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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

**Interview with Harold L. Buell, U.S. Navy (Retired)
Naval Dive-Bomber Pilot
Pacific Theater–World War II**

Place of Interview: Fredericksburg, Texas

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Interviewer: William G. Cox

Introduction: This is William G. Cox. Today is the 30th day of September, 2000. I am interviewing Commander Harold L. Buell, U.S. Navy (Retired). This interview is taking place at the auditorium of Fredericksburg High School, Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for the Pacific War Studies Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. I would like to introduce you now to Commander Buell who will give us a little background on his earlier life, where he was born and so forth. Commander Buell:

Commander Buell: Bill, it is nice to meet you, and I am not going to call you William. I am going to call you Bill, and you, in turn, can call me Hal because practically nobody in the Navy—the old Navy—remembers me as Harold. They just know me as Hal Buell.

I was born in Keokuk, Iowa, on the 4th of November 1919. I was born in Keokuk because that was the nearest hospital to the little town of Donnellson which was where my mother and father and two older sisters lived. I was the third to be born to the Buell family—first and only boy. A younger sister was born three years later. My father was the Methodist minister there at Donnellson. My mother went to have me there in the hospital; her previous children had been born at home. My father died when I was three, and my mother had an unfortunate car-train accident a year later so I was orphaned at the age of four. Well, that's a little about my earliest days. You want me to go on anymore about that?

Cox: Yes. Did you have Iowa schooling leading up to the Navy?

Buell: I stayed in the general vicinity of the state of Iowa during childhood. I had a guardian from about my 11th year at Ottumwa, Iowa, and his name was Dr. Donald McElderry. He was a local doctor. Ottumwa was about 35-40,000 people, and John Morrell and Company's meat packers was the main economy. It also had a John Deere Plant that made farm machinery. I had

lived briefly in a little town called Plymouth, Iowa, up by Mason City and also in Eddyville, Iowa with uncles and relatives briefly when I was very young, but I finally ended up at the age of 11 with my guardian in Ottumwa. I stayed there until I went off to college which was only 25 miles down the road, Parsons College in Fairfield, Iowa.

Cox: Were you attending college when World War II broke out in Europe?

Buell: Yes. I was at Parsons College the first year (1938). The second year at the college (this was in 1939), they had a new program called "The Civilian Pilot Training Program." It was Government sponsored, they picked ten of us, and we flew Piper Cubs 40 to 50 hours of flight time. We had to do a group of ground school courses which were college approved. In other words, it was part of college, but we did our flying over at a little airport in Ottumwa, my old home town. We all ended up passing that, and we got pilot's licenses. This really made some of us want to go further as flyers and in those days, you either had to go Army Air Corps or Naval Air because private flight training cost was prohibitive and we were all Depression kids. We barely had enough money to go to college. In fact, most of us were on scholarships; I had an athletic scholarship—couldn't have gone to college without it. So I had my private pilot's license in 1940.

A friend by the name of Ed Noonan was in that course with me. We went down to St. Louis, hitchhiked down, to see if we could pass the Navy flight physical. Sure enough, we were able to pass it. It was a tough physical in those days, about 35 people in the room, and when the smoke all cleared away, there were only four of us left. Of course, they wanted to sign us up right away, but that was Easter break of 1940, and I didn't have a full two years of college completed. So I couldn't enlist at that time, and it took me the rest of the year to get enough college credit so that I could finally join the Navy in December 1940. I went to Robinson Field which was outside of St. Louis, Missouri; it was what they called an E Base. Do you want me to continue on?

Cox: Continue, just like you are telling it.

Buell: The E Bases in those days wanted to find out if you could fly an airplane. Of course, many of us at the E Base in that group had taken the CPTP (Civilian Pilot Training Program). We had our pilot's licenses so the eight or ten hours of instruction at the E Base were fairly easy. We flew open-cockpit biplanes the Navy had build called the N3N, and the N2S, the Stinson version of the same airplane. You could not tell them apart, really.

Cox: Was that the SN2?

Buell: No, they called it the N2S. Those were the basic Navy trainers, and later down in Pensacola, we had all our primary training in them. It was a biplane, open cockpits—wonderful little airplane.

Cox: Did you survive that training?

Buell: I survived. I soloed there in St. Louis, and the survivors of us were sent to Jacksonville. They had a big new station there in Jacksonville.

Cox: Was this Florida?

Buell: Yes, Jacksonville, Florida. The new base had been in operation for three or four months. We got there and found out that it was a basic training base, just getting started, not the big Jacksonville Naval Air Station that exists today. They had nice runways and a couple of hangars. They had hit their max number of student cadets—aviation cadets, as we were called. When I first joined the Navy, I had to join as a Seaman, Second Class. In those days, you joined as a Seaman, Second Class, and more or less were obligating yourself for four years of service. A lot of men did not realize that if they busted out of the flight training program, they could very well end up as a sailor sent who knows where. As Jacksonville NAS was crowded, I got a big break. They sent us to Pensacola, which was an old established Naval Training Base; they call it “the cradle of naval aviation” to this day. It was where all the pilots of World War I had trained.

I ended up getting to go to Pensacola, and the way they did it there was after you had reached a certain stage of your training, they then made you an aviation cadet, a bit like a midshipman would be. Your status was no longer Seaman Second Class but an officer in training. The Navy would also select whether you were going to be a tailhook-type pilot, a multi-engine pilot or a VOVS cruiser-type pilot. Depending on which category you were picked for determined where you would do your training—your last couple of months. I got what I wanted which was Tailhook Navy, and I went to Opa-locka for the final stage of my training.

Now, at Opa-locka, you still didn't know whether you were going to be a fighter pilot, a dive bomber pilot or a torpedo plane pilot. Those were the three kinds of pilots flying off of the carriers. When I arrived there—when my orders came--I was to be a dive bomber pilot. I got my wings on the 1st of November, 1941, and the date on my commission was 6 September, 1941; that was my date of rank.

Cox: Then you received your first naval orders?

Buell: I had my new commission and wings with orders to VS-71 in WASP. I went home on leave and then reported to Norfolk, Virginia. I was to go aboard the *Wasp*, but the *Wasp* was out at sea so I was assigned to the Carrier Aviation Training Unit. They had one at Norfolk for the East Coast carriers and one at San Diego for the Pacific carriers. I flew the SB2U which was the dive bomber the VS-71, the squadron I was going to, was flying at that time. There were SBNs-- got to fly them a couple of times, but mostly I flew the plane I was going to go aboard in. The fighter pilots were flying F4Fs and some of the old biplanes were still around, the F3F biplane fighter. The torpedo pilots were flying the earliest versions of the TBD. So at the time of Pearl Harbor, we were there waiting to go—I say “we,” there were 25 or 30 of us in that category—all brand new ensigns trying to build up a little flight time. They had us out doing field carrier landing practice flights in the morning to prepare us to land aboard a carrier. Then, in the afternoon, we would go out and dive bomb and fire our guns at targets that were nearby; that was our schedule—two flights a day.

When Pearl Harbor happened, everything speeded up a little bit, and along about (the *Wasp* still hadn't come in) the first week of February we were told to fly out to the *Long Island* which was an escort-type jeep carrier. Later, we had dozens of them, but in the spring of 1942, there was only one and it was the *Long Island*. We went out in the Chesapeake Bay, made the magnificent number of three carrier landings, and that qualified us. In a matter of a few days, after 22 of us qualified, the Navy Department sent a special dispatch which changed all 22 of our orders to the Pacific carriers. In my case, I was ordered to Scouting 5 aboard the *Yorktown*. These carriers were in the Pacific.

Cox: Since you were assigned to carriers, was the *Yorktown* the only carrier you operated off of?

Buell: I flew from *Torktown*, *Saratoga*, *Enterprise* and new *Hornet* during the Pacific War with Japan. How I got to the *Yorktown* is an involved story. In my book, *The Dauntless Hell Divers*, I call it "the odyssey." The Navy sent me half way around the world, and finally got me to the *Yorktown* to report as a brand new ensign to VS-5, and it was exactly one week before the Coral Sea battle. Here I am in April 1942, out there on this ship as a brand new pilot. I hadn't even landed on a carrier since the *Long Island*. My new skipper was a Lieutenant Commander by the name of William Burch. What the Navy was doing, in anticipation of combat losses, was trying to get its squadrons up to full strength. There were 21 pilots all together in that squadron, and in seniority, number 21 was Hal Buell! I was the junior man in the squadron.

Cox: Was the Coral Sea the first carrier battle?

Buell: It was the first carrier-versus-carrier battle. My new squadron, VS-5, lost about half our air planes, four pilots killed, one wounded, and four gunners killed—two gunners wounded. We went back to Pearl with the *Yorktown* which had been damaged. We knew something big was planned, Midway, in other words, was going to happen. But *Yorktown* had been damaged, so Nimitz said: "I want that carrier ready in 48 hours." As part of getting the carrier ready, they decided they didn't want a squadron with the losses we had suffered so they replaced us with

VB-3 from the *Saratoga*. VF3, VB3, and VT3 went aboard the *Yorktown* and of course, those fellows went out to hell. VS-5 ended up at Midway, but we didn't go on the *Yorktown*, and it got sunk. We were put on the *Saratoga* a few days later so I didn't really take part in anything much at Midway except to fly searches for downed pilots. We looked for the fellows who were out there on their rafts after being shot down or running out of fuel.

Cox: And there were a lot of them.

Buell: Yes and we found some, thank goodness for that. A lot of them were saved. In other words, the *Saratoga* was the fourth carrier at Midway, but the three big ones were the *Enterprise*, *Hornet* and *Yorktown*.

Cox: So this was two separate carriers and two separate naval engagements for you?

Buell: Yes.

Cox: And there were others, maybe?

Buell: I was aboard the *Yorktown* at Coral Sea and was at Midway, but on a carrier that really didn't get into the heavy action, the *Saratoga*. After we had been out there just three or four days, ten of us were sent to the *Enterprise* to replace some of the pilots and planes that the *Enterprise* had lost. We still didn't know whether we were going to fight the Japs some more or go back to Pearl. After all the smoke cleared away, and the Navy realized that four Japanese carriers had been sunk and that we had been hurt ourselves. Nimitz decided it would be a good idea to savor this one, and everybody returned to Pearl. I ended up on the *Enterprise* going into Pearl, and Scouting 5, my squadron, stayed on the *Enterprise*. That is how we ended up on her for the invasion of Guadalcanal.

Cox: This was the engagement of the invasion of Guadalcanal?

Buell: Yes, on July 15th, on the *Enterprise*, we set sail from Pearl , and we knew that something big was going to happen by the time we rendezvoused in the South Pacific. The carriers involved were the *Enterprise*, *Saratoga*, and the *Wasp* for the invasion of Guadalcanal. The *Wasp* had arrived from the Atlantic and was going to get sunk, as well as the the *Hornet* was going to end up being sunk at Santa Cruz. (The *Hornet* was another mission.) We ended up with the three carriers for the invasion of Guadalcanal, and that is when I started flying my first real strikes.

Cox: So you did fly some missions supporting the Guadalcanal landings?

Buell: Seventh, eighth and ninth of August, 1942 at Guadalcanal, I logged seven strikes during those three days which was pretty much standard for all pilots. We would rotate—all the pilots were rotated through. We had 18 planes in the squadron and 20 pilots. All the pilots went on strikes, including, of course, the skipper. I was flying wing on my skipper, Lieutenant Turner Caldwell. Most of the bombing I did on the seventh, eighth, and ninth was at Tulagi, Gavutu and Tanambogo—little islands where the Japanese had troops and supplies.

Cox: You supported the Marine invasion, as well as keeping the Japanese busy?

Buell: The Marines had landed over by Lunga Point on Guadalcanal and took the airfield. There was not much opposition there. I think we made one strike in that area during the three days. We left after three days, and that is a historic complaint. Some say we deserted the Marines, if you remember, but it wasn't really that way. The Japanese had not come out with their carriers and everyone was wondering what was going to happen. Admiral Fletcher didn't want to stay close in where we were during the support phase so he went--he went out further north for sea room; sure enough, here the Japs came down with three carriers and we had the engagement known as the Battle of the Eastern Solomons.

At Eastern Solomons, which took place on the 24th of August, the Marines had just opened Henderson Field. It had been open for three days. They had a Marine fighter squadron there

with 20 F4Fs and one dive bomber squadron of SBDs—12 planes. On the 24th, 11 of us were launched late in the afternoon off the *Enterprise* because the Japanese were attacking us. This mission was known as “Flight 300.” We ended the flight at Henderson Field. It was the first time that Navy pilots went to a land base and then stayed there. When we landed on the field that night in the dark, the Big E had been hit. It had run. If we had tried to go to the ship, we would have all ended up in the water so instead of going to the ship, Turner Caldwell wisely had been told to “take them to Guadalcanal.” When we landed on Guadalcanal, there we are: 11 more attack planes. General Vandergrift is not noted for being a stupid man; suddenly, his dive bombers were doubled from 11 to 22. We never left Guadalcanal. We stayed there until every plane was used up. We fought 25 to 30 days depending on when each pilot was relieved.

Cox: By “used up”, the reference is to both aircraft and aircrews?

Buell: Well, our planes kept getting destroyed one way or another. We had 11 planes when we landed, but the very next day we lost one. We flew some of the Marine planes, the Marines flew some of our planes. In other words, they were SBDs, and we just flew whatever was available. In fact, we got there on the 24th and later that night, the Japanese came in to shell--the destroyers--and Vandergrift launched three planes. One of them was Walt Brown, my roommate. He lost our first SBD. He got out there, got lost and made a water landing over by Malaita, which was one of the outlying islands, and the natives turned him over to the Coastwatchers. He got back to civilization, but that was one of our 11 SBDs in the drink. And when we were shelled, they destroyed some on the ground. By the time the last of Flight 300, the last of our 11 crews, left Guadalcanal around the 26th of September, there might have been one plane left. We were losing airplanes all the time in other words.

Cox: During that period of time, how would you describe the living conditions there on Guadalcanal?

Buell: The living conditions were horrible. We were carrier pilots used to having pretty good

food aboard ship; at the worst, we would stay at sea awhile. We might run short on certain things, but there was always good basic food. But on Guadalcanal, we were eating rice that had been captured from the Japanese. We were eating canned tongue. Have any of the guys you interviewed talked about the sheep's tongue? From Australia?

Cox: No.

Buell: The damn sheep's tongue from Australia! Well, they had a bunch of that there.

Cox: Was it pickled?

Buell: Yeah, pickled in cans. And no matter how Marine cooks tried to cook them, it was sheep's tongue, and we didn't like it much. We still had flour so they would bake bread and sometimes give us flapjacks and one could eat those. We were eating rice and actually got so short of food toward the last of August and into the first of September that everybody lost weight, but most of all, just didn't have any appetite. There were a few Japanese and Korean prisoners, and of course, they were getting Japanese rice too. Those fellows were really happy because they were getting a bigger allotment from us, their captors, than they ever got from their own people. Our water supply, too, was very "iffy." They had to boil all the water and put it into blister bags, and the water just wasn't palatable. They put a lot of chlorine in it, and then, of course, we were trying to fight malaria. We were taking malaria pills, and some doctor had the crazy idea of taking salt pills--all this stuff combined with bad food. Our food got so short that we were actually on two meals a day. We would have a late breakfast which was usually bread and whatever we could get to go with it. The coffee was bad too. So we went through a pretty bad period there before we got decent groceries in.

Cox: So the next step then was you finally transferred to some other operation. Is that correct?

Buell: Well, they started taking us out of there. They found out that pilots couldn't last more

than about one month as we flew night and day, two and three strikes in a 24 hour period. You burn a person out or kill them. In my speech tomorrow, I am going to point out you could die in more than one way at Guadalcanal. You could obviously die being killed in action—shot down or what not. Then you could die being bombarded by shell fire or bombed by the Bettys coming down every day at noon. And then there were always the operations—they were sending us out when it was cloudy, raining and at night. A lot of us were not adequately trained really for this kind of flying, so we lost guys operationally. So you could get killed several ways, and out of the 200 dive bomber pilots of the Cactus Air Force during the period 20 August to November 15th, 1942, 41 of them were lost in action one way or another (20 percent).

Break in recording.

Buell: When relieved, I ended up in Noumea, New Caledonia. At that time, Rear Admiral John McCain was going to go back to Pearl, and he had one of those big Coronado flying boats that Admirals flew around in. The next thing I knew, there were eight or ten of us who had just come from Guadalcanal that he took on his plane. And you talk about a tired looking bunch—we were a bedraggled group, carrying souvenir Jap rifles, helmets and things. This meant that we got back to Pearl Harbor pretty fast. You know that plane has the ability to land on land or water, and when we landed on the field at Ford Island at Pearl Harbor who was there to greet us but Admiral Halsey. Bill Halsey greeted each of us personally, and of course, that was a big event. Then here comes striding out Admiral Nimitz, himself. I will never forget-- he stood there in front of us, and the man was a tremendous person. He had those piercing blue eyes—I don't know if anyone has ever described them in that way before, but you couldn't face that man without those striking blue eyes—you knew you were looking at a man you could react to with confidence. He looked at us with emotion as we were the first pilots that had come back from Guadalcanal. I weighed about 130 pounds. I had lost 40 pounds in the experience. Most of us hadn't cleaned up too much. We had beards—we didn't shave on Guadalcanal. We were haggard looking. Our clothes were almost rags. He looked at us and said: "Thank you for your service, Gentlemen, and believe me, it has not been in vain." What he meant by that was there were rumors that America

wasn't going to hold Guadalcanal. When we got back there, this first week of October no one was sure we were going to be able to hold on to that place. A day or two later, Admiral Halsey left and went down and took over the operation from Ghormley at the Headquarters in Noumea. But what Admiral Nimitz was telling us—the first survivors whom he had seen—was that our fighting had not been in vain because we were a pretty despondent group. We were glad to have survived and gotten out of Guadalcanal, but our friends were still back there, and we were worried. Was this going to be another Bataan? We were scared. So that stands out in my memory.

I got a little shock when I went for reassignment. All the fellows who were in the Guadalcanal group I was in got ordered back to the United States except guess who? Happy Hal Buell! I was an ensign, and they said “oh, by the way, you've just made JG—in other words I got promoted. Then the assignment officer said: “We want you to go out to Bombing 10. They are short a couple pilots, and they are getting ready to go.” And would you believe, I had three or four days of liberty, then reported to this new squadron, and by the 15th of October, I am back on the Big E, setting sail, and hurried like mad because the Japs were coming out again with their carriers. So that's how I ended up in the Battle of Santa Cruz.

At Santa Cruz, of course, the *Hornet* gets sunk (October 25, 1942). That's the old *Hornet*. Then in November, the Japs came down with a rather large number of transports to try to land a big new bunch of troops on Guadalcanal; and I think they call it “The Battle of Guadalcanal.” It was November 13th through 15th when we sank all the transports, but there were a couple of bad surface actions, remember? We had been losing ships all the time in surface actions. We lost four cruisers in one night battle because the Japanese were so much superior to us in these night surface engagements.

Cox: Was some of this described as going up and down the strait. Was that the terminology The Slot?

Buell: The Slot, yes. That was because there were islands running up from Guadalcanal in a northwesterly direction, the Russells and others. You had Santa Isabel and a bunch of others. And right in between, the Japs would either come down through there or they would come below the islands. You had about three approaches, but the main one was the slot formed naturally by the islands in a northwesterly direction that headed up toward Buka and Rabaul. Truk was to the north. A lot of the stuff would leave Truk and come down through the Slot. To summarize the Guadalcanal thing: I ended up back down there on the *Enterprise* in Bombing 10 in time to take part at Santa Cruz and what they call the Battle of Guadalcanal where we sank the transports that they were trying to reinforce with. By the time that was over, on November 16th, as far as I am concerned, Guadalcanal was saved. That doesn't mean that a whole lot of fighting didn't go on after that, but the Japanese never really were able to get transports and surface ships into the area--, they couldn't land troops in daylight. They had to try and do it at night.

Cox: In these engagements--were they costly?

Buell: Now our Navy/Marines paid a price for all of this. We lost the *Hornet* at Santa Cruz, we lost *Wasp* to a Japanese submarine September 15th, I think it was, and we lost the *Saratoga*--hit again and had to leave. We ended up with only one carrier left. That was the *Enterprise*.

Buell: . They would hit the *Enterprise*, but they never finished it off--the Big E. So here we are, sitting around at Christmas, and we didn't know it at the time, but the Japs had pretty well decided they weren't going to be able to get Guadalcanal back. They ended up evacuating their own troops out of there--I think in January and February of 1943. Do you follow?

Cox: Yes.

Buell: But what do we have in the way of carrier strength down there? Well, we actually had just the *Enterprise*--the Big E. We were the only carrier left. And the new construction, the new

Essex classes, were still a few months away. They hadn't started arriving yet. So we went through some pretty thin picking time there. In fact, Eugene Burns, the writer and correspondent aboard the *Enterprise*, wrote a book about it and he called it "*And Then There Was One.*" That was the title of the book, and it was true. There was just one left.

I stayed with VB-10 until about April of 1943. Then, a dispatch came from AirPac: We need some experienced pilots. Send some of your most experienced pilots back to the States. I consider it a big honor that I got sent from Espiritu Santo back through Pearl to the United States at the same time Jimmy Flatley did. Flatley was going back to be a commander of a carrier. I was going back and be greeted by Captain Wade McCluskey at San Francisco: "Hal, we don't want to send you to the training command. We want to send you to a new Air Group." In other words, here I had already served two full combat tours—VS-5 and VB-10. The Navy had built a air station right in my old home town of Ottumwa, Iowa. When Wade McCluskey said to me "we want to send you to new construction," I knew his boss was RADM Murr Arnold and that he had picked me. In other words, they were picking guys who had a lot of combat experience because they wanted us to be the nucleus to help train these squadrons. By this time, they had plenty of aviators. The training command was turning out aviators, and they were turning out good ones. They were getting these new carriers, but where do you get the "know how" to fight? The Navy couldn't keep plowing combat pilots back into the training command or put them on war bond selling tours. (Some of those top combat fellows spent months going around the country advertising the Navy.) I am not criticizing any of this: Tex Gay, the sole survivor of VT-8 at Midway, must have spent a year just being a walking advertisement for the Navy, which is all fine. I am just saying that in my case and a few others, we were sent back to new construction. When I reported to my new squadron, which ended up being VB-2, on the *Hornet*, one other man and I out of a squadron of 36 airplanes and 45 to 50 pilots, a fellow by the name of Mike Micheel, who had been at Midway with me, were the only combat men in the squadron. And we were only lieutenants in rank

Cox: So you served on four aircraft carriers in five major sea battles?

Buell: By that time, I was the only pilot around who had been present in all four of the carrier-versus-carrier battles of '42. I was about to get out there again, and in '44, the Turkey Shoot, on the 19th and 20th of June, we had our fifth carrier-versus-carrier battle. That is when I finally got to lead my division, I called it "Buell & Company," in the attack on *Zuikaku* in that battle. So I made all five of the battles in one way or another.

Cox: Essentially, then, when you came back to the States in 1943, you continued in a combat status?

Buell: When I came back to the States, I had already been in four major battles, and I had been on two full combat cruises—the VS-5 and VB-10, plus, a 30 day cruise at Guadalcanal. There were squadrons that went to Guadalcanal and did one 30 day cruise and that was the end of the squadron. Guadalcanal would chew them up in one month. That went on all during August, September, October and November of 1942.—by about December. So as far as the pilots who were there during August through November, later pilots coming to Guadalcanal, weren't really the Cactus Air Force. They were just the Guadalcanal Air Force—follow what I mean? We're not taking anything away from them—there still was a lot of fighting, but the fighting was going our way.

Cox: When you came back to the States and you formed up a new group, did you go back into the naval operations?

Buell: That was one of the questions I asked Captain McCluskey. I said: "if you are going to send me back out, OK, I am here for orders. You are the one who is going to give me the orders." I didn't say to him: "Why don't you send me to Ottumwa? I want my home town for duty where there is a naval air station, and let me train cadets." That wasn't the way the ball game was going. They wanted me in a combat status, and I went with it. But I did ask the good captain: "Am I going to have a little time in the States?" He said: "It will take at least six months, Hal, for you to get to the new squadron and we are going to send you to an East

Coast—not West Coast squadron.” They were forming Air Group 2 at Wildwood, New Jersey, then went up to Quonset Point. Sure enough, by the time we shook down and got the fighters and bombers and torpedo planes all trained, flew across the country to the West Coast, and got aboard a carrier to go to Pearl Harbor, it was almost exactly six months.

Cox: Was this a new carrier?

Buell: Yes, it was one of the new Essex Class.

End of Side One of Tape. (There appears to be a break in the oral history at this point.)

Buell: For about a month we were at Santa Rosa at a new outlying airfield north of Alameda, CA. About Christmas 1943, we went aboard a carrier (I can't remember which one it was) that took us and our SBD airplanes to Hawaii. We ended up then at Hilo, Hawaii—a big airfield there. We are out in Hilo, we have our SBDs, we are well trained, ready to go. Sometime in early February, I look up and I see an airplane I had never seen before-- a formation of about six of them. I said to somebody: “what in the world are those new planes?” And they said: “that’s the Beast. Those are the SB2C dive bombers.” They landed and the guy that was leading the flight got out of the airplane, and I looked at him and I knew him and he knew me. He said: “Hal, here are your new airplanes.” I said: “what are you talking about?” He said: “We are going to take your SBDs and give them to the Marines.” This big new dive bomber was called the Helldiver, nicknamed “The Beast.” Our 36 SBDs that we were all ready to go to combat in were taken from us, and we were given these new planes. That was bad enough, but three weeks later, they put us aboard the Hornet. We went aboard ship with a new aircraft that was really more aircraft than a brand new ensign could fly. Consequently, and I don't say this in any way against anybody, we went into combat with that thing. We went aboard ship on the 15th of March, and on the 30th of March, we were attacking Palau. We were flying with bombs and loads against the enemy, and we proceeded to fly a six month combat tour. I feel very good I didn't lose a single one of my guys—Buell and Company— but overall, in the squadron, we lost something like 15 pilots and

crewmembers, and most were operational losses. Planes broke up in the air, dove into the ground and all kinds of things happened because of this airplane that wasn't ready for combat. There are a lot of people who are really angry to this day about it. I looked at it philosophically because to me the SB2C had some attributes that were better. For instance, instead of two 50 caliber shooting through the prop, it had a pair of cannons mounted in the wings, and it was a tremendous weapon. For the first time, when I would pull out of a dive and I was going out, if I spotted a target and I had my two wing men with me, six cannons! As an example, on the very first strike, with our new SB2Cs, we dropped on ships anchored in the harbor at Palau—put bombs right on top of one, and we were sweeping out. I had my guys trained to join up very fast—so both of my wing men were immediately with me; we are down there about 50-75 feet off the water getting out of there, and all of a sudden, right in front of us was a big tanker—Japanese tanker—and a Sampan bringing it in. It was coming in with a load of fuel. We let go with those cannons and simply blew it apart. So I said to myself, well, old Beast, you may be a tough airplane to fly, but boy, you have a nose job that is something! Those cannons were such a superior weapon to the 50s on the SBD. But you see, people still want to talk about how the SBD was the plane, and the Beast was no good. But it really wasn't that. I don't feel that way. In other words, the Beast had some good points.

Cox: It had some design flaws.

Buell: Right and they were bad. For example, there was a problem in the aileron bell cranks, and if you had a failure, the airplane would have a tendency to roll. We know that we lost crews that way. It was probably some guy rough handling the plane on a pull out or something, and I taught my guys to be gentle with the Beast, but who knows?

Cox: How long did these operations that you were involved in go on?

Buell: Well, we did a full tour of six months, all through the summer of '44—is that what you are asking?

Cox: Yes.

Buell: We had the first raids on Palau, then supported MacArthur in the Hollandia operation in New Guinea. We went up to Truk; Truk had been raided once before; we raided them in April. When we left Truk two days later, it never ever recovered, and we are talking about a base that up to that point was their Pearl Harbor of the Pacific. We blew that place away. By that time, Task Force 58 or 38, whichever Admiral was in charge, you are talking now Task Force 58, was up to three groups—four carriers a group— we are talking about 12 carriers, and by the invasion of Guam, Saipan, in June, the fourth group was on line. We had 16—anywhere from 14 to 16 carriers—on line. That is power that was unbelievable.

Cox: So you were actually in operations in the Pacific from the point in time that you were down to one carrier to where you had 16!

Buell: Yes. And I can tell you this. I used to fly around out there, when we were the only carrier, the Big "E," and they would launch me on a 250 mile search. I would take off from that carrier, and I am out there 250 miles away doing the cross leg in an SBD with maybe a wing man, maybe not, and look around and I couldn't see anything but water in 360 degrees. I found myself thinking "you're an Iowa farm boy and what in the hell are you doing out here?" By the time of the Turkey Shoot in June 19-20 of 1944, we had 16 carriers; you flew around and all you could see were American ships. You had trouble finding your own carrier because there were a whole bunch of Essex-class carriers down there, and until you got to know the camouflage, you could pick the wrong one to land on.

Cox: May I ask you a question?

Buell: Yes.

Cox: Where were you and what were you doing when you heard about the dropping of the

Atomic Bomb and the ending of the war?

Buell: I had returned to the States, and I was at Daytona Beach. We were a special unit called VBF-1 (Aircraft, bomber, fighter). We were a bunch of guys that the Navy had picked—and get this— you had to have had two combat cruises minimum—in my case I had had three—everybody in the outfit had had two combat cruises. We were a mixture of fighter pilots like Butch Voris, the first CO of the Blue Angels, and dive bomber pilots like me. We were going to be fighter bomber squadrons in the invasion Tokyo, Japan. We were preparing to invade Japan, and this was in the summer of '45. The plan was that we would fly the F6F or F4U. We would have only one type aircraft. The squadrons would be 18 to 24 planes in number. They were going to promote us to Lieutenant Commander, and we were going to be C.O. Everyone of those squadrons would be skippered and X.O.ed by these combat veteran fighter or dive bomber pilots. The plane which we would use was going to be both a fighter to shoot down kamikazes or to dive bomb in close support of the marines. So we were going to have to be skilled in air-to-air gunnery, but also able to use rockets and bombs and napalm—lots of napalm. There were going to be two of these squadrons on a jeep carrier. You wouldn't be flying from the big carriers anymore. The big ones were going to be back there, and they were going to do selective bombing, but the invasion was going to be supported by about 25 of these jeep carriers. They were going to encircle Japan with Jeep carriers and roughly 50 planes on each carrier. That was the plan. President Harry dropped a new bomb. On August 6th, he dropped the first atomic bomb, and then he dropped the second one three or four days later. The moment he dropped those bombs, the war was over. When we heard about it, we didn't know what an atomic bomb was. But we did know that the Air Force, or the Army Air Corps, the big boys, the B-29s, had what they called "Block Busters"—great big bombs that would supposedly destroy a couple of blocks of buildings in one blast. We figured that this was some kind of a super bomb, but we didn't have any idea what it was. And the thing that is remarkable is they dropped those bombs in early August, and by the middle of September, guys like me were being discharged. They set up a point system. You got points for how many months you'd been in combat. I ended up about the top point man at Daytona Beach. And what did that mean? It meant that I could

muster myself out. I could go home quickly because you had to be processed in accordance with the points that you had. I'm at Daytona Beach, and Jacksonville was going to be one of the processing places, so it took me only about a month from the time the bomb was dropped--six weeks later, I'm out of the Navy. Can you imagine that? We were preparing to invade Japan--so people ask: "did Truman do right when he dropped the atomic bomb? You are going to get a hearty "aye aye" from guys like me because we were going out to almost certain death.

Cox: Could you answer for me what was probably the most, the lowest point emotionally that you may have experienced?

Buell: There were two times--I would have to say there were two times. After I had been on Guadalcanal for two or three weeks, we were out of food, we were flying strikes two and three times in 24 hours, we were being shelled, we were being killed by shelling, I had lost a lot of my best friends over a short period of time, and we were actually hearing reports--not just from Tokyo Rose but also from our own stations in California, (we could tune them in at night), and they were saying: "Guadalcanal is going to go, it's going to be another Bataan." That was a low point because we were all sitting around saying "are we going to allow ourselves to be captured?" We knew what had happened at Bataan. It was common knowledge by that time. We knew the Japanese and those swords were not just carried around for decoration. They had decapitated people. Most of us decided to go to the mountains. We knew that Martin Clemens had made it in the hills. We knew there would be places up there with good Marines so we were going with them. The ones who couldn't fly out with their air planes--when the air planes were gone, the ensigns were going to have to stay--we were going to stay with the Marines. We weren't going to surrender. We were going to the hills; that was a low point. I didn't want to think that way, and I was scared, frankly.

The other low point was after I led the attack on *Zuikaku*. I came home and crashed on Admiral Marc Mitscher's flag ship, the *Lexington*. In the crash, two people were killed--a deck man and the gunner of my wing man, Dave Stear, who had landed in front of me. I was shot up, I had just

led a suicide mission—why do I call it a suicide mission? It is quite simply they launched us, and we were told to go 310 miles and get the carriers. And we couldn't go 310 miles and do an attack and then come back in the dark and land on board a carrier. There just wasn't enough gasoline in the Beast to do that. Yet I got back, and I crashed. Two men were killed in the crash. Here I had just led the strike of my life against *Zuikaku*. We hit that ship so badly that it never flew a combat mission again. It didn't get sunk until Leyte Gulf when the Japs sent it out as a decoy, and it was the last of the Pearl Harbor carriers—we gutted it. So I had this elation of having finally accomplished something that I had wanted to accomplish, namely attack a Japanese carrier-- that was the name of the game. Every dive bomber pilot wanted to attack a carrier or a battleship. Those were the two biggest—you couldn't get bigger. When I attacked *Zuikaku*, it was in the center of a formation of ten ships. I went through the worst AA; I described it all in my book, *Dauntless Helldivers*. I have had people tell me that they cried when they read the story. I know I cried when I wrote it because after all we had accomplished, two men had been killed. One man, who will remain nameless, decided that he was going to see that I got court martialed because I had crashed on the deck and killed two people—took my own cut as he called it. I had an airplane that was so badly shot up you could throw one of these chairs through a hole in the wing. I couldn't take a wave off. I told them that as I am coming up the groove. I couldn't go anywhere else. I had no place to go except roll over and die, and you are looking at a guy who wasn't about to roll over and die at that stage. So I cut the throttle. I landed in the gear. What they never ever told me was—and get this— I have been told by people who were there--I picked up a wire, a pendant and the pendant parted. I then ricocheted, cleared the barriers enough to trip over them and go into the pack. The sailor from the *Lexington* was killed by the pendant whiplashing because he was exposed; he should have been under cover. So his death shouldn't have happened. My plane struck and killed the rear seat man of my wing man—the only man I ever lost in combat. Now that will put you close to the edge. And yet, no less a gentleman than Adm. Marc Mitscher, saw fit to—well, I ended up, four of my division of six with the Navy Cross. The day Marc Mitscher decorated me on the deck of the *Hornet*, he never ever smiled much, but he looked at me and he had this little smile as he said, just for me to hear, “Hal, if ever a man earned one of these, you did. Well done.” And he handed me my Navy

Cross. So that helped me, but can you imagine how I felt for a period of time?

Cox: I know how you felt...

Buell: When I got back to...

Cox: I know how you felt at Pearl Harbor--not Pearl Harbor, excuse me--when they dropped the bomb. You were already in the States.

Buell: Well, that's just like getting a reprieve.

Cox: So you were discharged at that point?

Buell: I went ahead and took a discharge because my plans were to go back to college.

Cox: Was this a second career then?

Buell: Pardon?

Cox: Was this a second career?

Buell: Yes, I was going to do a second career by leaving the Navy and going back to college. I was a pre-med type student. I was going to take on the task to become a medical doctor. My guardian was a medical doctor, and this was what he wanted me to do. I got back to this little college in Iowa, Parsons College, and like I said, was discharged on the 18th or 19th of September, drove home that weekend, and Monday morning, I'm back in college. A week later, I'm playing football again with the football team. But before I did all this--the last thing that happened to me at Daytona Beach--I went in to give my farewell to the squadron commander; he was a Captain R.W.D. Woods. He said: "Hal, I want to talk to you about something. Why are you leaving the

Navy?" And I said, " Captain, I joined the Navy because I wanted to be a flyer and because there was a war coming, and I didn't want to be a draftee or any of that." (I had never ever registered for the draft because I got into the Navy when I was still 20, and you didn't have to register until you were 21. So I never ever registered for an SSS number or whatever they call it.) He said: "well, two or three things have happened just these last couple of weeks that you ought to know about. First, they are going to take 3000 of your type of officers-- aviation, JGs, lieutenants, and a few lieutenant commanders from the ex-Navcads into the regular Navy. If you put in for it, you will have to go through a screening, but with your record, I don't see how you can miss. You should be selected." There is going to be a promotion come through, in about six weeks all you guys are going to be promoted to lieutenant commander. Remember you were promised lieutenant commander if you came here." Thus, he was saying I could be in the regular navy and be promoted to Lieutenant Commander. This was all pretty heady stuff. Then Woods said: "the best of all is that fellows like you who left college with two or three years credits, will be sent back to college to get your college degree, or the Navy is going to send you to a special school (it was called The Navy Line School), and when you graduate from there, you will have the equivalent of a Naval Academy bachelor's degree." Why go back to college to get a degree in Iowa?" I said: "Well, because I have promised people that I would do it." And he said: "We want guys like you. I have been ordered to do this: here's the form. I want to fill this form out, and I want you to sign it because I have been told that we are losing too many of you combat tailhookers. Just do this for me, Hal. Sign this form, and if you get selected, you can make the decision." Well, guess what? I said: "OK, Captain Woods." I signed it, then went home. About Christmas time, the first of the year, I was already starting to get a little edgy. I was missing the flying. If you read *Dauntless HellDivers*, that was how I ended my book, I'm talking about being back there in college. I don't really like what I am doing, I miss the flying, I miss the comradery. Here comes an envelope with the U.S. Navy Department in the corner. I open it, and it says I have been selected. Now I have to make a decision. Either get back on active duty right now or turn this down. What do you want to do?" So I told my guardian "if you don't mind, I am going to give it a shot." I didn't even stop at Glenview, Chicago, I just drove all the way to Washington, D.C. I was sworn in at the Potomac River Naval Command, promoted to

Lieutenant Commander, and I started the rest of my Navy career.

Cox: You did a lot of, I see here, test pilot.

Buell: Yes. From then on, I had a lot of wonderful assignments. When I went to VX-1, where I was testing planes like the AD-1 and the AF; these were planes that were anti-submarine warfare types (ASW), and we had to fly them both night and day operations off of Jeep carriers, and this was all tied in with ASW. The snorkel submarine was our big threat, the German snorkel, you remember, the Russians had it and they were converting their submarines to the snorkel. The Cold War was very much a Hot War as far as we were concerned. This was before Korea or Vietnam, and I was at VX-1, as a test pilot. Pax River was just starting to train test. I never got to go to Pax River, but I did the test flying for a couple of years on a lot of airplanes. In fact, Marion Carl, the famous test pilot, almost got killed in an AF. He was doing high tests with it. I did a lot of operational tests with the AF in which I never got more than 100 feet off the water at Key West. We were flying it down there where the submarines were. And I survived all that. I had an F8F, Bear Cat Squadron, that was my first fighter command, and then we converted to jets, so I got to go through that too.

Cox: What was the first jet that you flew?

Buell: The F9F2—the one with the straight wing and the big tanks on the end. Then they swept-winged it and made it faster. I flew a couple or three other types of jets. My favorite jet of all was the T2V, the trainer. The two cockpits, beautiful airplane, you could go anywhere you wanted to in the United States with it—fast and high. I got the opportunity when I had the jet squadron of being on my own, so to speak. COMAIRLANT was VADM J.J. Ballantine, and old J.J. liked me from the war days, so my squadron became more or less the operational test squadron for the ANTIETAM (CV-36) which was the first Essex Class CV with the new angled deck. The angled deck concept, combined with the ball landing system and steam cats, saved carrier naval aviation in 1953.

Cox: And you were using jet aircraft?

Buell: Oh, yes. Of about 6,000 landings that were made on that deck during its test period, 4,000 of them were made by me and my squadron. We made every test cruise and we made the cruise to England to demonstrate this was a brand new concept. They took an Essex class carrier, ran the port elevator up and anchored it in the up position, and then filled in from the corner of that elevator back to the fantail with deck and then drew a line down the middle of it, 10 degrees off the carrier center. That was the angled deck. Then they took what had been the regular cables, and they simply kept the one on the port side, but over on the starboard they angled it off so what was number two wire was still number two on the starboard side, but became number one on the port side. Follow what I mean?

Cox: Yes.

Buell: They angled the cables but no barriers. For emergency purposes, they would rig a special one we called the butterfly net.

Cox: In other words, if you missed it, then you were in the drink.

Buell: Well, no, if you came down and missed it, we could now make a power on approach, and when we got to the ramp. Now we still didn't have the mirror—it was coming. The mirror, that was the other step with the angle deck, but we didn't have it. We still had an LSO, but he didn't really signal much. We were supposed to bring ourselves up to the ramp. But we had no speed problem anymore. We were on power and at well above stall; in fact, it was like a power on landing. And when we would pass that ramp, he would give us a cut signal meaning that we were OK to land; you just simply held that and you flew down to hit right in among those cables—the angled deck had only five cables. If you didn't get a cable, you'd roll down the deck a little ways while on 90 percent power. If you miss with a bolter, put on the extra 10 percent, and just take off again. But if the hook engaged a cable, which most of the time it did, you were

trapped. Today we are still making the landings a lot like that except they now have a ball, and they talk to the pilots, the LSO talks to him, but he flies his own ball. They tell him if he isn't flying it right. All of the test work we did with LSOs, but they only gave a couple of signals. One was either you were too high or you were too low or you were on glide path. The speed was controlled by the pilot.

Cox: Would that be...

Buell: Because they knew we had to be at a certain power to be able to set up a correct rate of descent. And that is what they wanted. In a jet, as I recall--I am trying to think back--with the F9F, I think I would bring it in at the final at about 110 knots and set up this rate of descent. Boy, I'll tell you--by that time I was a pretty good instrument pilot, and I could set up that little airplane on--we had pretty good instruments in that airplane--we could set it up, and you could drive that thing into that angle deck and you didn't have a LSO cut, you didn't have to worry about barriers, could get the same wire, number 2, number 3, every time. The main thing about the angle deck was that it was so wonderful. Then I had to leave it because there was only one carrier with it. The Navy started converting to them as fast as they could, but my squadron did a lot of flying on the straight decks. Landing at night in jets on the straight deck was a hairy operation. That is the only way I know to call it. OK. What else? Is that it?

Cox: You did get a PhD degree after retirement?

Buell: Yes, after I did my 21 years in the Navy. It is 1961, and I'm a full commander coming up for selection to Captain. I was already in a captain's billet as personnel officer of basic training command. I had just left as Director of Training and Executive Officer of Whiting Field. I had been an air boss on a carrier. I had had my squadron command. But I also knew that we were getting involved in Nam (Vietnam) and that it was going to become serious. I came home one day--I told the wife, you know, I am getting ready for selection and a couple things are going to happen. Either I will be selected or not selected for Captain, but that's not as important as the

fact that I am going to be coming up for sea duty. The way things look, we are going to get involved out there for the third time. You see, I had been in World War II and the Korean thing and I said, this time I will be on an Admiral's staff. I will probably be out there because of my knowledge of carrier operations, and it is going to be good bye for quite awhile. Well, this fellow ((pointing to his son)), you were just finishing Fork Union, I think, about that time. I had a daughter in 7th grade—something like that. I had a wife who had lost one husband in a navy mishap, so—I said, I can still put in for retirement. That law hadn't changed. But if I do that, I am going to have to do another career. We made the decision that I would go ahead and take retirement. We ended up in college together, didn't we, old buddy? He was an underclassman at FSU, and I was in the graduate school. That was an interesting one! We ended up in the same fraternity. He insisted that I join their fraternity which was Sigma Phi Epsilon.

Cox: Did you get to haze him?

Buell: They treated me in a gentlemanly fashion.

Buell's son: I was the president—so they weren't going to haze him.

Buell: I got my Master's rather quickly. One year for the Master's. Then I made the crazy decision to go for the PhD., that took three more years. I ended up in my second career that, while never as satisfying as I had hoped it would be, was certainly rewarding. What a wonderful career I had in the Navy, flying, and if you have to be in a war, be a wearer of the Wings of Gold and be a Tail Hook warrior—it's a great way to go! I got to be a Tail Hook warrior, I got to fly jets, I had a wonderful time in my Navy career. Then I got to spend my time in an entirely different type of second career—but rewarding, and most of all, I retired at age 62 because I had enough retirement pay from two professions to do it. I got to write my book and you know, when you can get a book published (*Dauntless Hell Divers* was published in '91 and I was 71 years old) that is something too!

Cox: And you wrote a second book?

Buell: Yes, I have edited a second book with Dr. Ken Glass, who incidentally is a fellow professor type that I flew combat missions with in 1944 from *Hornet*!

Cox: The name of that book?

Buell: That book is *The Hornets and Their Heroic Men*, and it is on sale right out here on the stand. I brought some for the Museum to sell for themselves. Pretty good little book. It's a bunch of sea stories that the officers and men of both *Hornets*--the one sunk in 1942 at Santa Cruz, and the one that is the museum out in Alameda now. The stories in that book are edited by Ken Glass and myself.

Cox: And your home now is what?

Buell: Flight's End at 27 Linda Mar Drive, St. Augustine Beach, Florida, 32080

Cox: And you have a lovely wife.

Buell: Oh, yes, and we are on our 44th year now.

Cox: And she is an artist.

Buell: She is an artist of tremendous ability. We have a wonderful son and he is a professional photographer. He doesn't know it, he's a lawyer by profession, but I think he is a professional photographer as a second career. Our daughter is a successful travel professional in New York, and we have grand and great grand children! Life has been very good to us.

Cox: What media does your wife work in?

Buell: She works mostly in watercolor, but can use several mediums. She can do a portrait, for instance, you can sit for her, and she can do you in charcoal, pencil or watercolor. Let me tell you about the Indians. She went on a kick—she decided that she was going to do all the great Indian warriors of our heritage, American Indians, Geronimo, all the big guys. So we got books, researched, we found old photographs, and she has done a series of Indians. I think we have about 26 or 28 of them, and we have them all around the house, and we have this one corner, I call it “The Little Big Horn.” I jokingly tell people, you remember George Custer was at Little Big Horn and a lot of people don’t know this, but his brother was with him there and he got killed too. This younger brother came riding up, and George is supposed to have turned to him and said: “Good God, Henry (or whatever his name was), where did all these Indians come from?” And that is my saying when you come into my home at Flight’s End. I will take you to the corner and I’ll just say “you won’t know, but I know where these Indians came from—my artist wife.”

Cox: And now you have retired, you are up in the morning with the birds and everything?

Buell: Pardon?

Cox: You were once up in the sky with the birds and the aircraft. Are there any other kind of birds that are in your life that you cherish quite a bit?

Buell: I used to hunt dove, and the dove is the most valiant bird I know of in flight. Their flight patterns across a field remind me of when I was trying to get away from Japanese AA. I have watched doves come down over a field where a whole bunch of us would be out there, and they would go through the gun fire and nobody would get them. Such bravery bothered me a little. Now, we have birds and doves, on Anastasia Island. They don’t migrate because they have guys like me who feed them just like chickens. I have a patch of ground out there and I throw bird seed around, and here they come in. They sit around on the power lines watching for me to bring the seed out.

Cox: What type of vehicle do you go buy this bird seed in?

Buell: The Thunderbird. I have a 1956 T-Bird that I bought in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1956 that is still running!

Cox: And the color?

Buell: White.

Cox: White. OK.

Buell: White with a black and white interior. It is in pretty good shape. My son here asks about the T-Bird usually before he asks about whether his mother or I are still kicking. He loves it—he learned to drive in that T-Bird.

Cox: Do you have any sports that you like to keep up with?

Buell: Well, I am obviously a Bobby Bowden Seminole fan—football fan.

Cox: Seminole—what university?

Buell: Well, I'll put it this way. It's not the Gators, and Bobby and I are good friends.

Cox: Well, I think we have had a very, very good visit. I appreciate it very much.

Buell: Well, I hope I didn't get off too far off your desired materials and questions.

Cox: No, you did not. I appreciate it. Not only do we appreciate it for the archives, but as a person I appreciate all your efforts that you did during the war, the things that you have done...

Buell: Well, I appreciate you appreciating that, and like I may say tomorrow to the audience here, there is no getting around it—we are kind of like Jurassic Park. We are dinosaurs and like the dinosaurs, we are going fast. Also, like the dinosaurs, nobody exactly knows what happened to them so maybe like MacArthur said: “Most of us will just fade away.”

Cox: I think that is a good point to end on right there. When our time comes, we will just fade away. Thank you very much, Sir.

End of Side 2