

*National Museum of the Pacific War*

*Nimitz Education and Research Center*

*Fredericksburg, Texas*

Interview with

**Mr. A. W. McCasker**

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Interview with Mr. A. W. McCasker**

Interview in progress.

Interviewer: Go ahead and start off now, alright?

Mr. McCasker: Okay. This coastwatching business was quite a peculiar thing. A lot of different people got into to...for different reasons. Most of the people concerned would be planters, people that lived in the islands most of their lives and knew the country...the natives...and had all kinds of natural advantages. I was a different kind altogether; I was a very young man who had never been out of Australia in his life. I happened to be in the Navy and I happened to be on New Caledonia in early '42 was a liaison officer with the Free French when things started moving up north. So I was...just about north...first of all the New Hebrides...that's where I...that's where the American troops. And then eventually when they were looking for some (unintelligible) to...take things a bit further in the Solomons, for some reason that I'm not aware of I was asked to volunteer and I did. So I found myself with the American 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division on Guadalcanal in the early days and I formed an impression of that unit which lasted me all my days, they were magnificent troops, the best I've ever seen...and they were pretty tough guys.

From there I took a small party up north to...from Java...sometimes called Lord Howe Island...there were about three of those in the Pacific, but this is one of them. It's about...oh; I'd say about two hundred and fifty miles north of Guadalcanal.

I had at that time with...well behind Japanese lines. At that time we were well into the Japanese sphere of influence...they had occupied the place and took their fancy flag boy with them...had abandoned it with...right on the direct line of sight between Truk, where the Japanese were thought to be mounting a counter attack on the Americans in the Solomons. And it was thought that if we put a post there we might be able to observe their reconnaissance and perhaps their hits in the event of their mounting a counter attack.

So I...I arrived there towards the end of 1942 accompanied by two American soldiers whose names were Robbins...Pfc Robbins and Pfc Gillette...one was an aide man and the other was basically a radio mechanic. A local (unintelligible) Javanese that I picked up in the New Hebrides...who was our guide, philosopher and friend...his name is Catera (sp?) and he was related to the, oh, a character who called himself the king of the group...and he was very kingly character and just enormous girth of his and three wives...and the object of that harem while I was there.

But we arrived there in early... sorry, late '42. Now (unintelligible) Java is an odd sort of place. It really conforms more to the average idea of a tropical paradise...a remote place as you will see in the Pacific. It's...it's an atoll; it comprises maybe five or six hundred very small islands with a few larger ones thrown in. Its dead flat; coconut trees and (unintelligible) with a wreath surrounding it from which the Pacific surf roars and it roars in itself very different ways. The natives have learned over the years to pinpoint where they are in the lagoon at night by the sound of the surf. And after I'd been there a few months, I found that I could do it too...so that...a particular hissing sound in the surf would tell you that you were such and such a distance from the reef and such and such a point from the booming noise of the different characteristics would...it would tell you the same story about another place.

And the natives, they...they're attractive Polynesians – very light skinned people; very well built. Some of them are almost film star proportions...lived basically on (unintelligible)...from the lagoon and the sea from their small dugout canoes and on coconuts and a few vegetables that they grew and some (unintelligible). They are a charming people and spoke one variant of the Polynesian language which is spoken all over the Pacific and I was able to learn this dialect fairly recently...when...time I was there. These were the people.

When we arrived in our PBY from Lunga and Guadalcanal, we were greeted by the king and his half dozen police boys and he ceremoniously handed over the defense of his realm to us and formally declared war on the Japanese. It was quite an impressive ceremony. We there found all of these police boys to go out and collected all the Japanese flags that were still hanging in the place which they didn't (unintelligible) them. In fact I had been preceded there, I often tell this, to prepare the way by another coast watcher very much greater renown than myself...called Horton...Dick Horton had been sent in there two or three days before to prepare the way. He had already collected a large number of these flags. However, I came in with my group on the PBY and he left on the same PBY and left me to it.

So that's more or less what it was like. We had a heavy radio (unintelligible) is what we would call with a pretty good broad range. We were able to reach three and four hundred miles without great difficulty. The problem was that the batteries required two heavy-duty batteries and they...and the large and heavy chargers...that required about twelve natives to move the whole thing around. Later on in the...in the war, this was replaced by a small aircraft, called an APR-4A,(unintelligible) and could be moved around really by one man. So we had to cope with that.

So we settled down there and there we stayed for something like nine months and moving from island to island observing aircraft. We were...we did

observe a large number of Japanese aircraft over a period. We didn't see any Japanese ships. But Japanese aircraft kept on...flying over and reconnoitering the group...but...at very low altitude. And when...guys with a little bit of bombing around the place...I imagine they knew that there was someone there and they were looking for us, but they never managed to land their bombs in the right place. They also did a little bit of strafing at the boat that I had been operating, but fortunately I wasn't on it at the time.

Well we reported all these movements, of course, at our headquarters at Guadalcanal, and I had called part of the (unintelligible) at headquarters there with building up of...about Japanese movement and (unintelligible). There was a close American association in this particular instance, not only because I took two American soldiers with me...in the first place...one of whom stayed three months and the who other stayed...six...and before they were recalled to their units. But...because when we arrived, we observed an American Catalina...a PBY...had been practically chopped down close to the beach where we landed, and the remains of those PBY were there. And Horton had to move the wireless equipment from...the PBY. And that...took it back with him when he returned. But two or three of the crew had been killed. The PBY had been strafed by, I believe, something like six Japanese Zero float planes. And I think that about two of the Japanese planes were shot down, too. But the...the Zero was destroyed and two of the crew were killed and were buried on the island...in the...(unintelligible) islands we called

(unintelligible). I...I actually had the graves of these people fixed up and with a headstone...and I'm trying very hard to remember their names. I think one of them was a lieutenant called Clark (sp?), but I'm not sure and I haven't any record left, but it was all reported to the Marine authorities at Guadalcanal and they would know all about it.

But we continued to be serviced there by American planes to drop off the occasional mail and they dropped a box of cigarettes which lead to one or two somewhat amusing incidents because they had developed a technique of dropping the cans of cigarettes in the...in the water close to the beach from a low altitude. And this was quite practicable and they'd been doing this for some time when we received our first invitation from a Japanese aircraft (unintelligible). When it appeared, the natives dropped down into the water expecting it to ride in on the waves. Indeed we confirmed that when they saw shiny things popping up...Japanese aircraft which turned out to be something rather different from cigarettes. Fortunately none of them were...was at all wounded by all of this and they rapidly learned after that the difference between Japanese and American aircraft...not by appearance or by the insignia, but by the noise. The sound was quite distinct; the Japanese planes had, by and large, didn't have synchronized engines. It was capable of, it was quite possible to tell who was coming in the distance.

But this business of aircraft recognition indeed was very important because, as you can imagine, on...pretty heavy on fans there...not much happening for maybe weeks on end and then all hell breaking loose. So I'd taken the...got into the habit of going fishing with the natives in their canoes. The difficulty about this was, of course, was that the Japs didn't shoot up the local people...at least not very often...because they relied upon them to look after their aviators when they were shot down. But if they saw white faces in the canoe then could have been quite disastrous. So my boys used to listen to the aircraft and when I heard the unsynchronized engines of the Japanese planes, they used to tell me to get down in the bottom of the canoe in the bilge water and all their dirty feet and they put a mat over me until the airplanes disappeared. And this way I was able to get on for...quite a lot of good fishing. But unfortunately on one occasion an American aircraft came over and we all stood up and waved to it, which was quite alright and the pilot went back and reported that he'd seen me doing all these things and I got in a good deal of trouble for taking unnecessary risks! So I had to explain to the captain at headquarters there who was no real risk at all really...that I...it wasn't...somewhat uncomfortable and always rather smelly. Well this was before the thing that went on...on this particular station. It wasn't the most spectacular of stations at all and I...I've no stories of daring-do to tell such as you'd get from Paul Mason or Jack Reed (sp?) or Snowy Rhodes or some of the real heroes of this business. Mine was a bit staid, but we were isolated and, it was very little escape for us if we got caught because we were on a...a



small island in this group about a hundred yards wide, I suppose, and about three hundred yards long separated from everything else by water or by a reef...so that we...we would have found it very difficult indeed to get away. Fortunately the Japs didn't...land...get a ship in or land any forces there until somehow's after we got out...towards the end of August in 1943.

So, that was not all that much more to tell. That's sort of, you know one man's ...the summary of one man's part in all this.

Interviewer: How do you think that...that they got onto you in the...in the latter part of 1943? In other words why do you...you reckon that your departure was so closely related with the...?

Mr. McCasker: Well, they'd obviously observed us. They obviously knew we were there...probably from picking up our radio signals because most of it was in the clear. And the codes that we used in the...we did use codes...were very simple...(unintelligible) codes and things of that sort. Well we knew that they spotted us because the day before we got out, they had...sort of tree level reckies (reconnaissance flights) about four or five times a day. I shouldn't say that they spotted us; they knew we were there and they were looking for us, but they didn't find us exactly. And the day we did get out in the PBY, the following day was rather difficult. The PBY came in to get us was chased off by a Jap plane and we were sitting in the middle of the lagoon...in our canoe...waiting to get aboard and we had to scramble ashore from there expecting to be shot up at any tick of the clock. Fortunately the PBY came in

again about three or four hours later escorted by two fortresses  
and...they...they were able to keep the thing clear while we hopped into the  
PBW and...and flew back.

I might have mentioned one interesting thing which this reminds me of. Oh,  
about three months before we'd finished there, my police boys that...whom  
I'd recruited on the islands...I said that I'd taken over the chief of the king's  
defense forces and carrying back into camp with two strange women in tow.  
When I say strange, I...I mean...they didn't belong to the group and they  
were very much darker natives...people...and no one knew where they'd  
come from. Indeed, they'd been hiding in ...in the bush on one of the islands  
and rather afraid of what might happen to them if they were caught...and my  
police boys had picked them up and brought them in. they were in quite good  
shape...I know they weren't terribly ...how we say...well-clothed and...but  
after we'd...no one could speak their language, so we left them with the old  
king and his three wives to see if we could find out where they'd come from.  
And I, myself, was very worried because the Japanese had the habit  
of...getting these native women and shipping them around to places and  
abandoning them and it might well have been that they'd come from some  
Japanese nearby. Indeed this was not the case. We eventually managed to  
find out from them that they'd been going in a canoe to a wedding feast in the  
Santa Cruz Islands...something like seven, eight hundred miles to the south,  
and they'd been blown away and they'd drifted on the currents for something

like a fort night. They were living on the coconuts that they had in the canoe and some fish they managed to catch and rain water until they had fetched up on one of the outlying group islands of the (unintelligible) when some...they eventually were discovered and brought in. We looked after them for about three months; I reported their presence. But they did at the time, they had (unintelligible) difficulty because the PBY was coming to get us, that was shot at the previous time...it was now being escorted in by the fortresses was sitting on the water...rather nervously, I can imagine. The captain was out on the wing jumping up and down ordering us to hurry up and get aboard...and the thing...we were hurrying up as best we could. He wasn't at all amused when he said...in somewhat sarcastic tone, "Well is that all?" I said, "No, I'm afraid not, hang on a minute there are two women to get here." "Where are they?!" says he. I said, "They're ashore still saying goodbye to their boyfriends." So, we had to have these women aboard, and take them back to their own particular brand of civilization.

When I got back to LuaLua (sp?), which, by that time...uh, sorry, to Lunga in Guadalcanal which by that time was almost civilized at any rate to the extent that the British administration had returned and was beginning to assert their authority all over the place and...and I walked into the district office accompanied by these two...semi-clad native women. I'm afraid I was greeted with considerable suspicion and had to explain myself. However, that all ended quite well and they were eventually flown back to their homeland in

Santa Cruz. As I recall, the only thing I could understand was one of them...and had to say was she was married to an American called Johnny. I don't know whether you believe that...(laughter)

Interviewer: Johnny will be happy to hear that.

Mr. McCasker: (unintelligible)

Interviewer: ...I'd say Johnny was in the same...

(tape interruption)

Mr. McCasker: I...was a very young and newly married man at that time. I was only the...around about twenty-two when all these things were happening. When I got to...back to Guadalcanal, there was an Australian news reporter there whose name I have now forgotten. Perhaps it is just as well because I spent quite a few years after...trying to catch up with him in order to do him serious damage. He...he got onto this story about the two native women that I picked up and low and behold when I got back to Australia after some leave, one of the...the most common...the...the...one of the Australian women's newspapers highest publications...country... called The Woman's Weekly had got onto it and there was a full page spread...not mentioning any names but describing certain persons project knowledgeable to most people in the Navy and most of my friends, which described me as I recall, "A callow sub-lieutenant starting the ignoble beginnings of a beard and thumbing through king's regulations and admiralty instructions which were the bible of the Navy in those days to see if there were some sections that dealt with...and with an appetite for native women. And there was a full page of this together with a

sketch...and the women were variously described as Dorothy Lamours and Hedy Lamarrs. Well this didn't quite correspond to my recollection, but it still made a good story...except that I had, again, a little bit of explaining to do...innocent...and all as I had seemed. And it was regard to something...in fact, I spent three years trying to find that chap to punch him on the nose and I never caught up with him! (laughter)

Interviewer: I'm sure he's still in the business somewhere. (laughter) Yeah, that's a good thought.

Mr. McCasker: Well it's not any (unintelligible)...

Interviewer: Did you?

(taping abruptly ends)

**FINAL** copy  
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