

The National Museum of the Pacific War
Fredericksburg, Texas

James Q. Yawn

B-24 Pilot – Mission over Truk

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Interview with

James Q. Yawn

Mr. Cox: Today is May 1, 2001 and my name is Floyd Cox. I am a volunteer with the oral history program at the Nimitz Museum also known as the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. The oral history program is set up to archive the stories of our veterans that so honorably served during World War II. Today we are interviewing Mr. Jim Yawn of Alice, Texas concerning his experiences during World War II. Jim, I would like to ask you a little about your back ground; where and when you were born. And would you tell us a little about your schooling and how you ended up in the Marine Corps?

Mr. Yawn: I was born in the country in Mississippi. The nearest post office was in Bogue Chitto. It is a Choctow Indian name. That was the closest town where the post office was. We had rural delivery. I was just a farm boy. We made a living raising cotton, corn, sugarcane, peanuts and potatoes.

My mother had a good garden and we had cows for milk. We survived. We didn't have electricity or butane. That all came later after I left home. I was fifteen in 1933 and my mother sent me to Raymond, Mississippi, which is west of Jackson, to live with a doctor and his wife. It so happened it was a high school and junior college combined, so I did receive two years of college. That was the minimum to get into the Navy flight program. I had to go down to New Orleans to take the physical.

Mr. Cox: How old were you at that time?

Mr. Yawn: I was about twenty years old at that time after finishing two years of college. After I took my physical, which took a day and a half they sent me to Lake Pontchartrain. It wasn't very long before we had a bunch of boys from Texas, Arkansas and Mississippi. We were all sent to Miami, Florida for our primary training. We had to fly thirty-three hours before we were appointed as a cadet. When we finished there we were transferred to Jacksonville for our basic training. Somewhere along the line we got some training time on PBY's. From there we went to California after we got our wings.

Mr. Cox: Did you get your PBY training there at the same base?

Mr. Yawn: Evidently we did at the same base. We went to North Island and from there we went to Goleta which is up near Santa Barbara, California. We were all assigned to a Dive-Bombing Squadron and flew , SB-2C's. It was a good outfit, and I enjoyed it. There were about seven of us that had twin-engine time so they pulled us down to San Diego, which at the time was Camp Kearney. It is now Mirimar Naval Air Station. The first thing we got were the old Gruman F-4F Wildcats with landing gear that you had to crank up by hand.

Mr. Cox: Were you in the Navy at this time?

Mr. Yawn: No, when I got my wings I asked for a transfer to the Marine Corp.

Mr. Cox: In those days they trained Navy pilots and then you had a choice of staying in the Navy or transfer to the Marines, is that correct?

Mr. Yawn: Yes. I had requested the Marine Corp because I had a friend who told me I needed to be in the Marine Corp.

Mr. Cox: You refer to the F-4F, how was that as a plane to fly? Did you enjoy flying that plane?

Mr. Yawn: It was pretty tricky. You had to crank in about three and a half degrees because the engine torque would take you right to the left. At Camp Kearney we had no hot water. We had to take cold showers and we lived in tents. It got pretty cool in California at night and we just had this old stove in the tent for heat. Dress Greens were the uniform of the day at night. In the daytime it would get pretty warm. It wasn't too long before seven of us that had twin-engine time in Florida were called back to Camp Kearney and that is where we had the F-4F's. Later we got some DC-3's and C-47's. After that they had another twin engine plane, a C-46. I can't remember exactly when we got the B-24's.

Mr. Cox: When you got the B-24's and you were at Mojave, is this where you got your crew training or got your crews together?

Mr. Yawn: We really had some crew training at El Centro. It was awful hot there being in the summer time. Of course Mojave was pretty warm too. We finished getting our crews in Mojave. They were just young kids. We had an eleven-man crew on that B-24. We had a tail-gunner, waist-gunners, belly-gunner, nose-gunner and a top-gunner

as well as the engineer, navigator and so on. I made it a point to go to every station and it wasn't any fun when they let me down in that belly-gunner station.

Mr. Cox: Were you assigned an aircraft at that time?

Mr. Yawn: Yes we were assigned an aircraft. When we left San Francisco only five of us flew on the plane to cut down on the weight. The rest of the crew went by ship to Hawaii. We flew from San Francisco at night so we would be sure to get there in the daytime. There weren't enough daylight hours to take off in the morning and get there before dark. We took off at night about nine o'clock.

Mr. Cox: Where were you in Hawaii?

Mr. Yawn: We went over to Ford Island to get some radar gear and I remember that was kind of a hairy experience. We walked aboard the Arizona and it was still smoking. They didn't have it like it is now. It was an eerie feeling.

Mr. Cox: Speaking of that, when you flew into Hawaii and it was daylight what was your impression when you flew over the harbor and you saw what our fleet was like down there?

Mr. Yawn: It was quite an experience to see it. There wasn't much left

at that time. The Arizona was still there. The Oklahoma was still lying on its side. They had done a pretty good job of cleaning up. When we got to Clark we got our radar gear and we were ready to go. I didn't have a very good navigator and neither did my CO. He said, "you need to take off two hours after me." Our next stop was Palmyra Island. We landed and couldn't find the CO's plane. We were gassing up and heard a plane coming in and he had gotten lost. He overshot the runway and had to pull up. He made a beautiful landing but he had ruptured the left landing gear and was going to the left. He was hitting planes and trucks when he finally got close to us and stopped. We were trained to take a count so we were counting people when they were getting off and he was two short. The two fellows who were in the Bomb bay area at the time of the landing were killed. We were going in to try and get them out. I went to the front and my co-pilot went to the rear and about that time the plane exploded. It blew my flight engineer about fifty or sixty feet and he was in real bad shape. He looked like a balloon when I went to see him in the hospital there. He had a lot of burns. Later on he came back and joined the crew. It wasn't long after this that I noticed that others in the crew were doing all the

work. I asked why Troy wasn't working and they told me that he couldn't get into that arasol because he breaks out. arasol was like kerosene that we cleaned with. We had an excellent crew. Everyone stayed together real tight and helped each other.

Mr. Cox: Do you remember where the members of your crew were from?

Mr. Yawn: Yes.

Mr. Cox: Jim is looking at a picture of his crew sitting outside of their B-24.

Mr. Yawn: We had a navigator from Pontiac, Michigan. The engineer was from Chicago and the radioman was from Collersville, New York. The others were from Montgomery, Alabama, Martinsville, Indiana, Oklahoma, Attleboro, Massachusetts. Needville, Texas and St. Louis, Missouri.

Mr. Cox: You had quite a mixture.

Mr. Yawn: Everybody got along so good and worked real hard to help each other. At the reunions, I still have three that attend. One other is still living but he has heart trouble and he doesn't come to the reunions because he doesn't think he

could handle it.

From Palmyra we had several stops. We went to Samoa and Fiji. We were supposed to go to Espiritu Santo, that is where the squadron stayed but we went on to Guadalcanal. In Guadalcanal we lived with the Seabees. That was quite an experience. They were a good group of fellows.

Mr. Cox: Were you assigned to a Squadron at this time?

Mr. Yawn: Yes. VMB-254 was our Squadron's designation. Most of the fighting was over in Guadalcanal when we got there. There was one Japanese ship that we had bombed and they had beached it. We used to swim around it. We did reconnaissance work over the New Georgia group, Rabaul, Bougainville. This was about the time that the decision was made to begin island hopping, thereby bypassing many of the islands in the Pacific.

Mr. Cox: Your primary mission was reconnaissance and photography?

Mr. Yawn: Total, but we had guns to protect our selves in case of enemy attack. We went to Bougainville where we lived in tents. My Commanding Officer had been summoned to go back to Guadalcanal. It was Admiral Finch who told my

CO that we had to find the Japanese Fleet. He said, "we think they are at Truk Island and you guys have to make a run to Truk." We took off one morning with three planes and the headwinds were so bad we couldn't move so we went back. The next day we tried it one more time. One plane couldn't fly so two of us went on the second flight. When we arrived at the area where Truk was supposed to be it was covered by a heavy cloud cover. When we finally found a hole in the cloud cover, we did find the Japanese Fleet at Truk Island. Truk was completely surrounded by a coral reef and only one inlet for ships to get in. We could see the submarine nets across that inlet when we made the flight over. We took photographs which were the first ones taken of the Truk area in over twenty years.¹

Mr. Cox: Truk was the main naval base for the Japanese Navy out in the islands and it was heavily fortified wasn't it?

Mr. Yawn: Yes, it was heavily fortified. We didn't get as much resistance there as the initial run on Guam. Guam is where we really got hit hard. That was after our mission over Truk.

¹ A copy of the official Navy photograph taken by Captain Yawn are included in the appendage.

Mr. Cox: Once your cloud cover finally broke when you were over Truk and you saw the Japanese Navy down there, were you excited and elated?

Mr. Yawn: We had our orders and tried to carry them out as best we could and always did.

Mr. Cox: Did you receive any decorations for this mission?

Mr. Yawn: Yes, all of the crew members received an air medal² for that. As the mission commander, I received the Distinguished Flying Cross.³ We went to Eniwetok then we took off for Guam. We did the initial run on Guam⁴ and got hit pretty hard with Zeros there. With the headwind we couldn't go back to Eniwetok so we went to another island and spent the night. Then we went back to Guadalcanal.

Mr. Cox: Going back to Truk before we talk about Guam, did you have any interference by Japanese fighter planes or anti-aircraft when you went over?

Mr. Yawn: Yes we did. We had a Japanese plane that went between us and the clouds above us and never fired a shot but as soon as he went past the anti-aircraft opened up pretty heavy. I

² Copy of Air Medal citation appears in appendage.

³ Copy of Distinguished Flying Cross citation appears in appendage.

⁴ Copy of map of Guam photo mission plane route, by individual plane, appears in appendage.

headed back for that cloud cover. As soon as we got close to the cloud cover the waist gunner called in and said we had three Zeros on the right following us. We were able to get in the cloud cover before they could attack us. Our objective was to get down right on top of the water where they couldn't make a run on us.

Mr. Cox: When you made your flight and you took pictures of Truk from the air, the first photographs made in over twenty years, what altitude were you flying?

Mr. Yawn: We were flying at an altitude of twenty thousand feet. We had real good maneuverability at twenty thousand feet in the B-24. It would not go as high as the B-17's but we had good control at twenty thousand feet.

Mr. Cox: On a photographic plane such as your B-24, how many cameras did they have and how were they operated?

Mr. Yawn: In the Bomb bay area they designed it for three cameras facing downward. They also made shots out of the sides from the waist hatch. We got real coverage. It was all operated by a man in the back. He was a regular photographer assigned to that job because we were pretty busy flying.

Mr. Cox: You made the initial run over Guam. Did you have anti-aircraft fire there?

Mr. Yawn: We were hit with Zeros and anti-aircraft fire. We did a combination mission. We had five from our Squadron but one had to turn back with engine trouble. There were four of that went over. We had Air Force flying wing on us dropping bombs. We flew out what they call windows. I don't know if you are familiar with that. It is to distort the anti-aircraft. I tell you right now those Air Force B-24's flew a beautiful tight wing on us. They did a fantastic job.

Mr. Cox: They dropped bombs while you were taking your pictures.

Mr. Yawn: Correct. I guess that is why we got so much anti-aircraft and Zeros hitting us pretty hard.

Mr. Cox: Did the Zeros get any of the planes that were in your group?

Mr. Yawn: One guy lost an engine. The code was to throw out all of the heavy stuff and they even cut the belly gun turret loose and they got back pretty fast on three engines. That old plane would fly on three engines pretty good. It had a long wingspan. That Davis wing was designed and it did fly

really well.

Mr. Cox: What was the purpose of the flight over Guam?

Mr. Yawn: They were getting ready to make a landing and they wanted photographs of the terrain of Guam. When we took off from Eniwetok on the way to Guam and we had our radios on of course. They were saying one of the planes was shot down but no problem, because they are getting into the lifeboats. Then they came back on and said, "the Zeros are strafing the lifeboats and they killed them all." Tinian wasn't too far off course so they could hear all of this about a squadron before we did

Mr. Cox: After your Guam mission what was your next mission?

Mr. Yawn: We continued on to other islands that I can't recall the names. I would have to look in my logbook. They wanted to see if there were any buildups going on. I had a R&R trip to Australia. It was quite exciting. Then we came back and were just flying recon. They had pretty well secured Rabaul and most of the stuff so they had us load up and fly back home. From there I got to go to New York. It was the latter part of 1944. I went to New York to pick up a twin engine fighter from the test pilot at the Gruman plant.

It was the twin engine F-7F. The F-1 didn't do much and the F-6 was the workhorse. Then they came out with the F-8 which was the single engine.

Mr. Cox: To get back to when you were over in the Pacific, tell us about the time that some of your crew members trading some booze for an engine.

Mr. Yawn: Yeah, we were on a mission one day and we lost an engine due to mechanical failure. We had R-twenty-eight hundred engines on those B-24's. My ground crew came to my tent and wanted to borrow some whisky. I said, "what do you want that for?" They said, "we'll tell you in the morning." They all worked together and they traded that fifth of whisky for an engine and they had that sucker going the next morning, all four engines. (Laughter) We went off on our mission. That was a pretty cheap engine. I think it was the 3rd Air Force there and they had a lot of supplies so that is where they traded that fifth of whisky for the engine. I don't know whether they had to account for that stuff or not. I might mention that on Bougainville we had a foxhole on the side of our tent. Every morning about two o'clock this Betty, a Japanese Bomber, would come over. Finally one day the ground crew was bragging that they had shot it

down. We found out later that the Navy had shot down the Betty.

Mr. Cox: When the Betty Bomber would come over at two o'clock in the morning just to harass you, would you jump up and get into your foxhole every time?

Mr. Yawn: Yes, every time. Not too far from camp we knew there were quite a few Japanese. One night the firing just went on and on and on. In Bougainville I got to go up to a Marine outpost. Walking through the palm trees I was scared to death because I thought they were full of Japs. One night the firing just kept going seemed like all night. They said the Japanese were going to attack the base where we were. They kept coming down this same draw. They just kept coming and kept shooting until they had killed them all. They said if it had been Americans they would have thought about it and gone a different route instead of coming down the same draw. They just kept on coming.

Mr. Cox: After you were in the States and you picked up the plane, the F-7F, where did you go?

Mr. Yawn: I was transferred to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania but I

thought there was too much grab ass going on there so I borrowed me a little plane and flew down to Washington and I told them “you are going to have to move that plane if we are going to win the war.” They said take it to California so I went to Van Ayes, California and they started working on it and they did a good job. They would cut some holes and I would fly it.

Mr. Cox: You were like a test pilot for a new reconnaissance photographic plane?

Mr. Yawn: Right. I lived downtown New York for six weeks and that was quite an experience. I tell my wife, she doesn't believe me, that I got so tired of going to see the Rockettes that I finally went to an opera. (Laughter) When the war was over this plant in Van Ayes asked me to go to work for them, which I did. I was a civilian at the time when we flew forty Beechcraft aircraft to Argentina. We went up to Canada and picked up a hundred AT-6's, SNJ's as we had called them. We flew them to New York and they were going on to Sweden. I flew for a while and then got into the automobile business for forty-five years.

Mr. Cox: Where were you when you got discharged?

Mr. Yawn: I was in California but I still had real good contact with Don Kennedy and Christenson who were good friends of mine. They were still in North Carolina. We would get the planes ready in California and we would have crews come out and pick them up. I went back to North Carolina in a little town called Kinston not too far from Goldsboro. Christenson was an Annapolis man and he said, "let's fly up to Washington and check our flight records." I might mention Joe Foss was in there checking his and of course he knew Christenson. Joe said, "come over here I want to show you remarks in my flight training log. This guy says I was not co-ordinated and I would never be able to fly." Joe Foss ended up being a Fighter Ace. Pappy Boyington shot down twenty-eight Japanese planes and Joe Foss shot down twenty-six. Pappy had been in a little bit earlier.

Mr. Cox: What rank were you got out?

Mr. Yawn: When I first got my wings I was a Lieutenant and when I got out I was a Captain. I stayed on in the Reserves and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. I liked the Marine Corp but my work was a little hectic at the time and I thought I better retire. I had twenty-two years total.

Mr. Cox: Did you get recalled for Korea?

Mr. Yawn: No, I thought sure I would get recalled for Korea but they told us that they didn't recall anyone in above the rank of Captain at the time. That was the word we got. I was ready to go, I was in good shape but it was probably for the best. I got in the automobile business in Minnesota and moved to the Rio Grande Valley. I was in Kingsville, Texas for five years and then in 1959 I moved to Alice, Texas. This is where I want to stay. It is where I want to live and die. My friend Mr. Hill wanted me to go to Alice. I told him I didn't think I liked Alice. I had just been up and down Highway 281. He said, "you haven't seen the city." I said, "o.k. I'll come over and see it."

Mr. Cox: Over Truk you said there were two planes that went over?

Mr. Yawn: Yes, but we went separately. Christenson said he had been over the Island of Truk and I am assuming he did. I went right down the middle of it and it was pretty quiet and I said, "hell, I'm going to do this again." I almost got in trouble when I went back the second time. Christenson got back about two hours before I did.

Mr. Cox: What medals did you get?

Mr. Yawn: I got two DFC's and seven Air Medals. I got the second DFC for Guam⁵. By the way, I didn't receive the second DFC until 1998. They decided I should have it as a result of my flight over Guam.

I was never wounded thank goodness. But I did work real hard.

Mr. Cox: Did you ever fly another four engine plane?

Mr. Yawn: No. I really liked the B-24 with the Davis wing. It was a good plane. Some thought it wouldn't fly because it was slow but we made it. We tried to get off the runway in Bougainville and we couldn't make it so we had to find another island. It had marston matting and it rained almost every day so we had to find another island. It had a runway with about a two hundred foot drop off at the end. They said we went out of sight when we took off.

Mr. Cox: Is there anything else that you would like to mention?

Mr. Yawn: I guess we didn't have it as rough as some of the pilots in Europe because when the Zeros would come in at us they had too many tracers coming at them so they would back off a little bit. They tell me in Europe that was not true. Later when they had the Kamikazes, that was after my

⁵ A copy of the citation for the Distinguished Flying Cross appears in the appendage.

time, it was a different story. We didn't find them as aggressive as they seemed to be later on.

Mr. Cox: Before we conclude this interview, please tell us your story about the navigator which you referred to earlier.

Mr. Yawn: What happened was when they briefed us at this Air Force Base in San Francisco. They briefed the pilots, the navigators and the flight engineers. They had flown it so much that they could almost give you a heading. We left San Francisco in a blinding rain at nine o'clock at night. We had to fly at night to get there in the daytime. Everyone had been briefed but going down the coast I kept seeing lights on the left hand side so I told the co-pilot, "you better get up there and take a star shot when we get out of the rain." He said, "we're thirty degrees off course." The kid that had taken the variation had cranked it in backwards. So I don't know where we would have ended up. (Laughter) We made it to Hawaii, no problem, after he made his correction.

Mr. Cox: Jim it has been a pleasure talking with you and I want to take this opportunity to thank you on behalf of the National Museum of the Pacific War and I want to shake your hand

and thank your service during World War II.

Transcribed by:
Cynthia Gay Cox
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