

**ADMIRAL NIMITZ NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF THE PACIFIC WAR
Fredericksburg, Texas**

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

MR. TRUMAN GILL

USS Mississippi

Oral Interview

May 29, 2001

INTERVIEW
of
TRUMAN GILL

Mr. Cox: Today is May 29, 2001. My name is Floyd Cox. We are here in the Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas. I am part of the Oral History Program, whose specific aim is to record and archive stories of our veterans of World War II. Today I am interviewing Mr. Truman F. Gill concerning his experiences during World War II.

First of all, Truman, I would like to tell you “Thank You” for taking the time to interview with us and tell us of your experiences. To start off with, could you give me a little of your background, where you were born, when you were born, where you went to school, and we will just take it from there.

Mr. Gill: I was born in Beeville, Texas on February 17, 1921. I attended the local schools, high school and went to New Mexico Military Institute Junior College. I went to the University of Texas and left Law School to join the Marine Corps in 1942.

Mr. Cox: Where did you join the Marines?

Mr. Gill: I joined the Marine Corps in San Antonio, Texas, April 3, 1942 and was sworn in by Capt. D. M. Taft, who was a recruiting officer.

Mr. Cox: Why did you select the Marines, Truman?

Mr. Gill: Because if I was going to fight they were trained better and I had a better chance.

Mr. Cox: That is a good reason. Once you enlisted, where did you take your basic? Did they take you on a troop train?

Mr. Gill: I boarded a train in San Antonio and went to San Diego, California and took basic training at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot.

Mr. Cox: Can you give us a short overview of what you learned in basic training in preparation for fighting?

Mr. Gill: Well, I learned how to shoot the old 1911 .45. I learned to be an expert with a bayonet. And I went on through the rifle range and qualified there the first time as a sharp-shooter. Later on in the Marine Corps, I made expert.

Mr. Cox: That’s great. Tell us a little about your experiences on the rifle range. Did you have to shoot the 1903 Springfield?

Mr. Gill: Yes, I started out with the 1903 Springfield. And the one I had, the bolt would stick on it and I couldn't accuate it fast enough to do much. When I first started shooting it, to sight the rifle in, they said "well you missed the target". Tom Jones, the old Marine on the firing line, said "No, he didn't miss the target, he shot the spotter out."

Mr. Cox: Now what is a spotter?

Mr. Gill: A spotter is what they put in the target that is pegged in there to see where you are shooting. You normally shoot three shots. If you hit all three of them, you are shooting where you are looking.

Mr. Cox: So that is exactly what you were doing.

Mr. Gill: That is what I was doing.

Mr. Cox: Well great. Well, the 1903, that was slow-action bolt-action rifle, is that correct?

Mr. Gill: That was a clip magazine you push in there. From the top you manually push it in there and you had to actuate the bolt each time you put a cartridge in the chamber. Which is not near as fast as later rifle like the M-1, where you had an 8-shot clip which was semi-automatic.

Mr. Cox: Now one question that I have been asked by youngsters is as a Marine, when you were issued a weapon, did you keep that same weapon all during your career as a front-line Marine?

Mr. Gill: Usually until you were transferred or ended up in the hospital or something like that.

Mr. Cox: But that particular weapon was yours and you practically slept with it, if I remember correctly.

Mr. Gill: You wanted that weapon at all times. You never knew when you would use it.

Mr. Cox: Now after you finished basic training, did you go to a tech school of any kind? Or, were you going to be a front-line infantryman?

Mr. Gill: No, I went to Sea School. I boarded the USS Mississippi in Pearl Harbor in October, 1942.

Mr. Cox: Now Sea School. Did you select that, or did they select you?

Mr. Gill: No, that was a volunteer thing.

Mr. Cox: Sea School means that you went to school to learn how to serve on a ship as a Marine Guard, or whatever.

Mr. Gill: Yes, in the Marine Detachments on board the ship. They served on cruisers and aircraft carriers and battleships.

Mr. Cox: Once you completed your Sea School, then where did you proceed as you were getting ready to go to Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Gill: I went aboard the old USS Henderson, which used to carry a lot of the fleet Marine force of the First Marine Division. When we got a little bit past Alcatraz, we had an old Marine way back on the deck holler "Good-bye you lucky son-of-bitches."

Mr. Cox: And he was talking to the guys in the prison, correct?

Mr. Gill: Technically.

Mr. Cox: As you proceeded, did you go to Hawaii? Was that your first.....

Mr. Gill: We stopped at Pearl Harbor and went to the Marine barracks. We stayed in the Marine barracks for about a week and then went aboard the USS Mississippi.

Mr. Cox: So that was when you were assigned to your capital ship. Now what year was this?

Mr. Gill: 1942.

Mr. Cox: Do you remember the exact date?

Mr. Gill: October in '42.

Mr. Cox: As you went onboard, this was a brand new experience for a Texas boy, what were your primary duties on the Mississippi?

Mr. Gill: Well, my primary duties as an anti-aircraft machine gunner on 20 mm starting out. And then later on, after I had a little more practice, I got to run a quad-40 mm anti-aircraft machine gunner.

Mr. Cox: Now these machine guns had no computers of any kind, did they?

Mr. Gill: Well, we had on the 40 mm a sperry-gyroscope sight that was electronically controlled. We had a trigger on it and we could track things with it. And move the barrels as we moved the tracker and could fire by trigger. It took about 11 men to keep those four barrels loaded.

Mr. Cox: And what was your primary job on those quads?

Mr. Gill: Well, I was the gunner up there.

Mr. Cox: You were the guy that pulled the trigger? I bet it proved to be some interesting things that we will probably get into later on. Once you got on the Mississippi, where were you headed?

Mr. Gill: The first real trip we took was to the Coral Sea. After they sank the Lexington, we were doing a little patrol down there. And we stopped over by way of Fiji and got to go ashore. Fiji is a very beautiful island. We saw some of the natives, just going ashore for a few hours. The water is quite deep down there and we went through a coral reef that had been cut and taken into the back bay to the little town of Latoka.

Fiji is an island that is populated by indigenous people who were originally cannibals. In the late 1800's, about 1895 or so, they started bringing indentured servants from India down there. Now India comprises a high percentage of the population. Occasionally they have a revolution down there because of the ethnic backgrounds.

Mr. Cox: The Fijians even as of today.

Mr. Gill: They have had ongoing problems for quite sometime.

Mr. Cox: Well after you were on Fiji, where did you proceed to?

Mr. Gill: We patrolled for a while, trying to find these Jap ships. We never could find any, so we came back to Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Cox: To what, re-outfit?

Mr. Gill: To reload and resupply. Then we got ready to go up to the Aleutians. After we loaded everything down there, ammunition and supplies at Pearl Harbor we proceeded to San Francisco and then to Adak in the Aleutians.

Mr. Cox: Oh, you went to Adak, Alaska. Just as a note, I was there stationed there in 1951. So proceed...

Mr. Gill: Before we went to Adak, we made a little stop over in Dutch Harbor. This was after the Japs had bombed Dutch Harbor. As we started up through the channel to go into the harbor, we got into one of these willow walls, which was about 100 mile an hour wind and the old Mississippi could just barely make head-way against it.

Mr. Cox: What was your mission to go to Dutch Harbor?

Mr. Gill: We were up there trying to protect the frontier of North America against a Japanese invasion. The Japs had gone into Kiska. We had about 7 or 8 battleships up there with us and we didn't get into the Battle of the Komandorskis, but was the old Nashville and about 7 or 8 other ships that battled some Japanese cruisers for three and a half hours. That was the longest daylight Naval battle in North America in the daytime.

At that time little was known of Alaska and there was very tight censorship on it and people were not informed of the situation up there. These things are just trickle-down through history and thanks to writers like Bryan Garfield we do have documentation as good as could be had on it.

Mr. Cox: Did you proceed from Dutch Harbor to Adak? The Bay of Adak?

Mr. Gill: We did some patrolling, but then we went on into Adak and anchored. We could see that old volcano smoking, as you can well remember.

Mr. Cox: Mt. Moffitt.

Mr. Gill: You could read a newspaper at 11:00 at night. There is really nothing to do up there.

Mr. Cox: Absolutely nothing. Once you went to Adak, then where did you proceed from there?

Mr. Gill: We started back out on patrol again. We got a big contact early one morning between 1:30 and 2 a.m.

Mr. Cox: Radar contact?

Mr. Gill: Yes. We thought those Japs were probably evacuating Kiska by submarine. So the Mississippi and the New Mexico and the other battleships, I can't remember all the names, opened fire with the main batteries. I have never seen a bigger bombardment in my life. It was something that we were never able to find what we were shooting at.

Mr. Cox: That was 16-inch shells?

Mr. Gill: 14-inch.

Mr. Cox: I imagine if nothing else, they scared the animals. What animals there are.

Mr. Gill: Bryan Garfield said that there is a certain species of bird that nests up there on the water. So we think we might have been shooting at birds.

Mr. Cox: After you completed your mission in that area, then where did you proceed to?

Mr. Gill: We went back to Frisco.

Mr. Cox: As you were off the coast of the islands up there what kind of clothing were you issued?

Mr. Gill: We were issued clothing in Pearl Harbor before we went up there. We had excellent foul weather clothing. Zoot suits and parkas and overshoes and all the equipment that was needed up there in the Aleutians. We were much more fortunate than the troops that went into Attu. The Army came in there and they were ill-equipped to go into that area. Most of them got frost-bite and they had a tremendous loss of people not counting the ones that were killed in action but also from the elements and the weather.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this, while you were up there did you young men shave very often?

Mr. Gill: We just didn't shave, by permission of the Captain.

Mr. Cox: You didn't shave. Did most of the guys on the ship let their beards grow?

Mr. Gill: Oh, absolutely. No one shaved hardly, except the Captain.

Mr. Cox: You were about 18 years old at this time?

Mr. Gill: No, I was 21 when I went into the Marine Corps and was about 22 or 23 then.

Mr. Cox: You got all these young sailors on there, some of them trying real hard to grow beards when they couldn't hardly grow a whisker, I'm sure. And the Captain permitted the whole ship to go that way.

Mr. Gill: Right.

Mr. Cox: That was quite a morale booster for you guys.

Mr. Gill: We needed it.

Mr. Cox: After you were up there, your wife has mentioned you were on the bow of the ship. You want to tell us this story?

Mr. Gill: The fog was so bad that they turned the search light on and had me go up on the forward on the forecastle with headphones. Just in case we had a collision. I don't think I could have gotten out of the way.

Mr. Cox: But you were supposed to tell them is they were going to hit anything.

Mr. Gill: Right. If I saw any object. I was supposed to give the message.

Mr. Cox: I thought that is what they used radar for.

Mr. Gill: They didn't seem to have any confidence in it.

Mr. Cox: Once you completed your mission up there, then what was your next mission?

Mr. Gill: We went back to San Francisco and back to Pearl Harbor and then we headed for the Gilbert Islands. Which was the Gilbert Island Campaign of Makin and Tarawa. Our mission was to lend support and bombard all of the area that we were assigned. The morning they went into Tarawa, we were assigned to take on Makin Island which is known as the Butaritari down there.

I would like to say something about the USS Liscome Bay. This happened November 24, 1943, but it is still hard to talk about. I was on the quarterdeck on the port side and I was lying down on a ready box where they keep a lot of gear. I saw an orange wall start climbing beside me and I didn't know what had happened. I jumped right straight up and saw an aircraft carrier about 500 yards off our port side that had been hit by a big torpedo that come across the front of the ship. I didn't see the torpedo, but I sure did see what happened when it hit.

About a few seconds (15 or 20 seconds later) another torpedo hit the ship. These things hit the bomb room and the all ammunition exploded. The ship went down in about 22 minutes. It

was done by the Jap submarine, I-75. Our Navy never did get him during World War II, which I was sorry to see.

As soon as this happened, we had to pick up speed on the battleship and the destroyers picked up some survivors. According to the records, 646 men were instantly killed by the explosions and there were about 800 or so men on the ship. So there were a couple of hundred survivors.

Mr. Cox: And the destroyers picked them up?

Mr. Gill: Yes. Then about 8 that morning we started bombarding Makin Island, Butaritari. I noticed that one of the chief petty officers, on the quarterdeck where I was, turning white. And I asked him what was the matter and he had smelled black powder which was a precursor of an internal explosion. They used black powder to detonate the main battery shells. What had happened was an explosion in the main battery forward.

Mr. Cox: An accidental explosion?

Mr. Gill: Yes, internal. This explosion killed 43 men. This was the second time that it happened on the ship. But not during my time. It was maybe 20 years earlier that they had a similar explosion. There were two or three survivors from the explosion and they took them over by Breeches Bouy to another ship in wire baskets that morning.

Of course, that afternoon, we buried 43 men off the fantail on the starboard side with a gun salute. Their shroud was covered with an American flag. They had a five-inch shell sewn inside the shroud and they slid the bodies over the side which is very painful to see.

Mr. Cox: They were killed as the result of an accident?

Mr. Gill: Yes. An internal explosion in that battery. A flash-back. They blow those barrels out with compressed air. If you fail to clear a cinder and you have a spark - it is very dangerous.

Mr. Cox: This fellow that you were talking about that got white. He smelled it, he recognized that there was a problem?

Mr. Gill: Yes. I didn't know what was the matter with him. He knew. He had been on there before. He said when you had been that route before then you know sometimes.

Mr. Cox: When you were off of Makin Island, you were bombarding Makin in preparation for an invasion from the sea.

Mr. Gill: Now the Army troops were going in there.

Mr. Cox: Rather than the Marines.

Mr. Gill: We were supporting the landing down there of those Army troops.

Mr. Cox: Now in a case like that, do you man your anti-aircraft guns? Do you shoot towards shore with your 40 millimeters?

Mr. Gill: When we were bombarding, we were just standing back there just in case any planes came across any of these islands in there.

Mr. Cox: Were there any planes?

Mr. Gill: There were some that came across way up there and they decided not to turn towards our ship.

Mr. Cox: Were you glad or not glad?

Mr. Gill: Well, I wasn't glad. I wanted to get a crack at them.

Mr. Cox: That is exactly what I thought you were going to say. How long did you bombard this island?

Mr. Gill: It wasn't long before this explosion. I just can't remember. You had to fire one to get an explosion.

Mr. Cox: Did they pull you off the line, right after the explosion? Did they pull the ship off the line? How did they proceed?

Mr. Gill: I think that we had to back off there.

Mr. Cox: After your bombardment of the island and after the accidental explosion, I imagine, that you probably laid off of the bombardment to recoup. Where did you proceed from there?

Mr. Gill: Well, we went on towards Pago Pago. We picked up one of the ships that had part of her bow blown off - the USS Minneapolis. We had one of our evaporators that was out. So we were listing about 15 degrees starboard to port. We had to proceed very slowly. We limped in with the Minneapolis to Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Cox: Were you hooked together by any means? Or just traveled together?

Mr. Gill: Oh no, we just limped home with a few destroyers.

Mr. Cox: Once you got back to the stateside, you underwent repairs in preparation to go out again?

Mr. Gill: Well, we pulled into Pearl Harbor and they were getting ready to go and finish up the job of bombarding Eniwetok and Kwajalein. I got off the ship. I was transferred back to the states. I stayed onboard ship about 15 months. I put in for a transfer back to the First Marine Division.

Mr. Cox: While you were on shipboard did you ever have a chance to fire at enemy aircraft with your anti-aircraft guns?

Mr. Gill: No, I never did. We had too much trouble going on. I never did stay on long enough to get to the Kamikazes. I got off before they came in. They steered pretty clear of our ship as long as we had the destroyers.

Mr. Cox: Well, once you got off ship and you went back on land. You went to the First Marines?

Mr. Gill: I went back to the states. I went to Camp Elliott and helped train a bunch of men for the infantry. When we completed our training, we went aboard the Hugh L. Scott, which was an Army ship and manned by the Coast Guard. We did Marine Guard for about 5,000 Army troops that were being shipped to New Caledonia. It took us about three weeks to cross over. We were in a flotilla of destroyers and transports.

It was another push and we were getting ready to go north out of the islands. We went to New Caledonia. I disembarked there.

Mr. Cox: Then you went to land duty?

Mr. Gill: I stayed in New Caledonia for a while and I went deer hunting down there. We didn't have any fresh meat. So a bunch of us knew where some deer were and we got one of those old ammunition carrier type cars and went back up in the hills and went hunting. Most of those ole boys had never hunted deer. So three or four of them got together. I thought if three or four of them are together, they are going to beat the brush for me, so I went way past them up there where they would run the deer out.

They ran one by me and I almost got shot by one of them shooting at the deer. I thought the deer was going to run over me, but finally I shot him right through the neck.

Mr. Cox: A boy from Texas showed those other fellows how to do some deer hunting, didn't he?

Mr. Gill: That's right. So we took him down to the river and gutted him. The natives cut his heart out and ate it raw. Later on, we took him up to the officers' club and had a big cook-out. We had some fresh meat.

Mr. Cox: What rank were you at this time.

Mr. Gill: I was a corporal. The next day, we had to clean up the officers' club. People might wonder about deer in New Caledonia, but if read the South Pacific book by the Moon Publishing Company in California or refer to the National Geographic issue of May, 2000, one will see that they are getting over-stocked down there.

Mr. Cox: Time to go deer hunting again, isn't it, Truman?

Mr. Gill: Bout time again.

Mr. Cox: After your deer hunting, what were your duties on this island as a Marine?

Mr. Gill: Survival, I was just waiting to be transferred to go north with the rest of the battalions. I was transferred to Pavuvu which was that lovely island where all there was, was mud, no showers, rain, land crabs and exhausted Marines.

Mr. Cox: There weren't any active enemy on that island when you got there?

Mr. Gill: No. This was restaging area. The people from Cape Gloucester that were coming in there. At the same time the old combat areas had been ending had been ending up there around Cape Gloucester. New marine replacement battalions were coming in.

On the lighter side, Bob Hope, Carol Landis, Jerry Adler, Jerry Colonna flew in there to see us and entertain us. We sat on 55 gallon fuel drums with our socks rolled up to keep the malaria mosquitoes off of us and watch the entertainment.

Mr. Cox: The way I understand it, the veterans, such as yourself, really think a lot of Bob Hope. He put out a lot just to entertain you guys, didn't he?

Mr. Gill: I understand he even crashed out there in the sea somewhere and lost all his gear. But he still could entertain.

Mr. Cox: Once you staged there, then where did you proceed from there?

Mr. Gill: Well, I stayed on Pavuvu for about a month and a half. It was K-4-11, which was the First Marine Artillery. They wanted me to do some artillery shooting and I told them, that was fine, but I was really anti-aircraft machine gunner. So they sent me and some more Marines from the Third Defense Battalion down to Guadalcanal.

Of course, Guadalcanal was secured by then. But it was restaging area. I went from the Third Defense Battalion into the Fourth Defense Battalion. We stayed down there several months. From there we transferred to Guam. When we got to Guam, they told us we were going to Japan. We needed to get polar greases for the anti-aircraft machine guns. I thought well that really sounds great.

Mr. Cox: You said "polar greases"? Like p-o-l-a-r?

Mr. Gill: The climate is so cold out there that our guns could malfunction due to lack of lubrication because we needed a lighter grease.

Mr. Cox: So about this time, you had learned that was the next objective then. The invasion of the homeland of Japan.

Mr. Gill: Right. So from Guam we went to Tinian. And we went upon General Curtis LeMay's airstrip where he was flying out those bombers every night to Tokyo. He was fire-bombing Tokyo from these islands which lasted a good while. I think they lost about 3300 men over that area in Japan by bombing. And of course, when they dropped the Atomic Bomb, it was one of the happiest day of our lives down there. The Marines stole a little whiskey on the island and raised hell as they were celebrating.

Mr. Cox: So they dropped the Atomic Bomb. And they dropped both of them. And you as many ex-military men thanked Harry Truman for the hard decision he had to make.

Mr. Gill: Colonel Tibbets and General Sweeney, both of them at that time.

Mr. Cox: As you well know, some revisionists are trying to make us the bad guys in whole war and it is people like you that will say differently. We were not the bad guy involved. We didn't start it, but we finished it.

Mr. Gill: A lot of those people don't love their country if they feel that way.

Mr. Cox: Well, once armistice was called, what did you do then? Did you proceed to Japan...

Mr. Gill: No, I didn't want to go to Japan. We stayed on Tinian for a while and then I was transferred back to the states.

While we were on Tinian, there was a real typhoon down there. It even sank some of the ships offshore. It was a really a terrible storm. It blew all our tents down and everything. After that, we finally got aboard ship and I went back to San Diego. Since I was in the regular Marine Corps, I had to finish my enlistment, so I went to Barstow, California, which is a supply depot. We hauled everything. Even shipped barbed wire to Castro, I think.

Mr. Cox: Now when you were discharged, Truman, what was your rank then?

Mr. Gill: I was still a Corporal.

Mr. Cox: Of the two duties that you had, being a sea-going marine or a land-going marine, which would you prefer to be?

Mr. Gill: Well, I believe I would go back to sea again.

Mr. Cox: And why do you say that?

Mr. Gill: We had better food and if you didn't get blown up you had better living conditions all around. So everything is a risk over there, so that's the way I would go.

Mr. Cox: You might as well live in a little bit of luxury if you are going to have the risk, right?

Mr. Gill: Right.

Mr. Cox: Once you got back, you got your discharge. Is that correct?

Mr. Gill: Yes. I was discharged out of Barstow, California, April 2, 1946.

Mr. Cox: Before we finish this interview Truman, can you tell me a little bit your friend, Paul Edward Adams that used atrabrine to get out of inspection.

Mr. Gill: We took atrabrine to prevent malaria which worked real good. Paul had some atrabrine tablets for malaria and he mixed it up with a little water in a canteen cup and said he was going to get out of rifle inspection. So he smeared it on his face and his arms and his hands and said "wail till that stupid Lieutenant comes by. He'll say, 'put that man in the sick bay.'"

Mr. Cox: Did it turn him yellow?

Mr. Gill: Yes it turned him yellow. So he was down there laughing so hard because the Lieutenant said "put that man in the sick bay."

Mr. Cox: Well you had to do something like that every once in awhile just to kind of keep the morale up. Do you recall any other humorous incidents while you were in?

Mr. Gill: Well, I don't know. The British told us to leave things like we found them when were leaving the Canal. So we got bull dozers and pushed over all of the buildings we had built. We put about 50 gallons of aviation gasoline in the outhouse and made them look like volcanoes.

Mr. Cox: I understand that the Marines were really good at midnight requisitions. Do you remember any.....

Mr. Gill: We figured that anything that belonged to the United States belonged to us. Anything the Army had was fair game.

Mr. Cox: But what you guys had belonged to you. Right?

Mr. Gill: Yes.

Mr. Cox: Well, Truman, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for doing this interview with us. This will be an important addition to the archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War in the Center for the Pacific War Studies. I have certainly enjoyed the visit with you.

Transcribed by Becky Lindig
Nimitz Volunteer
January, 2002