

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

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

**Mr. Merle Ainley
Radar Specialist
U. S. Navy**

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Mr. Smith: This is Friday, September 26, 2003. My name is Ned Smith, representing the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. I will be doing an oral history today with Merle E. Ainley, from Iowa. We are in the conference room of the Bush Gallery at the Museum.
Merle, where and when were you born?

Mr. Ainley: I was born in Independence, Missouri, on August 19, 1926.

Mr. Smith: Who are your parents?

Mr. Ainley: My father was Thornton Ainley and my mother was Bernice Menz.

Mr. Smith: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Ainley: Yes. Two brothers and one sister.

Mr. Smith: Did your brothers have to serve in the military?

Mr. Ainley: No they were younger than I.

Mr. Smith: Where did you go to school?

Mr. Ainley: I went to school in Demoyne, Iowa and graduated in 1944.

Mr. Smith: Did you enlist right after that?

Mr. Ainley: I enlisted to keep from being drafted.

Mr. Smith: Where and when did you enlist?

Mr. Ainley: I enlisted in Demoyne and went to Farragut, Idaho for my boot training.

Mr. Smith: Why would a boy from mid United States pick the Navy.

Mr. Ainley: Well, I didn't want to be in the Army.

Mr. Smith: Did you have friends who had been in the Navy?

Mr. Ainley: Yes.

Mr. Smith: Let's go back to your High School. I understand you went to a technical high school?

Mr. Ainley: Yes. The first technical high school in the United States. They taught radio, machine shop and aircraft mechanics. Just about everything. seemed to fit right into the Navy. That is one reason I went in. And out of our class 80% of the men graduates went into the Navy.

Mr. Smith: You said you went to Farragut for boot training, I assume your high school had training that helped you in your boot training?

Mr. Ainley: Yes it did.

Mr. Smith: What stood out in boot camp for you?

Mr. Ainley: The beauty of Farragut, Idaho.

Mr. Smith: Did you have any difficulty in adjusting to the regimen or discipline? Was that difficult?

Mr. Ainley: No I didn't find it difficult at all.

Mr. Smith: Were you working pretty long hours in boot camp?

Mr. Ainley: Yes, it wasn't bad. I had good quarters.

Mr. Smith: What did you specialize in?

Mr. Ainley: When I got out of boot camp I went to radar school in San Diego.

Mr. Smith: How long were you there?

Mr. Ainley: Oh about two months. Radar was pretty new in those days, so we were in on the ground floor.

Mr. Smith: Do you recall anything outstanding about radar school?

Mr. Ainley: It was all new to me. I didn't dream there was such a thing. The radar school was out on Point Wilma which was nice, really beautiful. Then I went to radar school again at Camp Catlin in Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Smith: You weren't assigned to a ship at this time?

Mr. Ainley: I had been signed to an APA. But it wasn't ready to go and I asked to be transferred out of there. That was at San Pedro (sp?).

Mr. Smith: What type of a ship was an APA?

Mr. Ainley: It was a cargo carrier. It wasn't a war ship. They had a gunnery crew aboard.

Mr. Smith: How long were you in radar school in Hawaii?

Mr. Ainley: Another two months. I came out with a Third Class rank.

Mr. Smith: At this time were you assigned to a ship?

Mr. Ainley: Shortly after that I was assigned to the USS Whitehurst. It was a Destroyer Escort.

Mr. Smith: How long were you aboard the Whitehurst?

Mr. Ainley: They flew me out to Iwo Jima and I was waiting to go aboard. It was the day Roosevelt died it was hit by a Kamikaze and I went on board two days after that. Then we brought it back to Pearl Harbor. This was in 1945. It was about May 12th when Roosevelt died.

Mr. Smith: Then you came back to Pearl and then what?

Mr. Ainley: We were sitting in dry dock and it was terribly hot down in that hole and they were sand blasting the hull and it was very dirty and noisy and I asked to be transferred. The Yoeman transferred me to the Finch.

Mr. Smith: What type of vessel was the Finch?

Mr. Ainley: It was a Destroyer Escort.

Mr. Smith: When you went to Iwo, were you under fire?

Mr. Ainley: No. The Whitehurst was on picket duty off of Okinawa during the battle of Okinawa.

Mr. Smith: You didn't get shot at during that duty?

Mr. Ainley: I wasn't on while they were doing picket duty. I didn't get aboard. The Kamikaze hit the bridge, hit the wheel house and the bridge was practically all burned. So they had withdrawn and then I went on board.

Mr. Smith: You went back to Pearl and was assigned to Finch, and then where did you go?

Mr. Ainley: We took off for Eniwetok and then Guam and then the Layte Gulf, and all up and down the China coast.

Mr. Smith: And what was the ships mission at this time?

Mr. Ainley: When we left the Layte Gulf we took off twelve hundred prisons of war off Tiawan or Formosa at that time. Then we took them back to Manila and they were in very serious condition. Then we went back to Saipan and then to Hong Kong. We spent a lot of time in Hong Kong. This was after the war was over.

Mr. Smith: So then you were just on patrol duty?

Mr. Ainley: Yes, air sea rescue and charting harbors. My duty on board ship was working the radar, navigating, and we would locate landmarks to keep from going aground.

Mr. Smith: Did you have close buddies aboard ship?

Mr. Ainley: Yes. Some of them I knew real well, but I've become well acquainted with some today that I wasn't on board.

Mr. Smith: About how many did you have on board?

Mr. Ainley: We had about one hundred eighty-three.

Mr. Smith: Was that including the officers?

Mr. Ainley: That was the entire crew. We probably had about eight officers.

Mr. Smith: Was your skipper pretty good?

Mr. Ainley: Yes, always had a good one. I reported to the Executive Officer. He was communications officer also and in charge of navigation.

Mr. Smith: Tell me about clothing and equipment aboard ship. Did you run into any cold weather?

Mr. Ainley: No. The coldest we ever had was in North China, but we were only there a few days then we went back to Hong Kong.

Mr. Smith: What were your feelings or emotions during that time? Were you anxious to get home?

Mr. Ainley: I think everybody was. I enjoyed the Navy. I was with a good group of guys, good food and quarters.

Mr. Smith: Was there any time when you were under fire?

Mr. Ainley: No.

Mr. Smith: Was there anything out of the ordinary when you were working on your rig or hitting an object that was hard to identify?

Mr. Ainley: Sometimes we would have a false echo. I can remember one large rock when we would go to Shanghai we had to find to figure out where we were.

Mr. Smith: Did you use the radar also for weather? A cloud or storm might cause a false echo?

Mr. Ainley: Yes. I don't remember whether radar was refined enough to find weather. It is today.

Mr. Smith: Were your sleeping quarters in a hammock?

Mr. Ainley: No, we had bunk beds, stacked three high. We couldn't sit up but could get in and out pretty easily.

Mr. Smith: When did you get out of the service?

Mr. Ainley: I got out in May, 1946, in Charleston, South Carolina. We came back through the Suez Canal and then back across the ocean.

Mr. Smith: Did they retire the ship then?

Mr. Ainley: Yes, it was put in moth balls in Florida. It's since been destroyed.

Mr. Smith: What were your feelings when you came home?

- Mr. Ainley: I was glad to get home. My future wife had been waiting for me. She was a high school girl friend. We've been married fifty-six years.
- Mr. Smith: Have there been any changes due to the war that surprised you?
- Mr. Ainley: I guess our visit to San Diego last year, we went aboard the John Paul Jones and I was just amazed at all the electronic equipment. To me a ship that size would have been a battleship in World War II. It's now a Destroyer. It has missiles aboard.
- Mr. Smith: They tell me that during World War II the battle wagons and heavy cruisers had sixteen inch guns and now they tell me they have nothing larger than a five inch gun on any ship in the Navy now.
Is there anything else you would like to tell someone who will be considering a career in the military in the future?
- Mr. Ainley: Well I guess what I learned, I didn't have any fear. I know when I was on land, I used to think about how deep that ocean is, but when I was on the ship it didn't bother me at all.
- Mr. Smith: On behalf of the museum, thank you for taking the time to give us your oral history.
Thank you very much.

Transcribed by
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