could keep the lid on so to speak. Now, to give you an example. You're probably aware of this that the Navy has an organization called the Tail Hookers.

**(3, A, 188)**

T: Yes.

W: Which I happen to be a member of. Because I landed on board a carrier. They had this convention out in Vegas where they just did all sorts of things that they shouldn't have done.

T: This was in the news, I believe.

W: There were senior officers there all the way from admiral down to lieutenants that did not take the necessary steps to control that and to stop it right on the spot. Had I been there, and I was only a lieutenant commander, I would have jumped up and down, screamed my head off and done everything I humanly possibly could to stop that type of activity. Chasing girls, having a good time, was all part of the fun. But when you carried it beyond a certain point it had to stop, and they didn't stop it, and it was a disgrace as far as I was concerned. That some of these guys didn't take the necessary responsibility to stop that activity, and if you would have been a full Navy captain or an admiral and you said stop it, it would have stopped. But none of them said it.

T: There was a lot of bad publicity for the Navy came out of that.

W: Of course, I understand that. If you're a naval aviator today flying a modern day carrier aircraft it is so sophisticated and you're flying right on the edge all of the time. You're right on the edge. In other words an accident can happen (*snaps fingers*) that fast and you're gone.

T: Sure. As fast as those planes go.

W: Of course, they asked these kids to do things that really are amazing. What they're able to do. So that they do have to have a way to release the tension. But that is just not the way to do it. There's other ways you can do it. But it was just a big party. Of course they had all these manufacturers there handing out the free booze and all that stuff. It just got out of hand is what it boiled down to. But you see, and another bad thing was, since I retired they have allowed far more women into the Armed Forces and we have female naval aviators. They feel that they're just as equal to the men as anybody else and they are. But they're women. Some of them are pretty attractive. When you get a bunch of young bucks full of booze, what do

they think they're...they turn to one subject and as I say, they just got out of hand. This whole idea about Congress makes you an officer and a gentleman still applies. That you have to...you can have a good time but you can still keep that within bounds, and that didn't happen.

T: Standards of conduct apply to everybody.

W: Absolutely. I don't care who you are. You can have a lot of fun and you can tell an off-color joke and all that business, but there's a limit as to how far you go.

T: Sometimes that's a slippery slope, isn't it?

W: Oh, boy. I'll say it is. Especially when you're all boozed up.

T: Yes. On the record, Bill, let me thank you very much. That's the last question I had to ask you.

W: I thoroughly enjoyed this. I enjoy talking about my experiences now.

T: It sounds like had I asked you for this interview twenty-five years ago, it might not have gone like this.

W: No. It would not have. But the point is that if this information and the other information that you have compiled and if there are individuals that are going to come along in the future that are interested in this type of subject, there will be information now that they can go and use.

T: That's right.

W: You see, before there was nothing like this.

T: You people are the record, Bill. You're the record, and twenty years from now I don't think we'll have the luxury of doing this project.

W: Well, first of all none of us will be around.

T: That's right.

W: That's for darned sure. And of course since World War II there are some Korean POWs and there weren't nearly that many that survived...

T: Yes.

W: And during the Vietnam War...now that's an interesting thing, too.

T: Agreed. For today, let me thank you for taking time to do this interview for the POW Oral History Project. At this point I'll turn the recorder off.

**END OF INTERVIEW**