

ADMIRAL NIMITZ NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF THE PACIFIC WAR
Fredericksburg, Texas

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ART RANKIN

U. S. NAVY

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MR. PRATT: I am Rick Pratt. Today is October 19, 2001. I am interviewing Mr. Art Rankin. This interview is taking place in the Woodfield Suites, downtown San Antonio, Texas. The interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War Center for War Studies for the preservation of Historical Information related to World War II.

Mr. Rankin, thank you very much for taking the time to relate your experiences that you underwent during World War II. To start with, state your name and where and when you were born.

MR. RANKIN: My name is Arthur Louis Rankin, Jr.. I was born in 1924 in Galveston, Texas.

MR. PRATT: Who were your parents?

MR. RANKIN: My mother's name was Marie Musick. My father was Arthur Louis Rankin, Sr.

MR. PRATT: Where were they from?

MR. RANKIN: They were from Galveston.

MR. PRATT: How about brothers and sisters?

MR. RANKIN: I have a sister, who is older than I am. Her name is Ada.

MR. PRATT: Where did you go to school?

MR. RANKIN: I went to elementary, junior high and high school in Galveston, Texas.

MR. PRATT: Did you enter the military in Galveston?

MR. RANKIN: I graduated from Ball High School and went right into the Navy.

MR. PRATT: Why did you choose the Navy?

MR. RANKIN: Because the recruiter there said that I could probably get on a destroyer and I would be doing convoy duty. I would be running over to England; I would get 30 days leaves in England; I would come back to the states to Galveston and get another 30 days leave; I would

have a dry place to stay and three good square meals a day. I said, "That sounds good to me."

MR. PRATT: Did you ever see any of that?

MR. RANKIN: No, I sure didn't. Thirteen of us were sworn into the Navy together. All guys from high school. One poor guy went to Virginia to boot camp. Twelve of them went to the Corpus Christi Naval Air station and spent the whole war there. I'll give you one guess who went to Virginia.

MR. PRATT: Camp Perry?

MR. RANKIN: Right.

MR. PRATT: So you started your training at Camp Perry. Tell us about Camp Perry.

MR. RANKIN: Camp Perry was something new and different. We were isolated, of course, you have to be when you first go in. When we got in there, the first thing they did was take all of our clothes off and painted a big Mercurochrome number on our chest and shaved all the hair off. Then we got a physical.

The last thing that I remember on the physical, we had to see the psychiatrist. This guy made us sit on a little cold metal stool without any clothes and he would ask us questions like: "Do you like girls?" "If you were on a tropical island by yourself, with just your sister, how long would it be before you had sex with her?" That was the last interview you had to go through.

Then we went into a barracks. Everybody was green as grass. We didn't know anyone. That is where you started meeting up with the guys and you become buddies. I buddied up with a fellow named John Reid, who came from Mississippi. He had a heavy southern accent, in fact, most people couldn't understand him when he talked. I had to interpret for him. Reid and I were buddies and we stayed together until we landed on Green Island.

He came down with rheumatic fever. He was shipped back to Guadalcanal to the hospital there. Then went back to New Zealand to a hospital there. He ended up at Balboa Park Naval Hospital in San Diego. I saw him when I came back from overseas. I hitch-hiked down there and saw him. He was still in the hospital. That is the last time I saw him.

MR. PRATT: I remember from a couple of previous interviews, fellows saying they trained at Camp Perry. They went to Camp Parks?

MR. RANKIN: No, I didn't go to Camp Parks,. The battalion was formed before I got into it. We came in as replacements in California. The battalion went from Camp Perry up to Endicott; from Endicott to Parks; from Parks down to Port Hueneme. Reid and I went from Camp Perry across country to Camp Russo at Hueneme. We joined the battalion there.

MR. PRATT: What date was that?

MR. RANKIN: We joined the battalion in August, 1943.. Then we shipped out on October 14th. Or 16th.. to go overseas. We were on board a ship called the USS Perida. It had a free French crew, a Dutch captain and an Army gun crew on the back of the ship..

The ship was really noted for its famous food. They would serve you little hard boiled eggs and a lot of the time when you broke the egg open, there was a little chicken inside. A strange thing happened to me when I was in a barracks waiting to be discharged.

After the war was over and I came back and was discharged in Camp Wallace, Texas. It had been an old Army anti-aircraft base and they changed it over to a Prisoner of War Camp, then they made it a Navy Separation Center. While I was lying there in my sack, I heard these guys talking. This guy said, "Man, the ship we went over on was the worst food in the world. They had little unhatched eggs there." I said, "I bet you a buck I can give you the name of that ship." The guy looked at me and said, "I've never seen you before. What is it?" I said, "Perida." He came over and handed me a dollar.

We had one incident that happened just before we shipped out. We were secured in a place called Splinter City and you were supposed to stay there. But we decided that we would go over to the ship service our last night there, pool our money and drink the 3.2 beer. We had one fellow named Lambos, who procured a truck for us. I guess you know what procured means. We went over to Camp Russo and drank the beer. When they closed up, we went out to get into the truck. There were guys from all over. We were carrying everybody back with us. Lambos was driving. Some guy ran to get on the truck while Lambos was backing up and he fell down.. Lambos ran over his leg and broke it. The next days, when we were boarding ship, we hid Lambos in the life boat because the Shore Patrol came down there and they were looking for him as we pulled away. Afterwards, Lambos got a letter from the guy, thanking him because he got a medical discharge and didn't have to go overseas

It took us about 30 days to get over. While we were going over there, we had a report of a sub tracking us. This old Dutch captain was pretty crafty, sharp. He would run and find a fog bank and we would lose it for a while.. Then all of a sudden the sub was trying to stalk us again. We finally ran away from it. We pulled into a place called Noumea, New Caledonia.

We were laying out the anchor when three ammunition ships blew up. They blew sky-high. I remember one ship was there and they were bringing her out. She was on fire. She was loaded with munitions. That ship was warped from the force of the other ships blowing up. You could feel the heat from her. I remember seeing a man with an axe on top of the hatch, trying to chop a hole through it. It was smoking – they wanted to get hoses down there to wet the ammo down to keep it from blowing. We held our breaths as that thing went by and you could feel the heat from that ship. They took it out of the port area. I don't know if it ever blew.

Then they pulled us in for details to go up into the hills there to try to find identification and parts of bodies of the guys from the ships that blew. After we left that, we went up to Russell Island, right off Guadalcanal.

I remember going in and seeing this jungle growing thick. A P-38 dove down on our ship and came down and leveled out and flew along and took off. I looked at Reid, and said, "Reid, I'm not going to like this." He said that it looked like a green hell. I said, "That is exactly what it is going to be."

While we were on Russell Island, it was the first Christmas Eve away from home.

MR. PRATT: This would be Christmas of 1943.

MR. RANKIN: Yes. A bunch of my tentmates were sitting around with long faces. We were down-hearted and a little bit homesick. A good buddy of mine, Atwater, said, "Just hang loose. I'm going to get something." He took off. We didn't know where he was going.

He came back in about 45 minutes with store-bought whiskey. We started drinking whiskey and bringing in Christmas Eve. Everybody got happy. Finally, we asked Atwater where he got the whiskey. He said, "I stole it from the officers' liquor supply."

Also, while we were there, we had a fellow called Wildcat Reagan. His nickname was Wildcat. He was a BAR man. Wildcat had had a few drinks and someone bet him that he couldn't chop a coconut tree down with his BAR. He showed us he could do that. That barrel was red hot. When he blazed away with it, everybody thought the Japs were trying to come in.. Everybody came running, ready for a Jap fight.

We made it through that ok. They shipped us out the next day.

MR. PRATT: You all had caused enough trouble by then.

MR. RANKIN: Right. That is when we went to Green Island. Really, I don't remember that much about Green Island, to be truthful with you. I had a real choice assignment on Green Island. I had sort of messed up a little bit, as you do not back talk to anybody. If you do you pay the penalty. They gave me a choice assignment on the sanitation engineers. Which is the old garbage detail.

I remembered I pulled six months on that garbage detail. When we went into the chow hall, nobody would sit by you. You were avoided. After I got through with the garbage detail, the next thing, I was put on Mess Cook Duty. I pulled three months on that. Had a good supervisor named Tony Braun. He taught me a lot about preparing food.

After that, they had me doing different things. I went in as an Apprentice Seaman and I was a Seaman 1st. Class by that time I was overseas. I really didn't have any trade. I had come straight out of high school. Didn't know anything. Green as the grass.

Then we left Green Island, we loaded up and hit Hollandia. I remember going into Hollandia. Somebody got hold of some GI beer from somewhere. We had a beer bust on the beach there at Hollandia. All of a sudden these natives came down, we saw them and it scared the hell out of us.

They had red hair, blonde hair, etc.. They really looked wild. I found out later that most of those guys were cannibals. They actually ate people.

They had a big bun on the back of their hair. We found out the reason for that was their enemies would slip up and try to bash them in the back of the head and the bun would cushion the blow.

Then we went into the Philippines and I remember.....

MR> PRATT: What part of the Philippines?

MR. RANKIN: First, we pulled into Leyte Gulf. It was the invasion. Scary as all hell.

MR. PRATT: Was that during the Battle for Leyte Gulf?

MR. RANKIN: Well, I don't know if that battle was on. It was the invasion, when we went in. We went down the nets, got in the landing craft, taking off, doing figure 8's waiting for everybody to get off the ship. I looked up ahead and they had laid a curtain of shells down out in the water. The water was gushing up about 50 feet in the air. I thought that we were never going to make it through that stuff. That shrapnel would just tear us to pieces. So I told all the guys in the boat to loosen up the packs and if we got hit to get rid of the pack, but keep the ammo belt, knife and weapon and try to swim to shore. As we all lined up ready to go, they called us all back to the ship. When we got back to the ship, the ships crew didn't want us on board. We boarded the ship anyway.

Then they took us across and dropped us on Samar at a little place called San Antonio. It was in San Antonio where there was a hill right behind us. The Japs could fly down the valley, come up over that hill and hit the ships out in the bay. Normally they would try to do this at night. Lambos and I were assigned to go up on this hill and find out what was going on. They gave us two Philipinos as guides. So we felt they should know the country. The day we were supposed to go up there, I heard these two young kids ride up on stick horses thinking they were cowboys. They were our guides. Their names were Sidro and Sigamundo. I never forgot their names. They had seen a lot of cowboy movies and the minute they found out I was from Texas, they wanted to see me shoot. They just knew I was a cowboy.

So we went out to climb up the hill. We got on top and found an observation place where some of the people working with the Japs had been sitting up there giving the information to the planes so they could come in and hit us. We destroyed the radio equipment they had there. When we started down, a sniper was taking pot shots at us. There was a little stream that ran down the side of the hill. We hit that stream and we came down on our bellies in that stream. With Sidro and Sigamundo constantly saying, "Rankin, Rankin, you're from Texas. Shoot him, shoot him." I said, "Shoot him, hell I don't know where he is!"

A little bit later in the Philippines, we had people coming by and trading stuff: bananas, pineapples, etc.. They were trading clothes because the Japs had taken all their clothes away from them. One guy came in there and I had a jacket that was too big for me. A tent-mate of mine had a pair of pants that he didn't want because they were too big also. So we traded my jacket and a

pair of pants for a stalk of bananas. My jacket had my name stenciled across the back and on the seat of the pants was the name of my tent-mate. Three days later they caught this guy we got the bananas from; he was a fifth columnist working with the Japanese. When they brought him in, he had on these fatigues with our names on them.

We were in San Antonio, and a decision was made to move the battalion down to Guiuan to build a strip. After we started building the airstrip they took 60 of us from our outfit and three other outfits, the 64th, the 105th, and, I think, the 95th, for a special assignment. They took us back up the coast to a place called Balangiga. We set up a saw mill there. We cut lumber. While we were there, the natives started telling us that during the Spanish American War this was the spot where a bunch of American soldiers were massacred. They took some of them and buried them with the head showing. Put sugar water on the head and let the ants eat out the eyes. Of course, that sort of ticked us off that they would tell us this. To get back at them, we would go into town to drink a little distilled liquid called distilled tuba, come back and take pot shots at them. They would run screaming, but they never turn us in. (We had not tried to hit them, only wanting to scare them.)

I was stuck at the saw mill which was up on the hill on guard duty one night. From the hill you went down to a level place and then you went into a pretty thick jungle. I was down from the hill by the edge of the jungle. There was a little cemetery sitting off on the side that the natives had put there. I guess it must have been about 1:30 A. M., because I went on at midnight. I heard something coming up. The first thing that jumps in your mind is a Jap coming. So I was all ready. I had this carbine and I had a little black-out flashlight. I was scared half to death.

All of a sudden, I realized that something was digging a hole. I could hear dirt hitting the ground. I heard a crunching noise and wondered what was going on. Now I was really scared. I slipped over, real quiet, just like I was walking on eggs. I flipped that little light on. There was a pack of wild dogs that dug up some of the bodies and they were eating on the bones. I got sick. It caused me nightmares about this for a long time.

After we pulled our stretch in the saw mill, we got back to the battalion and found out we had a new president: President Harry Truman.

MR. PRATT: What were you using the material from the saw mill for?

MR. RANKIN: We were cutting all different kinds of wood: mahogany, ebony, and there was a white wood. I never did know the name of it. The Philipinos said that they called it a false ebony. You could bury it in the mud and let it sit there for six months. When they dug it out of the mud it looked just like ebony. It had taken on the black color and the texture of ebony. We needed wood and lumber, so we were cutting the lumber.

MR. PRATT: Were you using it for your construction?

MR. RANKIN: Yes. Everything. American service personnel came up in barges and we would load them up. To be able to load the barges we built a little platform over the river. We were

inland about three miles. The town of Balingiga was down the river a bit. We built a platform so you could run up and put a Crane on it and pick up the lumber and load it on to the barges. The first load of lumber we lifted was too heavy. The crane almost went overboard. The guy kicked it loose and let the load drop. So they finally strapped the Crane down on to it and that worked. The green lumber was very heavy.

My job at that time was oiling on this rig for a guy named Young. He was the operator. Someone decided to open up more area using dynamite. There were some charges that didn't go off. Everybody was scared to mess around with it. Young said that he could get that stuff out. He told the officers that he could get the dynamite out, but he had to do it his way. He did not want any interference. The officers said "Ok". Young called me over and sent me down into the village to get him two bottles of distilled tuba – this stuff was about 151 proof, it was so stout, you could use it for lighter fluid. He was waiting for me when I got back. He took a big drink out of it, handed it to me and said, "take a big drink." I said that I didn't want it, but he insisted I take a big drink. So I did and handed it back to him. He drank that one bottle.

He got up in the cab of the drag line and told me to get behind the rig. He said that he would dig up the dynamite and I would peek and tell him if he had. exploded material or still live sticks of the dynamite. He would take the bucket and drag it back real slowly and finally got every bit of that unexploded dynamite. After it was over, he got the other bottle of whiskey and finished it. I helped him do it because I was still afraid.

MR. PRATT: That was on Samar?

MR. RANKIN: Yes. We had one incident that happened there I have never forgotten about.

We had some replacements that came into the outfit. Because they hadn't had marksmanship training, Head Quarters Company didn't want to let them have a weapon. I said that we could give them the training. We knew what to do. We were not going after Japanese without weapons for the replacements because there were a bunch of Japs running loose up there. Anyway, we got weapons for them. I got to be pretty close buddies with the replacements. One was named Roy Peoples. He came from Alabama.

While we were there we got what was called a "condition black." Japanese troops moving in on us. So we were going to have to go out and stand guard. And Roy, somewhere along the line, had lost one of his clips. We were issued two clips for the carbine. There were 15 rounds in a clip. I had told all the guys to only count on 14 and to "save one for yourself if you don't want to be taken prisoner." So Roy was going up on guard duty with one clip. I gave him one of my clips with the understanding that when he came of guard duty, I got my clip back.

It was misting rain as he headed off to guard duty. All of a sudden we heard this blood curdling yell. We just knew he had his throat cut. But we had a bunch of wild dogs around there and it turned out that a wild dog had slipped up while Roy was hiding and licked him on the back of the neck. Scared the hell out of him so bad, he just screamed. Also scared the hell out of us too.

MR. PRATT: Sounds like you had more problems with the dogs than the Japanese.

MR. RANKIN: We had trouble with both. One time on Samar, in the village of San Antonio a B-24 had been out bombing and was hit. As they came back, they had to bail out. While they were parachuting out, somebody yelled, "Paratroopers, Japs are invading, Japs are invading." They were starting to shoot and running. Of course, most of the guys were more interested to run over there and get a souvenir. A Japanese souvenir. And these guys coming down are Americans.

I talked to one of the guys. He said, "Damn, we go up there, we get shot at by the Japs. We get shot out of the sky and you guys try to murder us." Luckily none of them got hit.

While up in the hills, as we called the high jungle, a group of Philippino guerrillas and some of our guys mixed it up with some Japs. The Philipinos wacked the heads off of two Japs and sliced up two others. We patched up the two wounded ones and sent them back to Guiuan for interrogation. I have never forgotten the looks on the faces of the two live Japs.

MR. RANKIN: I came back on the Barnstable. I started back in October, 1945. I remember we hit a typhoon out at sea. That scared the living daylights out of me. I got back and I went on leave November 23rd. I was to report back on December 23rd. I said, "To hell with that, I was going to have Christmas at home." I had been away too long. My grandfather said I couldn't go AWOL; that wouldn't be right. At that time, my mother happened to go into the hospital on an emergency and the doctor got me a five-day emergency leave.

When I finished that up and reported back, they put across the Bay in Galveston at the little Naval Section Base. I could see my house from there. I stayed there until I got discharged at Camp Wallace.

MR. PRATT: So what was your official rating when you were discharged?

MR. RANKIN: Carpenter's Mate, Third Class.

MR. PRATT: Besides that saw mill at Samar, how much carpentry work did you do?

MR. RANKIN: Very little. Most of the activity I did at the saw mill was on a AC-10 with a Philippino swamper. We would go back in where they cut the trees and would hook on the logs and haul them out. It was dangerous work because the place was full of cobra snakes. We killed one darn big python while hooking up the logs. I did some carpenter work where they had to screen the chow hall to keep the flies and bugs out. The chief that put me in and got me promoted was named Chief Godfrey. The Chief put me in for promotion 15 times and they told him that if he ever did it again, they would bust him down. He was a stubborn little guy. He put me in for a 16th. time and I finally got my promotionn.

MR. PRATT: What was that to?

MR. RANKIN: That was Carpenter's Mate 3rd. from Seaman 1st.. Chief Godfrey was a bachelor and he had a gold mine in Oregon. Working that gold mine was his pride and joy. That is all he wanted to do when he got back He was a really good person, tough, but really good. Didn't smoke. Didn't drink. Didn't cuss. Whenever we would get a ration of beer or cigarettes, he would call me to his tent and lecture me about the evils of drinking and smoking. When he got through he would give me his ration of beer and cigarettes and tell me to take them and divide the beer and cigarettes with the men.

MR. PRATT: When you were discharged, you came back home. Actually, you were back home when you were discharged. What line of work did you get into then?

MR. RANKIN: When I got back, everywhere I went to apply for a job, they kept telling me that I was too old. I was twenty-one years old and I was told employers wanted 18 year-olds to train their way.

MR. PRATT: How old were you then?

MR. RANKIN: I was 21. They wanted young guys. I messed around for a while and took whatever I could get. One job I had was as night watchman. Then I went to work for ADT as a guard operator. I decided I was getting no where. So I took advantage of the GI Bill and went to college. I got my BBA and then went to work – well, I put in 30 years with the State of Texas and retired. I ended up at the old State Board of Control. I was Director of Centralized Services there. After I did that, I moved back to Houston. I felt like I needed to do something, so I went to Houston Baptist University and signed up for courses working toward a Masters. That is where I met my wife and we married in 1989. We both have our Masters' Degrees.

MR. PRATT: What is your most important, the strongest thing you feel you learned or developed or what could you pass on to us now?

MR. RANKIN: The most important thing I have learned in my life was from my children. Just observing them and seeing how they grasp situations and how quickly they learn. And how they can teach you a lot of things, if you just keep quiet and listen. I have learned a lot from them and I learned to put my faith in my Savior, My Lord Jesus Christ. In life, I have been fortunate. I really cannot complain because I guess I was at the right place at the right time. Got the promotions when they came along. Worked hard. Did my best.

There is one incident that happened to me during a fire fight. All hell was breaking out around me. I was scared out of my wits. I prayed to God to save me. It was like some big hand covered me. The noise disappeared and I knew at that moment I would come through the war ok.

MR. PRATT: I want to thank you for taking the time to share your experiences with us.