

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

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

*Mr. Thomas Whitehair
Second Class Storekeeper
Career, U.S.Navy*

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Mr. Thomas Whitehair
October 19, 2002

Mr. Johnson: This is Kep Johnson speaking. Today is the 19th of October, 2002. I'm speaking to Mr. Thomas Whitehair. The interview is taking place at the National Museum of the Pacific War, in Fredericksburg, Texas, in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Mr. Whitehair, I'm going to let you talk as you like, and I will do a little prompting along the way. And you can just speak at a normal tone of voice. I have checked out my mike and it's working well. We're getting a good recording. So all you need to do is to speak up and tell your story.

Mr. Whitehair: As you can see I was in on the tail end of World War II. I didn't enlist until March the 17th, 1945. About May, I was sent into the Pacific on a transport ship to Guam. And when we got to Guam, all the people from A to M stayed in Guam, N to Z went to Manus. When we got to Manus Island, they weren't aware that we were coming and they didn't know what to do with us. There were Seabee battalions on the island also and they didn't know what to do with me, so about a month later an LSN came in and they said they needed a deck hand and they volunteered me to go. I went all over the Pacific Ocean on the LSN. We went to Johnson Island, Midway, Kwajalaine Guam and other places. And when I came back to Manus, they said you are supposed to be here and not on the LSN so what they did was transfer me on to Manus. I stayed there about eight more months and we decommissioned the island and they transported us on an APD to Guam. I stayed there about eight more months and then they let me loose. They didn't let me loose, they sent me back to the United States, I took leave, then I got duty in Pearl Harbor, that's in 1948. So that's the most I can tell you.

Mr. Johnsons: Okay. Let me get a little background on you. When were you born? When and where?

Mr. Whitehair: 12 / 28/ 26 in Simpson, West Virginia.

Mr. Johnson: Your parent's names and where they came from?

Mr. Whitehair: My Father's name was Artey Whitehair. He was born in West Virginia. My Mother's name was Beatrice Edna Elsey. She was born in West Virginia.

Mr. Johnson: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Whitehair: I have three brothers and four sisters.

Mr. Johnson: Where did you spend your growing up years?

Mr. Whitehair: In western Pennsylvania.

Mr. Johnson: And you finished high school there?

Mr. Whitehair: Yes.

Mr. Johnson: And you enlisted in March of 1945? Was that just out of high school?

Mr. Whitehair: Yes.

Mr. Johnson: So you graduated in mid-year?

Mr. Whitehair: Yes. Well I didn't actually graduate to tell you the truth. I got a GED in the Navy later. I went by myself. A lot of boys wanted people to go with them, other friends. But I didn't I went by myself. I took the bus into Pittsburgh and dropped information as to what to do. And they said do to you age, your Mother and Father will have to sign for you to get in. If I was eighteen, it was fine, but I wasn't and I brought the papers home and coerced my Mother and Father to sign, and away I went.

Mr. Johnson: You say you were born in 1926? You would have been nineteen years old in 1945.

Mr. Whitehair: Not in '45, I would have been eighteen because I wasn't born until December 26th.

Mr. Johnson: Have you gone back and gotten your diploma from your high school since then?

Mr. Whitehair: No, I just got a GED. I was a career person.

Mr. Johnson: A lot of high schools have awarded diplomas to vets from way back, World War II, and Korea.

Mr. Whitehair: No, I just didn't pursue it. I did quite well without it.

Mr. Johnson: How did you happen to pick the Navy.

Mr. Whitehair: When I was in eighth grade I decided I would even make the Navy my goal. I knew when I first did it, I was going to be career navy man.

Mr. Johnson: Where did you go to boot camp?

Mr. Whitehair: Great Lakes.

Mr. Johnson: You were a store keeper?

Mr. Whitehair: Yes. That's right.

Mr. Johnson: Did you get specialized training after boot camp for that?

Mr. Whitehair: No I did not. I was a striker but due to the fact I could type...I learned typing when I was a sophomore in high school...they took that and that's how I wound up in the storekeepers job.

Mr. Johnson: Did you perform in that MOS during your time on the LSM and all those various assignments? You were working in a supply type job?

Mr. Whitehair: Right, yes, and drawing up manifests and what cargo we were carrying and what cargo went what island.

Mr. Johnson: You and your ships were not directly involved in combat in the rear area?

Mr. Whitehair: No. At that time...that was about June - July of '45 and it was practically over by then.

Mr. Johnson: So it was July when you got out to the western Pacific.

Mr. Whitehair: Yes, about June or July.

Mr. Johnson: Through the rest of your Navy career did you stay in the supply field?

Mr. Whitehair: Oh yes. I retired as a Senior Chief Storekeeper. I don't know whether you know, they made E8 and E9's now.

Mr. Johnson: And you retired in August, 1966.

Mr. Whitehair: Thirty-six years ago.

Mr. Johnson: Gosh, that is a long time isn't it? And you said you did not enlist with a group of people when you went in. Did you fall in with anybody in particular that you stayed in touch with?

Mr. Whitehair: That I still communicate with? No. But I was very social. I wasn't anti-social by any means. I still remember most of their names.

Mr. Johnson: Do you go to reunion for units or ships or anything?

Mr. Whitehair: No, I haven't, because I have been on duty that was considered preferred duty by a lot of people. When I came back from Pearl Harbor, I was only there about nine months and they transferred me back because my enlistment was up. And this was the Truman year, they reenlisted me without my control. And this is what delved me into being a career Navy man. Then I went home on leave and I got orders to go to the Naval Air Station, Atlantic City, New Jersey. That's where I met my waterloo, my wife. And from there I went to Norfolk, Virginia, on the USS Midway. We made a trip to the Carribean and from that I went to a holding place. Once again, my enlistment was going up. I didn't know what I wanted to do and they put me in FASRON (???) 102 and held me there for two or three months and

then they said we will send you to the Fleet Aviation Accounting office right there in Norfolk, Virginia. And so I reenlisted again and from the Fleet Aviation Accounting office I went to COMSERVRON 4, Commander Service Squadron Four, aboard the USS Vulcan, and I was on that for four years. Then from there, I went to the best place they could have sent me, Montevideo, Uruguay, for three and a half years. And then when I came back from there, I went 3 ½ years of recruiting duty in New York City, right down town. So as you can see, I've had some nice places. My last six months they sent on an island out there six hundred miles east of Miami, Florida. It's called Turk Island. That's where John Glenn went down first and they picked him up there. But I wasn't there at the time. I was there much later. I spent about six or eight months there. I retired in Sanford, Florida.

Mr. Johnson: And where is you live now?

Mr. Whitehair: I live in Irvine, California.

Mr. Johnson: Do you have Navy contacts there?

Mr. Whitehair: No, my son lives there. Prior to that, I lived thirty-three years in Rutherford, New Jersey.

Mr. Johnson: You had a short tour during World War II. What were your perceptions about the war during the time that you were in?

Mr. Whitehair: Well as you can tell, I was only there a few months, and I had very little contact with anything...the only time we shot the guns was when we came upon a floating mine, and we shot it and reported it. When I was in Pearl Harbor after that, they sent me to a place where they kept and compiled information on where all the ships entered the port and when they left, Communications something...they called it. There's only one other place and it was in Washington, D. C. And we kept track of all the ships in and out. And here again, just because I could type, that's where they sent me. And it was beyond belief...I was striking for third then, I took the examination for Storekeeper Second Class. And at that time, if there wasn't any Second Class Storekeeper for that particular command, they couldn't promote you, because they had to have a billet. We had a chief storekeeper that was the Captains Yoeman. And he liked me, and I told him that if I can't be advanced, I want to go someplace where I can. And that happened for about a month. And one day he said, you can sew your second class (???) on your arm. And I just happened to know on the 14th Naval District, which was right across the street, I knew a yeoman

over there, and he looked it up for me, how he did it. He transferred me to the 14th Naval District, they had a Second Class Storekeeper. They advanced me to Second Class Storekeeper, then transferred me back on paper. That's how I made Second Class.

Mr. Johnson: Without moving from your desk. Did you go back to your hometown after the war was over?

Mr. Whitehair: Oh yes. I didn't get back until about '47, two years and a half.

Mr. Johnson: So you didn't see any postwar activity.

Mr. Whitehair: No. By then it was old history.

Mr. Johnson: I think you've pretty much covered your experiences, not only during World War II, but later on. Were you involved in the Korean conflict?

Mr. Whitehair: I was over in the Mediterranean. I was at the Naval Air Station in Atlantic City when it started and then they transferred me to the Midway, which came out of Norfolk. And the Midway later came over to the San Francisco, or San Diego.

Mr. Johnson: And you got married when you came home in '47?

Mr. Whitehair: No, I didn't get married until '51.

Mr. Johnson: And you have children?

Mr. Whitehair: I have one child. One son.

Mr. Johnson: And you said he lives in California?

Mr. Whitehair: Yes. And I asked him if he wanted to go to the Naval Academy. I had the power, if he could pass the physical and entrance exam. He said no, I don't want any part of that. But he has done very well. I'm very proud of him. When I used to write when I was in New Jersey, and I used to say I'm very proud to be your father. So when he was in New Jersey, he went from first grade to twelfth grade. And he was valedictorian of his high school class of about 300. And then he went to Duke. I knew he wanted a Masters degree. He had a degree in electrical engineering, and a degree in biomedical engineering. And I knew he wanted a Masters. So I told him, I'll tell you what, you show me your piece of paper with you having your Masters degree, and I'll give you five thousand dollars. He said you don't have to do that, I'll do it. So he goes out to California, gets a very good job, saves all the money he can, says sayonara to them. I didn't know this was going to happen. He had arranged a loan from the government, and went to Northwestern in Illinois and got his Masters Degree in two years. So he's done well.

Mr. Johnson: I think the last administrative piece of business here is to ask you to sign this release. The purpose of this is to ask for your permission to use this recording in any of the functions of the Center for Pacific War studies. And it gives us the rights to this material in our educational and research activities here. You can read that and then see if you agree to its content. *(Mr. Whitehair signs paper.)*

Mr. Whitehair, we thank you for taking your time to tell us your story.

Transcribed by Evan and Virginia Roberts

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