

*Admiral Nimitz Historic Site
National Museum of the Pacific War*

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Robert Rhodes

(World War II - U.S. Army Air Corps - Pearl Harbor Survivor)

Date of Interview: December 8, 2001

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This is Trudy Harris interviewing Mr. Robert Rhodes for the National Museum of the Pacific War on the 8th of December 2001.

Ms. Harris: Mr. Rhodes, tell me where you were living before you enlisted, what your schooling was, and what you enlisted in, and when.

Mr. Rhodes: At the time, I was living in Lawrence, Long Island, and I was working at a gas station at the time I enlisted. I did that after high school. Times were bad and I wasn't making much money. I got together with a friend of mine, and he said, "Well, let's enlist in the Army. Nothing can be worse than this, and we can go to Hawaii." I said, "Fine, we will do that." So we got together and went into Whitehall Street in New York City, and enlisted. At the time I enlisted it was January 23, 1941, and we were sent to Fort Slocum. We were there a very short time, I believe eleven days; then we were shipped out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We were put on the Troop Ship Republic. We had a rough sea trip. Off of Cape Hatteras I believe half of the ship was sick. We weren't sailors – that is one thing that we weren't. We went on down, through the Panama Canal; it was a long trip. It seemed like it was forever, but I believe it was 18 days. We stopped at Balboa and they took us off the ship, marched us around a little bit, stretch our legs. It was rainy and very wet at that time – very hot. We got back on the ship and proceeded on into the Pacific. It was a interesting, but yet boring at the time. Of course we had a lot of sickness on the ship. In fact, the Captain of the ship died at sea. That was new to us too since we had a burial at sea.

Ms. Harris: What type of illness did the men have?

Mr. Rhodes: Later on we learned it was dysentery. Quite a few of the fellows were sick. We used metal trays for food. They said the soap that they were washed

with caused it, being they were not rinsed properly.

Ms. Harris: The Captain of the ship died of dysentery?

Mr. Rhodes: No, I don't know what he died from. We were just told that he had died.

Ms. Harris: Who would take over the ship after the Captain died?

Mr. Rhodes: I guess the First Mate. I'm not a naval man, but that is what I figure must have happened. Then we finally arrived in Honolulu. We were transported to Schofield Barracks, where we were quarantined because a lot of the fellows were sick.

Ms. Harris: Let me ask you two things. First of all, how old were you when you enlisted?

Mr. Rhodes: I was 19 when I enlisted.

Ms. Harris: You didn't mention basic training. Did they ship you out...

Mr. Rhodes: I'm coming to that now. Basic training was at Schofield Barracks. They sent us there where we got our basic training, and then we were assigned to what outfit we were going to go to. I was assigned to Wheeler Field, the Army Air Corps fighter base to the 696th Ordnance Company, and I was one of the members in that organization. That is where I was at the time of the attack. We had a lot of damage. What was left serviceable of the P-40's were made up and put together from other planes. Most of the planes had been badly damaged. I recall the first reinforcements we received from Louisiana about March 1942. They were P-40's that were on maneuvers and had all different markings on them.

Ms. Harris: Can we back up a little bit, and tell me what you remember on the day of Pearl Harbor – where you were...

Mr. Rhodes: Oh, like it was yesterday. I saw the movie "Pearl Harbor" and, of course, that was exaggerated. That was Hollywood. We did not have the fire power at all. Anyway, the day of the attack... Well, let me tell you previous to the attack, we were on alert.

Ms. Harris: You were?

Mr. Rhodes: Oh yes. We were on alert, and we were ready at all times. In fact, prior to December 7th, December 5th our planes were dispersed all around the field in bunkers. We were at alert, planes were loaded with ammunition and ready to go. Friday night, December 5th, the planes were all pulled in on the hangar line, wing tip to wing tip. Saturday morning, December 6th, we stood a parade inspection on the hangar line with General Davidson commanding. Then the alert was called off and two buddies of mine, which I buddied with from the time I went in the service, Guy Hand and David Fessler, both Pennsylvania boys, and we all got a three-day pass. It was the first pass we had in weeks because we couldn't leave the base. We left our barracks, which were wooden barracks on the west end of Wheeler Field. We had a Mess Hall but decided to eat at the Air Base Mess Hall, which was right off the hangar line about 100 yards. It was a three-story concrete building and that is where we went to have our breakfast, then get the taxi at the gate. It was about a half a mile back over to our barracks. We were up early because we were going to Honolulu on a 3-day pass. We were going to have our breakfast first, and then we were going to catch the cab to take us to Honolulu. I believe that it was 50 cents a person to Honolulu. We had our trays and were walking to the tables and just getting ready to set our trays down, and we heard a plane in a dive. This was the first dive bomber. We knew that something was wrong. We knew that our maneuvers were over and we were on sabotage alert. During the maneuvers the Navy planes would drop flour sacks. They were playing games to see how alert we were. This was between the Air Corps and the Navy. We sat our trays down and went to the large windows, looked out, and saw the first plane with that red circle on the fuselage. He had not released the bomb yet. He was just coming into dive, and then we saw him release the bomb in seconds as we got to the window. It hit right in the middle of a bunch of P-40's, and they went up in smoke and flames. At the same time we all hollered, "It's the Japs, let's go!" We took off. We had

to get out of that building. We had nothing – nothing but our dress uniforms, our khakis on, and were heading for Honolulu. I would say that there were 20 or 30 fellows in the Mess Hall having breakfast. We made our way out of the Mess Hall and started heading for our barracks. It was the only place we could go to get our guns and gas masks, which we always had. Maybe one or two minutes out of the building, Dave and I were running together, and Guy was behind us that caught a 7.7 in the shoulder. It wasn't that bad. We were headed to the barracks, but in the meantime these dive bombers were flying over with the rear gunners shooting us at will at tree-top level. You could see their faces smiling. We could have hit them with rocks if we had had any. There was not a thing we could do about it. The only cover we took was under the palm trees and the cars as we went down to our barracks. It seemed like forever since we couldn't make any time because every time a plane would come over it would start strafing. After the dive bombers came in the fighters came in. They were causing havoc with their 20mm cannon and their 7.7 machine guns. You couldn't make too many moves and it took us a long time to get back to the barracks. We got Guy to the medics and got him taken care of. When we got to the barracks we were able to get guns. We got our rifles and our gas masks. Everybody was stunned. They didn't know what was happening. The field was full of black smoke. That was all you could see of the field. We didn't know what was happening. We had no communications; nobody knew anything, nobody could tell you anything. We started getting our stuff together. By that time it was over. I would estimate it was 25 minutes before the dive bombers and fighters used up all of their ammunition and went on. From that point we started getting ready and we were anticipating an invasion. We figured there would be a follow-up coming in. We knew that Pearl Harbor was devastated and we knew that Hickam Field was hit hard. We knew it. We knew it was going to happen from June of '41. President Franklin Roosevelt was over there in the

summer of '41, and we stood parade inspection for him. He gave a radio speech that night, which we listened to. I think they all knew at that time. Of course we were at odds with Japan because of the embargo. They didn't like what we were doing. We had them pretty "bottlenecked" for oil.

Ms. Harris: How far from Pearl Harbor was your field?

Mr. Rhodes: Wheeler Field is inland. I don't know what the mileage is – perhaps 8-10 miles.

Ms. Harris: How many of your planes were destroyed or damaged?

Mr. Rhodes: I think we had about 90 planes at Wheeler at that time. I would say two-thirds were destroyed and the others were damaged. We had a squadron at Bellows Field, which is on the other side of the island. I don't think the planes there were damaged much. Of course, I wasn't there, but I understand that they were not hit very hard. I think that the Japanese didn't cover them that much. They figured that they weren't going to do much damage. The rest of that day all we did was getting ready – prepared. Also, as we were heading back to our barracks, there were quarters for the officers and the families, and we warned them as we went down. They all came out wondering what was happening. We told them to get back and take cover because it was a real Japanese attack. The people didn't know what had happened, especially the civilians (the women and the children) that were living in the quarters for the servicemen. I recall that evening all of the women and children were rounded up. We formed a convoy. I was in that convoy with heavy weapons and we took the convoy to Honolulu. All of the civilians were taken off the base because in the event of another attack. From then we just went on and prepared. We waited and went day by day, and started building up. That is the story of my day, December 7th. I recall it very vividly.

Ms. Harris: I am sure you do. What then did you do after Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Rhodes: After Pearl Harbor we started to get new pilots just out of flight school in

the States. Late 1942 the 696th was disbanded and all 65 men in the Company were split up and assigned to Fighter Squadrons. Capt Johannsen, our Commanding Officer, along with Capt Overstreet, his Adjutant, were assigned to Headquarters, 7th Fighter Command, Fort Shafter. At that Time Capt Johannsen was promoted to Major and Ordnance Officer on General Davidson's Staff. I was also assigned to Headquarters Squadron, 7th Fighter Command to work under the supervision of Capt Overstreet. Later I was put on detached service to Hickam Field to set up an Ordnance Maintenance Shop in a hangar to receive our armaments coming in from the States. We degreased and serviced them and got them ready for all the new airplanes we were receiving from the States – unarmed! They were P-38's, P-39's, P-47's and the P-61 night fighter. That is when we started to build up our squadron in 1942 and 1943. In 1943 I was assigned on the 7th Fighter Command Task Unit 57.2.2 that was going to the Gilberts. I went on the Task Force with some of our squadrons, and we went in after the invasion and set up the airfield for our planes to come in. I was stationed on Makin Island and we went in and set up for our squadrons when they came in. We got situated there and had some problems. We still had sniper fire from some of the Japanese that were still around. The islands had just been taken. Actually Tarawa and Makin weren't islands, they were Atolls. You could throw a stone across them because they weren't that big. We finally got our squadrons set up, and we were there for quite a while. Then they came up with the reassignment back to the States based on the point system. I came in on that. They went by rank and time you had in the service. We were just starting to invade Saipan at that time and that is when I got my return to Hawaii for rest & recuperation. I was on the first bunch that came back from the Central Pacific.

Ms. Harris: What was your rating at this time?

Mr. Rhodes: I was a Technical Sergeant. At that time I was instructor and also

troubleshooter in armament. At that time we had a variety of guns; we had a 50 caliber, 20mm, 37mm, which we had on the P-39. I was under command of Captain Overstreet at that time. He was the Ordnance Officer. Then I returned to Fort Shafer and later was sent back to the States in November of '44. I was reassigned to Langley Field, Virginia, and was in charge of the Base Ordnance Department. That is where I finished my time and I was discharged September 3, 1945.

Ms. Harris: At that time you were 20 years old?

Mr. Rhodes: No, I was 20 years old at the time of the attack.

Ms. Harris: You didn't stay in the military?

Mr. Rhodes: No, I was thinking about it, but I had been away so long. At that time I had a girl friend that I had met at Langley. When I got out of the service we got married. She wasn't too interested in me going back into the military.

Ms. Harris: What was your most emotional experience during the war?

Mr. Rhodes: The most emotional ones that I've had – Two men in my platoon at the time at Hickam Field committed suicide. One guy was from California. In fact, it was right in the hangar where we were working. He had been drinking and used a 1903 rifle. We tried to convince him to come out. I remember that we had called the Chaplain to help. Then we also had another one; one of our fellows did away with himself with a .45. I think those were the most emotional times because I never thought about being killed or not getting home. I used to tell the guys to take it day by day and they would get home. If you worry about getting killed it is going to be on your mind. I never thought of that. I just went day by day and did my job. I figured the Good Lord would take care of me. I always had my Bible with me. We were bombed at night when we were in the Gilberts. They would come over every night and bomb us. We didn't have fox holes. Back then on those islands you couldn't dig a fox hole because they were all coral. The Army Engineers would dig them out with their equipment. They were about three feet deep. They would put coconut logs on top of

them and that is where we hid at night if there was a bomb attack. You got down in there with the land crabs. That was our protection and that is about all we had. There was no place else to go. Losing the fellows that I knew, especially that way, and I understand there was a lot of it. They would dwell on getting home. You just couldn't do that, especially in war time. You just had to do your job and count on the Good Lord. I went through it, and here I am 60 years later. It was an experience. I don't regret my military service at all. I am proud of being in the military in this great country that we live in. That is why I always look forward to December 7th. It bring back a lot of old memories and the good times we had before December 7th. Hawaii was beautiful. We loved Waikiki Beach. We liked the outrigger canoes. It was nice.

Ms. Harris: Were your commanders good men?

Mr. Rhodes: Very good. Major Johahnsen was one of the top men. Very good and understanding and compassionate. Captain Overstreet was a little different type of man. He was an easy going man. He was from Georgia and an engineer from Georgia Tech. I worked under Captain Overstreet and we got along very good. When we had problems we worked things out. We had a lot of problems – the armament coming in was all new. We used to have misfires and hang-ups, etc. We worked on them and got things going.

Ms. Harris: Did you have any black soldiers at all?

Mr. Rhodes: No. None at the time. I understand they were in the Navy. I believe they were stewards. I remember reading about that. I believe that one that was at Pearl Harbor was decorated.

Ms. Harris: Did you have any contact with the Japanese at all, or any prisoners of war?

Mr. Rhodes: No. We had the infantry there that took care of any problems or anything like that. We were more involved with keeping our planes going and keeping our armament and bombs up, and doing what we had to do. That was our job.

Ms. Harris: The weather in the Pacific – was it hot most of the time.

Mr. Rhodes: It was hot most of the time. The mosquitoes were the worse thing. They would carry you off. We had the head netting, etc. As regards the water situation, they had the desalination and that is what they used at that time. We got our water from the ocean. Of course you could only drink hot water because they put it in Lister bags and the water was still hot. It was so hot that sometimes when we were handling the guns we had to use gloves. That is how hot the stuff got with the sun beating down.

Ms. Harris: Is there anything that you would like to say that you haven't said about your wartime experience or service?

Mr. Rhodes: Not really. I was enthused about coming back home. I think that was my biggest thrill – getting back home to see my Mother. I had not seen her in all those years. My sister was back home and they worried a lot about me. I always got a letter off when I could to let them know that I was OK.

Ms. Harris: What about your life since then? What has your career been like?

Mr. Rhodes: I've been in the roofing and siding business, sheet metal work. I've done that for over 25 years. I retired in 1979. My grandchildren are my hobby. My family has always been first with me. I've deprived my wife and myself of things that we like to do in order to do things that we want to do with the grandchildren. Our youngest one is seven years old. He is with me all the time when we are home. I've been trying to locate a video of the parade and we would love that for our grandchildren. I thought it was fabulous. I think the City of Fredericksburg has done a tremendous job. The hospitality has been overwhelming. You don't find that everywhere today. I'm originally from New York, and occasionally I go back there, but it is a different New York now. Everything is changed and everybody's outlook is different since World War II. Back when I was growing up you knew everybody on the block and you visited with them. I think back a lot, and I only met one buddy that I knew before Guy and Dave. I met him, John McConnell, at the 1989 Florida State Convention in Fort

Meyers. We met and knew each other from Minute One. He hadn't changed much. He was gray and he knew me. That was the greatest meeting that I've had. We were separated after Pearl Harbor and never saw him after that day. He was reassigned to a squadron and I didn't see him any more. That was a nice occasion for me and I was glad that I went there. That is why I come to these things. I keep thinking I will meet some one. I haven't met anyone from Wheeler Field that was in any of the squadrons, or that I knew. Of course a lot of the guys have passed away through the years. There are not many left. I believe that we have a little over 9,000 in Pearl Harbor Survivors Association at this time.

Ms. Harris: We certainly thank you for this interview. We wish you all the luck and hope that you will come back to see us in Fredericksburg.

Mr. Rhodes: Thank you very much. It has been a pleasure.

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