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Interview with Robert Chaffin
U.S. Navy, Aircraft Maintenance

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Robert Chaffin

Today is December 5th, year 2001. My name is Floyd Cox; I'm a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War. We're here at the Museum today in Fredericksburg to interview Mr. Robert Chaffin, we also call him Bob, concerning his experiences during World War II.

Mr. Cox: To start off with, Bob, I'd like to tell you thank you for taking the time to stop by and give us your interview and, if I might ask you, what was your date of birth and where were you born?

Mr. Chaffin: My date of birth was 30 March, 1922 and I was born in a little place called Spring Valley, Texas. It no longer exists, so far as I know. It was near Waco, Texas, about 15 miles. My family were farmers and during the Depression, 1927-28, we moved to Waco, Texas. Born in Spring Valley, moved to Waco, big trip, 16 miles. Necessity was the mother of that. My father went bankrupt because the cotton crop didn't make it two years in a row, and the Texas cattle industry, I don't know what the government body was, came in and declared all the cattle there had to be destroyed because they had tuberculosis. Bankruptcy was inevitable. At that time it was quite a stigma. Anymore, it's an everyday happening.

Mr. Cox: Of course, during that time there were many other farmers and ranchers underwent the same thing, did they not.

Mr. Chaffin: Oh, it was nationwide and particularly in the southwest.

Mr. Cox: Did you go to school in Waco?

Mr. Chaffin: I went to school in Waco, started at the South Waco Elementary in 1928, September 16th probably, that's when school used to start. And moved from there to the junior high, South Junior High in Waco, Texas and from that to the high school in Waco, Texas and graduated in 1940 from Waco High School. At that time I didn't give a great deal of thought about enlisting in anybody's military service because I'd seen the Texas National Guard driving around in trucks with a sign on the side that said "Tank". They pulled a 37mm field piece along and they had a sign on it that said "75mm". The people that went to the spring training, I guess you'd call it, anyway when the National Guard mobilized, they didn't have enough guns for all the people in the Guard, and rifles, so some of the guys carried broomsticks. The tanks they had were very small units and they went back and forth through the pine trees over in southeast Texas and as they were going through, they had no trouble, they'd push the pine trees down. When they came back the other way, the pine trees rammed into the tread or through the driver's window and killed the drivers. It was a great fiasco; a world of learning took place, a world of preparation made there.

Mr. Cox: So you were discouraged from going into the Army.

Mr. Chaffin: I decided the Army didn't need me. I went to business school for quite a period of time. I went to work for the Cadillac dealer in Waco in the parts room and used some training that I'd received previously working in a wrecking yard as a kid. Finally I got a chance to enter the National Youth Administration war training programs they had around. I was supposed to go to Kelly Field, at Kelly Field they said no, they hadn't got any more berths. We were in convoy from Waco to Kelly Field, they stopped us in San Marcos at the café that used to be out on the main road there...

Mr. Cox: You're in military convoy, vehicles...

Mr. Chaffin: No, it was a convoy of Texas Employment Agency vehicles. They stopped us in the convoy there and told us that all the berths in San Antonio were full and the only thing they could do now, was anybody that wanted to go home, they'd give them a bus ticket to go home on and the rest of us should just stay on the trucks, and we'd turn left and go to Corpus Christi where they had the same facility but didn't have anybody in the buildings yet. Went to Corpus in the National Youth Administration Program and worked that for a three month period or thereabouts, then went on the employment rolls for the Navy as an aircraft mechanic trainee. And off of that into junior aircraft mechanic, or some such terminology. Around my 18th birthday, I got a notice ahead of it that on my 18th birthday I was going to get to sign up for the draft, because I wasn't old enough for the draft up to that time, so the same day I signed up for the draft I walked across the street and went to the Navy recruiting office.

Mr. Cox: Do you remember what day that was?

Mr. Chaffin: I don't remember the date the law became effective, but it was in early 40s, '42 when I was enlisted on the second, so probably 30, 31st when the law became effective. In between 18 and 21 you had to register, and like I said, I walked across the street. They carried us to Houston on a Greyhound bus, we were sworn in Houston, after a little wrangle-I had a letter or recommendation from Commander Holland at the Naval Air Station at Corpus Christi-I was recruited as a first class petty officer. He's seen me working and knew what I could do. He sent a letter to the Navy recruiting and they said OK, they'd do that. But when I got to Houston where the formal recruiting took place they balked and said no, we can't do that. We don't recruit people like that. Well, I knew differently because they were something over a thousand people short on their recruiting quota. I played with the people for awhile at the Navy recruiting station in Houston. Had a break, went across the street around the corner to the Marine recruiting and asked if they could guarantee me that I could stay in aviation if I joined them, they said they could, and I said fine. They said "You have to have your parents' signature". I said, "OK". They wired my parents, my parents wired back, and I went back to Navy recruiting. I had a break I could take, I went over there and I went back to Navy recruiting wandering around the halls, in this room and that room, and finally the intercom system announced me to report to the yeoman and I did. He wanted to know what in the hell I was doing, with the Marine recruiting calling me in their placement, and I said, "Well, they guaranteed me to stay in aviation and you people won't guarantee me anything". They said, "Wait a minute, we can do this, we can do this. We can't give you first class petty officer because you're not 21, but we can do third class petty

officer". I signed the papers and that was it. Went back to Corpus Christi for boot camp, two weeks in boot camp in Corpus Christi which was how to make a bed up, where to eat, and so forth, and out of that went right back to work on the flight line.

Mr. Cox: My gosh, that was quick!

Mr. Chaffin: Yes, it was. I spent, I don't remember the dates on the transfer out of Corpus Christi, but I worked on the fight lines, started out dragging the gas hoses, gassing the airplanes, and I made crew chief on one airplane. Then I had two more assigned to me, and finally they decided to put me in engineering, on aircraft maintenance. I worked aircraft maintenance, I was up for second class, didn't get to take the exam for some reason. Anyway, I transferred to Beeville, the same job in aircraft maintenance, engineering section. I made second class petty officer in Beeville. My father died in 1943, and I volunteered for overseas duty. Made that, overseas, and the first assignment overseas was the CASU One, at Ford Island Naval Air Station, Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Cox: You said "CASU One," can you...

Mr. Chaffin: Carrier Aircraft Service Unit. Made one trip down into the Marshal Islands, or one of the island groups, on one of the liberty ships converted to a carrier, the CVE. We carried a Marine air group down there and launched them from the deck.

Mr. Cox: What was the name of that ship?

Mr. Chaffin: The Gambier Bay. That was in February of '44. That was a 14 day trip, down there and back, and then back to CASU One. From there, the second of May, '44, I went aboard the Essex, and I was on there until 2 December, when I transferred off onto the USS American hospital ship.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you about the Essex. You were a young seaman, you went on this giant aircraft carrier, how did you feel? Did you really have a lot of pride being on that big ship?

Mr. Chaffin: Unbelievable. I felt I'd sort of, pardon the expression, urinated off a couple of years messing around at Beeville, Corpus and Beeville. But anyway, it happened at an opportune time. I was on CASU One, the Essex pulled in and dumped their air group at the Naval Air Station there, Ford Island Naval Air Station. At that point in time they converted from the aircraft air groups being self-sustaining-they carried their own airplanes, they carried their own mechanics; they carried everything, a totally self-sustaining group, outside of food and laundry. The Navy changed their procedure and the aircraft carrier air groups; then lost all their people except flight crews and pilots, this kind of thing.

Mr. Cox: All of their support.

Mr. Chaffin: All their maintenance people. That became ship's company, so I transferred into the ship's company. I was assigned to the Essex, but I was in the air group. They left a bunch of disappointed people, because they figured they'd made their

missions in the Pacific and would get to go home. And all they got was turned around in Honolulu. I'd made first class petty officer rating by then, and assigned-I'll pat myself on the back. I wasn't a pretty good mechanic, I was a damned good mechanic then. As a kid I'd worked from the time I was 12 or 14 years old and I knew what work was and who the boss was. So it worked out that everything worked fine until the 25th of November, 1944. We'd made all the different islands starting down in the Marshals and moving up.

Mr. Cox: Let me stop right there and ask you, as an aircraft mechanic, what type of planes were you working on. Dive bombers, fighters?

Mr. Chaffin: Until I came on board the Essex, I was working on whatever happened to show up. At the training bases we had North American AT6s, SNJs, BT13s, SNBs. Aboard the Essex, being in the air group support function, I way assigned torpedo bombers. I worked on TBF. When I saw Bush was going to run for President they showed him flying a TBF, and I thought, anybody fool enough to fly that airplane doesn't need to be President.

Mr. Cox: So you didn't have a very high regard for the plane as far as mechanically?

Mr. Chaffin: Mechanically it was a good airplane. Design-wise and forced function, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. You take an F6F, a Navy fighter, stationed about 4even with the main island, cut him loose and he's off the flight deck flying before he's halfway to the bow. The TBF, you move him back to 400 feet, lock the brakes, full throttle, and he ran down the flight deck and he ran off the flight deck just like running off this desk, he just went off sight, dropped. Grumman build wonderful airplanes, very strong airplanes as far as mechanical strength and design, it was well done. F6F, the F4F, before that the F3F, back ahead of that, everything well designed. The TBF was the first torpedo bomber that carried the torpedo totally enclosed in the bomb bay. Everything prior to that time had the baby caught between its legs while it was flying That gave us the capability to carry 2000 pound block busters in that bomb bay and a whole bunch of 500 pounders and 250s and Daisy Cutters and all kinds of different configurations. But it was a good airplane. Just if it had ever been designed and had the engines been available to commit to it, the 2800 engine, it would have been one hell of an airplane. It worked out well, it was slow. The equipment that was furnished, by the time I got into the fleet, the equipment that air groups were supplied, everything was top notch.

There were so many things that restrict some manufacturers, the F4U, Corsair, the big drawback to that was, anytime you're sitting on the ground the tail wheels down, the nose is sitting 16 feet up in front of you, and to taxi you had to go over here, go over there, look and see what's ahead of you, and wonder what's in-between this and the next turn. It's a case of experience, learning, reworking, rebuilding and choosing a new product.

Mr. Cox: When they'd come back off a mission, it was the job of your crews to put those planes back together, if they took in any heavy damage.

Mr. Chaffin: We didn't have too much trouble with that, because a great number of the TBS, the torpedo bombers, if they came back, quite often they got engaged with the

Tilly. Tilly was the machine that picked up the trashed aircraft, carried it to the fantail, and dropped it off.

Mr. Cox: You didn't want your plane to go to Tilly.

Mr. Chaffin: The ones that had minor damage, sheet metal damage, this kind of thing, we'd go in and do whatever in the way of mechanical correction need be the associate metal specialists would come in, do their work, rebuild the fuselage or whatever.

Mr. Cox: If a plane came in and some of the crew members were heavily wounded or possibly killed, and there was blood all over, did they clean the plane up any before the plane took off on another mission?

Mr. Chaffin: Oh yes. You had overboard scuppers that you could take an airplane up, and take a water hose, and wash it out. Quite common on the TBF, with the ball turret up top, the gunner down underneath, you'd bring it aboard refuel it, drain the tail gunner, wash it and put it back on the line, because the man had no defense whatsoever, he had a very short swivel on it, a 30-caliber.

Mr. Cox: You said drain it-that means clean it up because he was killed.

Mr. Chaffin: Drain the blood out, drain the blood and guts. I guess the worst I ever saw was a young man shot in the turret, the turret was, you had to crawl in there and double up, you were sitting there like a monkey on a football. They had one guy come back in, he was literally blown apart. Evidently the Japanese had begun to come in with total 50 caliber in some airplanes instead of 20 mm. and they got a direct hit on this kid, he was nothing but a bag of flesh and bones. Getting him out was a chore. Our people did as much as they could to get him out and on a litter, get him down to sick bay, but it was...

Mr. Cox: Did you ever get used to cleaning these planes up after some people had been killed in them?

Mr. Chaffin: I don't think you ever do. I still have the horror of trying to tend somebody in an automobile accident. I'd got used to it as a kid, people would run into each other in the old wooden-frame bodies in the cars, the things would splinter and the guy's sitting there, he's got a big post driven through his chest, that kind of thing, but I never got used to the blood and guts. You'd accept it and you'd go on. And on the aircraft it was the same situation. You can't stop it.

Mr. Cox: While you were on the ship, do you remember any of the things that were funny among your shipmates? Anything outstanding in you mind?

Mr. Chaffin: It's a long tale. We had a young man in the ship's company, he was in the air group, transferred into ship's company. He was a first class petty officer. He was there when I came aboard. We happened to be assigned to the same section, taking care of torpedo bombers. He was from California, and he always talked about his dad who was a fireman. I'd never been across the Equator. We were in Honolulu, and we get to the equator and it's Polywog Day. This guy had really been putting the needle in us Pollywogs all the way. I went down about 9:30 to the quarters I was assigned, he was sleeping just a couple of bunks over. I bend

down, he was sound asleep-he was a redheaded kid. I knew this was going to be the last chance I was going to get to do anything within the legal limits of the law. Another guy and I went over and took turns with the scissors, and we cut a Mohawk pass through his hair, never said a word, never told anybody and he didn't wake up. Went on through this thing, and the day we were hit with a Kamikaze, I was running an engine on this aircraft that had ignition troubles. I'd run the engine up and he's standing as fire guard with a CO2 bottle. I didn't know who he was, didn't know anything about that. But finally I kept looking him up in publications, finally joined the Association, I looked through and found this guy's name, with a title to it, and I called him. He was living out in Los Cruces, New Mexico.

Mr. Cox: You contacted him years after you got out of the Navy.

Mr. Chaffin: Yes. This is in 1990-I don't even know what year.

Mr. Cox: This is 50 years later.

Mr. Chaffin: Almost. I called him and asked him if he was – the name, I don't remember. But yeah, this is him. I said, "You don't remember me, I'm sure" and I told him who I am. He said, "Yes, I remember you." And I said, "Well, where were you when it hit the fan?" And he said, "Well, I was standing fire guard for you." So we talked back and forth for several minutes. About three years ago or thereabouts, I called him. My daughter was going to Los Cruces for business. She had tickets on Southwest, the freebie, green points, and she said, "I'll furnish the transportation if you'll furnish the rental car and a room out there. No, the rental car is on the company, all you have to do is furnish the room". I said, "All right." I went out there and contacted this guy, went to see him. We didn't become close friends or anything, but a lot of memories. We both transferred off the Essex the same day, the second of December, 1944, and started the long trek down through the islands, jungle hopping in C47s and what have you, to get down to Guadalcanal fleet hospital.

Mr. Cox: During any of this time, did he know that you're the one that cut his hair?

Mr. Chaffin: No, He didn't until I told him.

Mr. Cox: Until you saw him in Los Cruces?

Mr. Chaffin: No. On the phone I told him. I said, "I cut your hair on Pollywog Day. And he said, "I wanted to do that, it's so much fun."

There was some frivolity on crossing the Equator and Pollywog Day and what have you, but usually it was, about all you wanted was busyness, and that was a big advertisement for the Navy. You go three hots and a cot, vs. the Army.

Mr. Cox: On the Essex, were you in any big battles?

Mr. Chaffin: The first and second battle of the Philippine Sea, running up the coast, we finally got to Ulithi Majure anchor points. Two of the big battles, I don't remember the names of them, but the amazing thing to see was the cruisers and the carrier line

the carrier line and battleships and destroyers and everything in formation. And see an air attack come in and these ships all opened fire at dusk. Every fifth shell is a tracer and they were firing fast enough that most of the ships looked like they had a fire hose with red water spraying the sky.

Mr. Cox: During an attack, did you have a battle station? What was your battle station?

Mr. Chaffin: On the flight deck up on the catwalk. We were ready at anytime to get up and run to aid aircraft handlers or moving aircraft or anything that came up. Didn't have a gun, no gun duty. None of the aircraft maintenance people were involved in gun duty aboard a ship of any kind. There was no time. You had to be free. We had people that were stationed at general quarters down on the hangar deck for the same purpose; to assist in moving aircraft or whatever might be happening, bring aircraft down the elevator, up the elevator, pushing them on, and this kind of thing. If little repairs came up it was fine if you could get to it, if you didn't get to it, move it out, put it over to the side, we'd get to it later. The only dangerous place I ever had was down ton the hangar deck one day. We were retrieving aircraft and they were firing the 5-inch twin 38s and the shell cases came out of the back end of the thing and were firing forward at the starboard die. These shell cases were about 30 or 40 pounds of brass and they were squirting out red hot and dripping on the deck. When you got a moving aircraft on the elevator, off the elevator and bring the elevator up or take it down, the minute you hit the down button you generate this massive hole in the deck and all these shells roll off in there and drop 30 feet down and hit the deck or hit you or the aircraft or whatever it is you are moving. That was one of those things-at night time under general alert, torpedo bombers, the Japanese were using Bettys at that time.

Mr. Cox: They were using Betty Bombers, torpedo bombers?

Mr. Chaffin: Torpedo bombers. Figured the defense system for it. We had an open-mouth 38 toward aft on the Essex and it was tied into the radar up on the island. A late model innovation. It was also tied up with what they called flashless powder. At night you could sit up on the flight deck with a jug of coffee. You got a Coca-Cola jug and wrapped it with paper tape, sit and drink coffee and you could sit and watch the radar screen and see the gun move. The gun gets still, the radar gets still, sit there. Whoo! One shot, a ball of fire possibly as big as this room and then, done.

Mr. Cox: What you're saying, it hits the plane?

Mr. Chaffin: No, just right at the mouth…

Mr. Cox: Oh, the mouth of the gun.

Mr. Chaffin: Yes. You'd sit there for about four or five, six seconds, seemed like forever, but you could almost count the seconds. Whoo! Right on the horizon. Hell of a fire. And that gun had 38. When I left the ship they had 38 one-shot kills to their credit.

Mr. Cox: They'd zero in on them…

Mr. Chaffin: The radar did.

Mr. Cox: And then just get them clear when they were quite a ways off.

Mr. Chaffin: The Japanese came in and learned that their aircraft were being picked up on radar and they were flying on autopilot so that they could maintain altitude and direction and locked on as good as radar did. There were other things. We had kamikazes come at us. Some were kamikazes, some were just fanatics. We had one guy come in; the Essex had long wire antennas up forward and when we went to battle stations, these things cantilevered down and the wire were just above the water. As a matter of fact, when you rolled enough, why, sometimes they would dip into the water. This one guy, either was shot or lost his mind. He came in and went between the ship and the long wires and the towers. The Japanese, he was gone. Just total destruction.

Mr. Cox: You're talking about an American plane landing on the deck...

Mr. Chaffin: Coming in, either bounced the hook or skipped the wire. Down the deck he goes. The hold-up barriers were the deck cables across the deck. Three strands of one-inch cable wrapping around the prop, the engine, what have you, cut the landing gear out from under the aircraft, any number of them And those were cases that would go overboard most of the time. Once in awhile, you'd get one catch a wire and just wrap it up. Change the engine; change the prop; put it back in service.

I never had any experience with jet operations on an aircraft carrier deck, just amplifying the danger that exists with prop aircraft. I think that jet aircraft carriers, if it's just sitting there it's not going to hurt you, but it can suck you through and kill you. Or, at the other end, it turns you around and blows you overboard. Prop driven was a much safer aircraft, I think. Most of the times when we were going to operate an engine and any fix condition on deck, we put safety lines up.

Mr. Cox: They kept you quite busy, did they not, when you were out to sea, keeping all these planes in A-1 condition?

Mr. Chaffin: Yes. In later months of the Pacific as we pressed north, the Navy developed a skip-bombing technique. That was, come down, level off, launch his bomb as he put his nose up, and skip...

Mr. Cox: Just like a rock across the water.

Mr. Chaffin: Right Skip it right into enemy shore defense and what have you. One of the bombs skipped had a greater velocity than the airplane behind it. It ran on down and the guy's just picking up speed because he's pulled out of it. His nose had to be down. If he pulled out and didn't pull up enough, he ran into a shower of shrapnel from his own bomb and coral from the coral reefs out there. We decided the damned thing needed a stainless nose on the airplane. But they didn't. It was a lot of work. Sheet metal, we were just worked ragged. And we had such trouble accounting so we pulled accounting off on sheet metal people.

We had so many repairs, constantly, so we turned it over to them and we'd catch them while the airplanes were gone on the next mission.

Mr. Cox: When a plane was heavily damaged, but all of you repaired it, sheet metal men and engine repairmen, who made the decision whether that plane was air worthy again? Was there a particular person who had to make that decision?

Mr. Chaffin: Yes Sir, Two. The engineering chief for the particular squadron type of aircraft, torpedo bombers or fighter bombers and the crew chief that did the work on the airplane. That consisted of saying at least you could take it on a test flight and see if it will work. You'd done the engine runs; you'd done everything; you'd checked all the vital controls. You signed off on a yellow sheet that the aircraft was air worthy. The flight crew would take someone who was qualified, say a Marine Corps captain or a Navy lieutenant commander, to fly the airplane and to certify it was all right. If they were in a push for it, if it got off the aircraft, got off the deck, he went on to wherever the hell he's going. He accepted the aircraft that maintenance had been done, signed off by so-and-so. We did a lot of inspections within the framework of being a mechanic, over-inspection I guess you'd say. Secondary inspection was accomplished by senior mechanics. Most people don't understand it. Fight aircraft or military combat aircraft, even then, was a pretty complicated piece of equipment. Now, they're even more so because they got all these plug-in controls. If that board doesn't work, get another one.

Mr. Cox: It definitely has changed, aircraft have changed. You didn't have a bunch of circuit board on the planes you worked on, did you?

Mr. Chaffin: No. I have a friend who was in the Air Force. He was on Air Force One in Dallas when Kennedy was killed. And he was talking about the things he did, he did this, he did that, and his son is now a pilot. He was a pilot in the Air Force, served his 20 years and then got out. He went through the whole thing from muscle aircraft to computer aircraft and he said that of the aircraft now, the only thing he likes to fly is a Fokker. It's a twin-engine jet. It's not quite as reconfigured for operation as a 737, 757, all the later model jets. Everything is a screen and you can read the screen instead of reading the gauges. . He doesn't like the screens. He went back to the Fokker because he gets to fly them once in awhile. The rest of them, it's sort of twist a knob, crank in a little more of this, change the heading occasionally. The complexity of the aircraft at the time, there was very little increase in complexity from 1939 through World War II. You can't take time to make it fancy. You want something that works. It's an industry that in itself is amazing, the manufacturing industry backing up – but, that's an opinion.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this. A plane came in, you mechanics got on it. How many mechanics at a time-I'm including the engine mechanic, the sheet metal-did you guys all work on the plane at the same time?

Mr. Chaffin: If you could get up to it fine. In the torpedo squadron, aircraft, TBF, stands over six, nearer seven or eight feet tall. You can't get to it. You got all kind of things I the way. Someone designed, brought aboard ship, looked like a painter's ladder. Had a 12 or 14 inch platform, goes back toward the wing butt. Had an

arm on it, hooked, built up on it, laid up on the wing. The ring counting on TBF was fastened and you had an arm down from this platform with a hook on it. Holes five-sixteenth inch by about two inches, put a back plate on it. Same thing, rest that onto the ring counter, take this thing, put it up on the leading edge of the wing, push it up, hook it in. You could push the airplane anywhere you wanted to you and you'd just keep working, changing magnetos, still working.

Mr. Cox: You're still working and they can move the aircraft around.

Mr. Chaffin: Yes. They moved the aircraft and your tool box. Other aircraft didn't have that problem of accessibility, the engine section and so forth.

Mr. Cox: When coming off a mission and you had a lot of damaged aircraft, and I imagine sometimes you guys really had a lot of particular squadron, a lot of damage, did they have any priority on...

Mr. Chaffin: Yes. An evaluation was made and order of preference established as to which to repair right now, which ones to repair on the flight deck, which ones to drop to the hangar deck and put in the Back Bay, pull the wings off, or whatever might have happened. And we had full capability from number three elevator back. We had a large bay in the area where you could do anything you wanted to. You might have to move the aircraft a few times, but you could change wings, change landing gear, change engines, change prop. And, again, here somebody made a judgment. Here's the order we have to put them in so we can get them out when we fix them.

Mr. Cox: It would be quite a logistic problem. It'd be terrible to have a plane done that you had 15 planes in front of it.

Mr. Chaffin: If you had that happen, then everybody just humped it and moved airplanes. You'd move the airplane up to the number three elevator, carry it up, put it on the flight deck, carry it back to number one elevator, and put it back down. Sort of a domino situation. The hangar deck, fight deck, it's the same thing. Each deck has somebody that's in charge of the overall decisions about what's to be done and by whom. You'd get a lot of information by looking at the aircraft, the next mission requirements, etc. It was always fun to have the airplanes all up forward. Some had fuel in, some you hadn't. You'd drain them, doing everything in the world and then somebody say, "Re-spot the deck". Both ways, getting ready to go on a mission and retrieving them back in the spots.

Mr. Cox: Did you have a crew working for you or were you part of the...

Mr. Chaffin: I had a six man crew working. This fellow Carter, I was trying to remember his name, Carter...

Mr. Cox: The Mohawk man.

Mr. Chaffin: Yes. He was in my crew, but he had a group of his own. There was a little bit of bad blood, a pecking order type thing, rank, grade and rank. You have that with, I don't care what was being done, cleaning latrines, you'd still have somebody...

Mr. Cox: You've got it right, Bob, pecking order is what it is. Based on time and grade and all that. It still exists.

Mr. Chaffin: Oh, it does.

Mr. Cox: You were referring to a kamikaze attack on the Essex. Tell me, starting from the very beginning. Tell me what you remember about the whole thing and the final outcome.

Mr. Chaffin: I was down on the hangar deck, just aft of the number two elevator. The number two elevator on the Essex was one that was out overboard over the water. I was just aft of that and I was running the engine on a TBF that had an ignition problem. It didn't lose all its power, but it had lost some power, reduced power. It wasn't safe out there. I was running that engine up to see what the true skinny was on how much power it was losing, this kind of thing,. The power you could check by RPM and manifold pressure, you know what you're producing there. If those two balance out to a certain place you know you've got this much horsepower. By analyzing either the ignition or carburetion, it wasn't getting enough power, that's what I was attempting to do. The emergency siren came on and that's the signal from the air control officer to cut all engines. I set the engine down and I climbed out of the cockpit over the on the left side, for whatever reason, I don't know why I did it that day, I guess habit, and I said "No, I don't want to do that". I swung overhead and swung onto the center section on the other side of the aircraft, walked down the wing walk and stepped off. I was young then and could do that easy. I dropped off the wing of the aircraft onto the hangar deck and simultaneously with that action, the Japanese took action on the outside of the ship. He came down the ship and wiped out eight gun mounts, 20 mm. gun mounts, and three men on a gun, loader, talker, and aimer. I don't know what the terms were but the whole group, he got them and the elevator operator standing there. This guy busted all of his fuel tanks open. Gas flames all over sprayed the skidders on the elevator control. I didn't know this had happened, but discovered it shortly. I looked up and saw that the aircraft I'd just stepped off of had a hole about six inches in diameter all the way through it. I thought, "I don't want to be here". Gasoline was everywhere. I stood up on my right leg and headed for the number one elevator well, which was further astern. When I stepped off on my right leg, I stepped all the way up to my butt. I looked down and my dungarees were on fire. I put the fire out and realized then that my leg was folded underneath me. People showed up with one of these steel-framed wire basket litters and loaded me into the litter, picked up my leg and threw that in with me.

Mr. Cox: Was your leg completely off?

Mr. Chaffin: No, it was…

Mr. Cox: Just hanging there?

Mr. Chaffin: The femur was broken, just right at the neck of the femur. They put me in that litter. Had an aide station right near, I don't know where it was, the corpsman forgot to tell me where the aide station was. They carried me forward and through the number one elevator well and up and opened up the passageway into

the officers' country and carried me in and lad me down on the deck in the officers' mess. A young corpsman about as big as you are came up and had what looked like a cardboard box under his arm. He reached in, stretched me out a little bit, reached in his box and grabbed a handful of sulfa powder, slapped in into place. Then he reached into another box, grabbed a bandage and put it on me and said, "We got to get you into sick bay". They carried me to sick bay and put a Thomas splint on my leg to stretch it out. The foam rubber on the upper ring of the Thomas splint was probably this big around and sort of flesh colored. I was going back and forth through there and the guy said, "My God, look at that!" I thought they were looking at my wound. They carried us back to sick bay. There were 14 casualties, death casualties and 46 injured. That's a lot of walking wounded.

Mr. Cox: When you were injured, did you know you were injured at the time?

Mr. Chaffin: No

Mr. Cox: You didn't feel it or anything?

Mr. Chaffin: I felt nothing.

Mr. Cox: Was it shrapnel that hit you or what happened? Did they surmise what the cause was?

Mr. Chaffin: I can show you. (Sound of something being unwrapped.)

Mr. Cox: What Bob is doing right now, he's got a souvenir he brought with him that caused his injury and we'll look a t it in just a second. While we're getting this out, did they dig this out of you, Bob, or ...

Mr. Chaffin: Later. At that point they only picked out what they could see and do something about.

Mr. Cox: Well, it's about the size of a matchbox, because that's what you have it in. One of these small matchboxes. What Bob is showing me is a piece of shrapnel here, it's pretty jagged and it's about an inch long and about a half-inch wide. This is what broke your leg?

Mr. Chaffin: Well, there were several others, I don't know which one. That one cropped up months later in the pubic area between the junction of my leg and my belly and popped through the tissue behind the skin. That happened when I fell off my crutches while I was in the Mare Island Hospital. There are several pieces this size still in me. There's a great possibility this is the one that broke my leg but the others, I don't know. People have said, "Why don't you have them removed?" I say, let sleeping dogs lay.

Mr. Cox: When you go through an airline checkpoint, does...

Mr. Chaffin: I tell them I have body shrapnel and I also have a pacemaker, so no. And this is part of the Japanese pilot's parachute. Everybody says kamikaze pilots didn't wear parachutes, but they did because they were flying old airplanes and they had

to have a parachute to sit on to see out of the damn airplane. I gave the other half of this to the Essex Association. They have it in their historical effects.

Mr. Cox: So apparently,as that Japanese suicide plane came down the side of the ship, the Essex, taking out those gun placements, it ended up where you were.

Mr. Chaffin: The shrapnel ended up where I was. The airplane practically destroyed itself in its movement. It crashed through things. What was left was either gathered up by a bunch of souvenir hungry sailors or pushed overboard.

Mr. Cox: After they took you down to sickbay, how long were you there before they transferred you to a hospital ship?

Mr. Chaffin: I was in sick bay from the 25th of November. We came back into Ulithi and anchored at Ulithi and they transferred us off the second of December. But we weren't just out tooling around. This all happened about 13:30, one o'clock in the afternoon. By 2:20, not any later than 2:30, they were back out there, flying airplanes, doing the whole thing. They finally got things slowed down enough to pull the aircraft carriers out, go back into anchorage. I'm sure they had to reload, new bombs, new everything.

Mr. Cox: New personnel, because they were at least minus one.

Mr. Chaffin: There were 14 that were killed, those were the gun crew. I don't think there were any aircraft mechanics or sheet metal people that were killed. The same day we made port, they transferred us off to the USS Samaritan, the hospital ship.

Mr. Cox: They took you to the operating room?

Mr. Chaffin: They took me to the operating room, put that pin through leg…

Mr. Cox: What Bob is showing me is a pin they put through his leg that has an end on each end. What did they do, cinch that down?

Mr. Chaffin: No, they put that through my leg and then they put me in a cast up under my arm, down my chest, under my leg and down to my foot. Tied my foot up and anchored this in the cast. I got this out at the Naval Hospital at Mare Island. I always wanted to see if I could catch the doctor that operated on me. He was, to me, an old man. He was probably, maybe 35 and I was 18. It was one of those things, you start asking questions and they pull the curtain down. There was no way you could make contact.

One kid that was on the elevator control was burned so badly that the only place they could give him IVs was in the top of his foot where the shoelace and shoes had protected him from the fire. He died the night before we anchored at Ulithi.

Everything considered, it was the blind leading the blind, I guess you'd say. Aircraft mechanics, hospital corpsmen, whatever, the American spirit stood there.

Mr. Cox: Everybody pulled together and we won it, didn't we. After you went into the operating room, they put on your cast and all this, then did they send you-you were stateside when they did all this?

Mr. Chaffin: Oh no. This was aboard ship anchored off Ulithi, aboard the Samaritan, they did the operation. The next morning this Carter and myself were the two that I know were transferred onto an old flying boat. They put us in the basket again and down on the deck in the flying boat, inside and off and down somewhere to some other island further down where they had a landing strip. They then put us on old C-47s and we started island hopping down through the Marshalls, the Marianas, and all of these places. We finally ended up on Guadalcanal. When we came in at Guadalcanal at Henderson Field, they had the old steel matting, we landed on that. They brought an Army field ambulance and put two of us down low just about the wheel wells and another two just above us. We did the 40 mile trip through Cook County down there to Guadalcanal, a joy ride. The Guadalcanal hospital was built of U.S.S. steel huts. No Quonset huts. It looked like steel barns. They were in rows between coconut trees. They did all these things, checked this, checked that, said "You're going to live. At least we can feed you right."

We were there until the 22nd of January, 1945 and then I came right to Mara Island Naval Hospital. I said, "I don't want to go on a boat trip, I'll wait for an airplane." They turned me down for not going on the boat trip and said they'd get to me when they could. I said, "All right". I got out of there, I think it was four or five days after. It seemed like an hour we were flying over the ships. Somebody said, "There's the ones you were supposed to be on". We flew through the islands. We were on C-54s then.

Mr. Cox: You had probably an in-flight nurse with you, did you not?

Mr. Chaffin: Had corpsmen. The corpsmen were there in case you ditched at sea, they could push you in the water. No, there were people on the flight in all kinds of conditions. We got back to Hickam Field and went down on flight line to the hospital. They took our aircraft away from us and flew blood back to Iwo Jima or someplace, I don't know. In five days or so the airplane came back, loaded up and then they flew from Hickam to Hamilton Field. From Hamilton Field they transported us overland again to the Navy hospital at Vallejo. Then it was just a matter of biding my time and arguing with the people about how to get back to walking. I found out, after I'd been there a while, that it was the amputation center for the West Coast. After much talk and what have you, they said, "Well, you don't show any signs of proper knitting. We're going to have to amputate." I said, "Just wait a bit. The only milk and eggs I've had in the past three years was when we stopped off at Honolulu for five days. Let's give it a little time." I was eating everything I could get of eggs, fresh fruit, good food.

I guess in about another week or so they came back and said, "Yes, we can remove the cast". They put me on the operating table, cut the cast and lifted off the top half. I'm laying there, they said, "Can you raise up?" I said, "I don't know." I raised up, turned and lifted that leg up. They helped me on the end, lay it on top of the bed and the doctor said "I don't know what I can do about that

pin" –it was sticking out. "I've got to get it out of there. Can't leave it like that." He took out a screwdriver and tried to take out the set screws that locked the pin in place. They were metal. They'd rusted. The heads sheared off. I said, "Cut it off". He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Get the bolt cutters and cut it off". He said, "I won't do that. Where would we get bolt cutters?" I said, "In the prosthesis room. I see them making stuff all the time. They have bold cutters, all kinds of tools. You ask for bolt cutters". A guy came up carrying a bold cutter and the doctor said, "I'm not going to do that". I sat up, cut the head off.

Mr. Cox: You cut the head off the pin on your own leg!

Mr. Chaffin: I laid the bold cutter down. He took a big hypodermic syringe full of iodine or whatever that brown stuff is they use, followed it through as they pulled the pin out, put a bandage on it and said, "It's done".

I went through physical therapy. This knee wouldn't bend, it had been in a cast so long. There was a corpsman in the physical therapy room. He was real ruthless. He said, "I'll fix that so you can bend that knee." He put me on a big exercise bicycle that had a cast iron wheel on it, direct drive. He strapped my feet on and every time it went by, I'd get bumped. He said, "When you get tired of getting your ass bumped, your leg will be all right".

I was doing well until roaming through the ward one night and the guys had a powder fight. Everybody sent their kids shaving lotion, shaving powder, all that kind of stuff. These guys would take the powder and throw it on each other in the shower and you'd have to go and take another shower. Smelled like a Chinese whore. So I was going around on crutches with powder on the highly waxed floor and I spread-eagled and strained that leg. I can feel it right now. I felt that shrapnel. They said, "How do you know?" I said, "I can feel it". Took me to the operating room, took a picture and the doctor said, "Yep".

Mr. Cox: Was there much pain when they took out that piece of shrapnel that had worked its way up?

Mr. Chaffin: No, it was just right under the skin.

Mr. Cox: So you got a souvenir of World War II.

Mr. Chaffin: I got a nice collection there.

Mr. Cox: After your leg got rehabilitated, do you have any problem with you leg now, Bob?

Mr. Chaffin: This leg still-the V.A. says, "It can't be, it doesn't show in X-rays." I said, "I don't care if it shows in X-rays or not, that bone hurts in that leg". They said, "How does it hurt?" I said, "It just throbs. It's not a pain necessarily, but I know it's there." They said, "Can you describe it?" I said, "The best I can tell you is, when I'm sitting at a stop sign in the car with the engine running, a guy drives up next to me, I hear this 'thrum, thrum, thrum', and that's about the same thing." They've tried bending, they've tried reinforcements. It doesn't change. I ended

up losing about 5/8 of an inch from this leg and I compensated for it years by having a 3/8 inch padding in the back of my shoe. I cut an eighth of an inch off on the shoe on the other side to make it come out even money to take care of the limp. I think I'll make it now, I'm 79. In another 30 I can worry about it.

Mr. Cox: Did you get your discharge shortly after they discharged you from the hospital?

Mr. Chaffin: I went to the Corpus Christi Hospital for recovery and I was discharged there. That is the last Series C discharge that was issued at Corpus Christi Hospital. After that, they came up with the DD2-14. It's on a separate piece of paper. This is all on one piece of paper. Your life history, thumb print. I have the letter of award here, the Purple Heart.

Mr. Cox: We'll make a copy of that for your oral history file. I thank you very much, Bob, for stopping by to relate your experience, which is a valuable addition to the archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War. And I want to shake your hand and thank you for your service during World Ware II for me, as an American citizen.