

The National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with:

Floyd C. Cox, Jr.

Childhood during the Depression and World War II

February 7, 2022

Today is February 7, 2022. I am Reagan Grau, Director of Collections and Exhibits at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. I am in San Antonio today to have the pleasure of interviewing Floyd Cox who was a youngster during the war. I would like to get his insights as a child in the United States during the war. With that, Floyd, I think it would be a good idea to start with when you were born, where you were born and a little bit about your past and where you grew up. And then we will dig a little into your life as we go on.

Cox: Well, thank you Reagan, it is indeed a pleasure to talk with you about growing up during the war. I was born in Hutchinson, Kansas November 26, 1932. My father was a flour miller and my mother was a housewife. Now as you know in 1932 the country was in a severe Economic Depression and in 1935 in search of a job, my father and mother and myself moved to Phoenix, Arizona and then to San Diego, California as jobs were hard to come by. At that time people thought that California was the land of opportunity and we moved there. The only job he could find was washing cars at fifty cent per day at a car dealership. On a side note; not long after we arrived in California, I was diagnosed with a severe case of Diphtheria which was a common cause of death of children during the 1920s and 30s. As I grew older, my mother told me that, at time, I was not expected to live. There are only things I recall about that experience at age three. One of them was; I crawled out of bed in the infectious quarantined area of the hospital. I crawled out of the bed and consequently the nurse tied me to the bed. The other thing I remember was that my dad, who was making fifty cents per day, would periodically buy an ice cream cone for all four of the boys in the ward. He could not bring it in so he and my mother would have to see me, their only child, through a window of the hospital and present us with an ice cream cone.

Now, we only stayed in California until I recovered and we moved back to Kansas. We moved to Hutchinson and in 1936 my dad lost three fingers on his right hand in a milling accident. He left the mill he had been working in and we moved to Kansas City where he worked for another milling company. Later on, we moved to Lindsborg, Kansas. At that time, it was a Swedish town of 1900 people. I was in the second grade at this time.

Now at this point in time, living in a small town was a wonderful thing for a youngster. We could go anywhere at anytime and not be concerned about something bad happening.

One Sunday, we heard on the radio that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. Of course, being a nine-year-old, I had no idea where Pearl Harbor was. I had no idea what a Japanese person was. There were no so-called minorities living in Lindsborg, a Swedish town in Kansas. That was when first heard of the war. Later on, the various stores downtown would have posters in the windows that would have the silhouettes of the various aircraft involved in the war. They would have on of US aircraft, Japanese aircraft and German aircraft. (1) That excited us young people because we thought that it might be a possibility that we might spot the enemy's airplane over Lindsborg, Kansas. The likely hood was at least a double zero. It was there and then that we learned to conserve. Once again this was during the Depression and my father was not making much money. Consequently; we always had a garden to supplement our rations. We also had chickens and they would supply us with eggs and our Sunday chicken dinner.

It was a great time for a child. Now in our situation, we were not extremely poor but we certainly not well-to-do so we created our own type of entertainment most of the time. We would play horse-shoes and soft-ball. We would also skate with the old fashion strap-on skates. We would go exploring down by the Smokey-Hill River and I could tell you of some of the experiences we had there, but I won't get into it now.

Sometimes, I would go to the movie theater and as I recall it was twelve cents for admission. Once in a while, I would get a quarter from my mom and I could go to see a movie. The admission was twelve cents and a bag of popcorn was five cents. That would leave me eight cents to buy some candy. I would walk to down-town, by myself, to go to the movie, sometimes after dark. Even as a youngster of nine, you never felt unsafe contrary to what it is like today.

Grau: Did you live outside of town?

Cox: We lived right on the edge of town. Right by the stockyards. That was an experience in itself. One of the things that I do remember during those trying times that there were some people in our town, of less than 1900 people, that were very poor. Of course, there were a lot of men, passing through town, we called them bums, but basically, they were men on the move looking for jobs. They would hop on a freight train and get a free ride from one point to another. Periodically we would have one come to the door and ask for food. Although we had limited resources, my mother usually would fix them a sandwich. It was usually peanut butter and jelly. The recipients were always grateful for anything that you would give them.

Grau: Now you were in school at the time, right?

Cox: That is correct.

Grau: Tell me about being in school and you being old enough to know that the war was going on.

Cox: I don't remember the subject coming up as far as teaching us, in the lower grades. First, Second and so on. But, after school was out, we would play war. All of us wanted to be the good guys, that is, the US, versus being the bad guys who were the Japanese and the Germans. I hated when it was decided that I would be the Japanese General.

Grau: Do you recall hearing news about the war and the war progressed or news from the war-front? How did you get informed about the war's progress?

Cox: The thing I remember Reagan, was, number one, we would hear about it on the radio. Edward R. Morrow would actually broadcast from the battle-front. Everybody would stick to the radio to follow the war's progress. It was not like it is today, where you have instant communication. Or, when we would go to the movies, they would have the News reel that would show you some of the things that were going on overseas. The thing I do remember is, you never saw any dead Americans in the news reel. I think that the omission of such was propaganda as the Government did not want people to know

that Americans were being killed and wounded. As kids, we didn't discuss it much. We just played war.

Grau: Did your family have just one radio?

Cox: We only had one radio and that was in the living room. It was a large floor model radio and like I said, the family would sit around and listen to the news. I should give you a little side-note. At this time, my father was thirty-eight years old. He had three fingers missing and he had two children. He went down and tried to enlist in the Army. He had previously served during the early 1920s. They rejected him because he was working in a war related industry, a flour miller, he had two young children and he had three fingers missing from his right hand. My dad was quite upset because they would not accept him.

Grau: What year did he do this?

Cox: That was in 1942. A lot of young people were lining up to go into the military.

Grau: Was there much military activity in your town?

Cox: In the little town of Lindsborg there wasn't other than you would have airmen from Salina, Kansas which was about thirty miles from Lindsborg, come over in their Class A (dress) uniforms. Salina was a large Bomber training base. The one thing that I vividly remember is Troop trains coming through town. They would slow down or stop for some reason and these young G.I.s would throw candy bars out the windows. Usually, they were chocolate bars and they were rationed at that time. You couldn't find candy hardly ever. Of course, we young people would yell and wave at these young men who were serving our country. I have often wondered how many of those young men whom we idolized ever came home. Later on, during the war, we moved to Hutchinson, Kansas which had a population of about 20,000 people. This was in 1943. The war was really going on hot and heavy. We lived on the edge of town, right outside of the city limits. We had a huge garden. During the war, these were often called Victory Gardens. In fact, it was almost a full acre. We had about any vegetable you can think of.

Tomatoes, potatoes, corn, beans, peas, pickles and many more. You can guess who the free gardener was. Me.

Grau: I guess that supplemented a lot of your food. Of course, Rationing was in effect. Do you recall what food products were rationed?

Cox: I know that sugar was. Meat was rationed as well. Believe it or not, I still have the ration books of my mother and dad. In addition to a huge garden, we would raise one hog every year. That provided us with meat. We raised chickens from little chicks to eatable chickens as well as egg providers. We raised ducks and we also raised rabbits. I can't eat rabbit meat, to this day. People say that it tastes like chicken. Well, I will disagree.

Grau: What are some of the other things that might have affected life in Hutchinson, Kansas at that time?

Cox: Well, the shortage of gasoline did. Of course, most families had only one car and my dad drove that to work. But it was driven strictly to and from work. During those years, we never went out of town unless we were moving from one town to another because of gasoline rationing. Now periodically my parents would be out of gasoline coupons and had no gasoline, for whatever reason, and my uncle Earl, who was my all-time favorite uncle, because he was a farmer got an additional gasoline rationing because of being in the farm industry, would give my dad a couple of gallons of gasoline. That really helped on several occasions. Of course, tires were rationed and I do remember this: our tires were practically bald due to several things. This was due to number one, the price of tires, number two the lack of availability of tires and number three they were rationed. You had to have so many ration stamps to buy any.

Grau: Do you recall any drives of any sort

Cox: Yes, during the war we had a big scrap iron pile at the grade school and sometimes I would walk to town along the railroad track and I would find an old railroad spike or some piece of iron that had fallen off of a train and I would pick it and end up throwing

it in the scrap iron pile. As a young kid, you took a lot of pride in doing something like that because you felt like you were doing something for your country. In those days everyone was patriotic. All the way from the young grade school children to the young men who fought in the war.

Grau: Do you remember how the war was messaged to those in your age. Do recall any movies or propaganda posters that were posted around town?

Cox: I do not remember the name of a lot war movies, but I do remember one that was very popular and that was 30 Seconds over Tokyo which told the story of the Doolittle Raid over Tokyo. I believe it was produced in the late 1940s. If there were any war movies showing, I had to go see them. Of course, there were different type of posters all over town for example one might say "Loose lips might sink a ship" or "Watch what you say. The enemy is listening"

Grau: You do recall these type of posters?

Cox: Yes sir. They would have them in the store windows. Of course, they were also posted in the Post Office. Now when I lived in Hutchinson, we would lay in the grass in the front yard and the PT-17 Navy primary training planes from the Hutchinson Naval Air Station would be above us and they would go into stalls and do different maneuvers. This was real exciting to us youngsters. I have to note this. I had the pleasure some seventy years later, as a volunteer at The National Museum of the Pacific War, of interviewing to interview several men who had trained at the Naval Air Station at that time. I wondered if I had seen them in the air above Hutchinson.

Grau: Did you ever ask any of them if they had seen you laying out in the grass?

Cox: I specifically remember asking Paul Stevens, (2) who wrote the book, Low Level Bombers, "Do you remember seeing any kids laying in the grass watching you?" He said, "No I don't Floyd, I was too busy trying to figure out how to get out of a stall." Once again, these guys were my heroes when I was ten and later on, I was in my seventies and they are still my heroes. In Hutchinson, they have three railroads coming through

town, consequently; they had a lot of troop trains passing through. We would go down and watch the troop trains come through and they would have passenger cars full of young G.I.s and flat cars with tanks, trucks and artillery and weapons of that type. That was exciting. Another thing that I remember is that periodically we would have air raid practices. They had a number of sirens through-out the city and without any warning they would go off and people were to take some kind of shelter until the siren quit sounding. If it was at night, the local Air Raid Warden would come around and verify that each house had black-out curtains drawn and no light was shown. Now remember this is in the middle of the United States and the likely hood of an air-raid was remote, but I think the government's thinking was; This type of action will really remind the people that a war is going on.

Grau: As you were growing up, did you know anybody that had an older brother or a friend that was in the service?

Cox: I had one friend (Paul Stevens OH#00036) that had a brother that was in the Navy and we tried to keep track of him but in those days' military movement was secret and you seldom knew where your loved one was. He came back safely. I did have an uncle who was in the military. He was my mother's brother and he was in the Army and he served in North Africa and Italy. One thing I remember doing was that I took a container that had had bee-bees for my bee-bee gun in it. I filled it with Kansas dirt and we mailed it to him during Christmas, while he was in Italy. He got a real kick of having a little piece of home while he was in Italy. His name was Frank Anderson and as he was in the military, I idolized him. He came home on leave and I have several pictures of he and I and you can tell how proud I was standing there with him in his uniform with Sargent stripes on his sleeve.

Grau: Where did your uncle Frank live?

Cox: He lived in Colorado. He had lived in our hometown when I was much younger.

Grau: You had a close relationship especially because of the war.

Cox: Yes. My mother always wondered where he was at. Now she had four sisters and he was the only boy and he was the oldest of the bunch. His sisters idolized that man and so did I. As the war progressed, we were all concerned about the high casualties that were occurring. On occasion the Newspaper would post the number of casualties. I also remember that there was a huge bill board on the County Court House lawn on which listed the names of those, from Reno County, who were killed. As a kid, I if I went by the bill board, I would see if there were any names added since the last time, I had gone by it. At this time, I had an old Spanish American War Rifle with bayonet that my uncle Sherman had given me. I will show it to you later on. I had a bag swing in the back yard. It was a swing made out of a burlap bag that was filled with rags and we would swing on it. I used it as foil for my bayonet practice. (laughter) Just in case we were ever invaded. Something else you might find of interest. During the war they established a German Prisoner of War Camp at the Kansas State Fair grounds. It is part of down-town Hutchinson. I recall that some of the fences were twenty-five yards from the main street and some of the German prisoners would stand there and if you passed by, they would try to converse with you. A lot of them were just young Germans that were caught up in what they had to do. It was during this time that some, who I would guess you would call trustees, would be hired by my uncle Earl. He might hire twelve of them at a time to come to work on his farm. He would transport them by a trailer pulled by a tractor. I am sure that this was a real perk for these young men for they not only got paid for working, my aunt Katherine would fix them a hot lunch.

Grau: Did you ever inter-act with any of them?

Cox: Not that I recall. In those days, due to propaganda, I didn't like Germans and I hated Japanese. I had never seen a Japanese person and I don't remember ever hearing anything about the Japanese until the war started. I hated Japs and I didn't like Germans but they were more like us. Talking about the German prisoners, many years later, my aunt and Uncle went to Germany and spent two months living with several of the German families whose male members had worked for him on the farm. The

German families were very hospitable to them and it is no wonder considering that my uncle treated them like regular civilians rather than German POWs.

Grau: I am sure that he needed the help at the time.

Cox: Yes sir, because all of the young males were in the military unless they were classified as so -called Conscientious Objectors. My family had little regard for these claimants, during those times.

Grau: It sounds like you were quite the young patriot.

Cox: Yes. I certainly was. Once again, the various forms of propaganda affected your way of thinking. For instance, I hated Japs and I didn't even know what one was. You would see these posters of the ferocious looking Japanese soldiers sticking a baby with a bayonet. Just imagine, this was a poster that a child would see. Of course, they were slat-eyed and they were different. And now Japan is one of our closest allies.

Grau: As the war progressed, were you following the progress of the war to the point that you thought it might go on forever?

Cox: No, I don't think I ever thought that. I do remember V-E Day, you knew the war in Europe was over and I recall that horns and sirens all over town went off and everybody was so happy. When V-J Day happened with the victory over Japan, I was in Junior High School and a friend of mine who lived way out of town had a car that he drove to school. Ross Ritthaulter was his name. They let school out and about seven of us piled in his car and he drove to main street. There they had all of these cars in a make-shift parade. All of them were honking their horns and people were yelling out of the windows. Everyone was so happy that their loved ones would be coming home and things would get better. I'll never forget that day.

Grau: Now you have mentioned playing war after school and doing bayonet practice with a real gun and bayonet, I was wondering about other toys that you may have had.

Cox: Up until the war started, we did have some manufactured toys. I had some soldiers made out of lead. By the way these soldiers are in a box in my garage. I got these before the war started because after that metal toys became very infrequent. In fact, you couldn't find any. Of course, in those days you didn't have plastic toys. You did have some made out of wood. In fact, we used to make our own wooden guns. I recall a machine gun that I made. I guess I was eleven or twelve. I took a broom stick and made the barrel, a couple of pieces of wood for the firing chamber and four pieces of broom stick for the legs. It looks something like a machine gun. We also made our own wooden rifles and pistols.

Grau: What about models and things like that? Were they available?

Cox: That is another thing that brings back a fond memory. In those days one of the breakfast cereal companies and I believe it was Wheaties, would print a model on the boxes. You would cut it out, put a penny in the nose of it and you would glue it together and you would have a model airplane. It might be a British Spitfire or a P-51 Mustang and as I recall they had ME-109 German fighters and a Japanese Zero. I had them hanging from the ceiling of my bedroom. I recently purchased on E-Bay a replica of the Zero as it appeared on a cereal box in those days. I am in the process of putting it together. I also put together balsa and tissue paper models. Some of these would fly by winding the rubber band which would drive the propeller of the plane. Those took a lot of patience and that is not one of my strong suits. Reagan, you might note that I still build models because right above you, you will see various models of World War II aircraft that I have put together so I guess I still have a fascination for aircraft of World War II. Another thing I do remember is that with the naval air base being outside of Hutchinson, periodically a Navy blimp would come over. That was in Kansas, the middle of the United States. Before the war, you would never see a blimp.

Grau: Was this one lost or what?

Cox: I don't think so. I believe that they trained some blimp crews there. Going back to talking about my metal soldiers, we would play war with the soldiers. We would make

miniature trenches and so on and the neighbor kid from across the street would come over and bring his. We would have our battles even though all of the figures depicted Americans we would call one group the Japanese force and the other the American force.

Grau: You were calling it a war, while the war was happening.

Cox: That is right, and I was wishing I was old enough to be involved in it. Now while I was still in Junior High and before the war was over one of my teacher's boy friends who was a Corsair pilot and I remember that he was killed in action. That really brought the war close to home because he was her fiancé and she lost him.

Grau: Now, your mother and dad were working steady, during the war. Your father was a flour miller which was vital for the war effort, what about what your mother was doing?

Cox: My mother was taking care of two kids but one thing she was doing, she would can. As I said we had a big garden and she can all kinds of things, potatoes, beans, beets and all kinds of things. She would also make sweet pickles and dill pickles in a large ceramic crock. She even made sour kraut in that crock. I had the crock that my mother used and I gave it to one of my daughters last month. Mom canned all kinds of vegetables and there is nothing like it. After mom had finished the canning, we would put them in the basement that was cool year around. Boy, that was sure good stuff.

Grau: It sounds like it.

Cox: I might mention this. We had a strawberry patch that was probably 40 by 40 feet and we grew a lot of strawberries. We would have strawberry shortcake available breakfast, dinner and supper. I would eat it almost every meal. Seventy years later I became allergic to strawberries.

Grau: It is a good thing it didn't happen when you were twelve. (laughter)

Cox: That is right!

Grau: Did your mother ever hear from your uncle when was overseas?

Cox: Yes, she would in fact I have a letter that my uncle wrote while he was in North Africa. The return address doesn't say North Africa it says APO and gives a number. She would hear from him periodically and of course she would write him at least once a month. I don't know about his other sister but I would guess they did also.

Grau: Were your grand-parents around?

Cox: No. My father's parents died when I was eight years old. My mother's parents were gone before I was born. You know, things were bad almost all over the world during that time but things were good in the United States. There was somewhat of a shortage of dress clothes and I didn't have any real dress clothes. I wore bib overalls most of the time and we went around bare-foot except during the winter time. It gets cold in Kansas during the winter. My mother would patch my bib overalls until they were patches instead of bib overalls.

Grau: (Laughter) I remember something like that. It was not quite bib overalls but I did get quite a few hand-me-downs.

Cox: Periodically, my folks would buy me something special. I remember, and I have a picture somewhere, I got a flying type of helmet, with goggles, like fliers would wear. Now this was before the war. I believe they were marketed about 1937 not long after a flight made by a pilot by the name of Douglas "Wrong Way" Corrigan. And of course, Lindberg had flown over the Atlantic some ten years earlier so the helmet and goggles were somewhat in fashion. I looked kind of funny wearing the helmet and bib overalls.

Grau: You were quite fascinated by planes and flying and that sort of thing. It enhanced your imagination.

Cox: Yes, I was. I remember when General Doolittle bombed Japan. Once again, seventy years later, I had the honor and pleasure of interviewing the gentleman who was the bombardier on plane number fourteen on that mission. His name was James Macia. (3) Here I am a man in my late 70s and I am talking to a man who is in his 90s and he is still

my hero. Back then, these guys put their life on the line for America and that is something I will never forget.

Grau: Yes, and when you heard about it, and you understood that, even at a tender age.

Cox: All Americans were patriotic then. Our young men were along ways away but they were protecting us. Consequently; when I turned seventeen, a week after I graduated from high school, I joined the Air Force. I wanted to be a gunner on a B-29 bomber but the Air Force decided that I should be a Russian Intercept Operator. Which I loved doing.

Grau: When was that?

Cox: June 1950. I came to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

Grau: And here we are sitting in San Antonio today. Well Floyd, I don't believe I have anything else. I think you have provided us with some good insight what your childhood was like during the war. If you can think of anything else you would like to add just let me know.

Cox: One thing I did fail to mention, we did scrap iron drives, and we also saved old grease. You know when you fry bacon you have quite a bit of grease. My mother would put this waste in an old coffee can with a lid on it and once that thing was full, I get excited even talking about it, I would take this can of household grease to the grocery store and hand it to the butcher. I was very proud as I would say, "Mr. butcher, I want to donate this to the war effort." You might wonder what this grease was used for. It was used to make nitroglycerin. Now, once again here I was a young child I was doing something for the war effort.

Grau: Even as a youngster you realized the importance of contributing to the war effort.

Cox: People were very patriotic and of course there was a lot on the line. You might be interested to know that during the Depression and the War years we never had a telephone. We didn't have a telephone in our house until I was thirteen years old. This was not uncommon. One might wonder how did we communicate by phone. Well, if someone called, which was very infrequent, they would call a neighbor, who had a

phone. The neighbor, or their kid would come over and tell my folks about the call. The call would be to one or the other and the call would be important such as sickness in the family or whatever. There were no kid calls. You didn't call a girlfriend or a friend. You also might be interested in the type of stove we had. We had a kerosene stove. Kerosene is a derivative of gasoline but not quite as explosive. We also had an ice box. Not a refrigerator but an ice box. So, we got ice from an ice wagon that came around periodically. During the war a lot of the deliveries were made by horse-drawn wagon. Milk was delivered in this manner. When the ice-man would come by and we kids would congregate at the rear of the ice wagon and get the chips of ice and chew on, while the iceman would deliver the 100-pound blocks of ice into the house. I hadn't thought of that for many years. I guess it was about 1946 when we got an electric Kelvinator refrigerator with the coils on top of the box.

Grau: Well, Floyd, I appreciate the time you have spent with me today. Is there anything else?

Cox: Not that I can think of at this time. Those were the good times for a youngster. You never heard about drugs and some of the bad things that are happening today. Thanks for visiting with me.

Transcribed by: Floyd C. Cox
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