

Interview with Mr. Howard Williams

This interview was conducted as part of the Fall 2003 Freshman Seminar at the University of Texas at San Antonio, under the direction of Professor Robinson. The student interviewers are Kathryn Petrey, Anna Jimenez, Mike Rodriguez, and Chance Williams. The text of the interview will be placed in the archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. C. Williams: My name is Chance Williams and today is October 6, 2003. I am interviewing Mr. Howard Williams in San Antonio, Texas.

Mr. C. Williams: Mr. Williams, what was your rank in the Navy?

Mr. H. Williams: Seaman third class when I was on board ship.

Ms. Petrey: Is it hard to talk about what happened?

Mr. H. Williams: No, not hard for me after all these years. It's been sixty-one years since all this action took place.

Mr. C. Williams: Where were you born?

Mr. H. Williams: In El Paso, Texas.

Mr. C. Williams: In what year?

Mr. H. Williams: 1927.

Mr. C. Williams: What are the names of your parents?

Mr. H. Williams: Arthur and Lois Williams.

Mr. C. Williams: What made you decide that you were going to enlist in the Navy?

Mr. H. Williams: Well, after December 7th, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the young girls would not even look at you if you didn't have a uniform on. There were recruiting movies-- "The Halls of Montezuma," "Navy Blues" were just a couple of the movies. Everybody was in the service. I was the age of fifteen at the time. So, we would see those movies, and we would want to go down and enlist.

Mr. C. Williams: Were your father or mother in the service?

Mr. H. Williams: Yes, my father was in the service in World War I. He fought in France. He was wounded over there.

Ms. Petrey: Was he in the same branch as you were?

Mr. H. Williams: No, he was in the Army.

Mr. C. Williams: Did your dad influence you to join?

Mr. H. Williams: Yes, he did, and I wanted to get in the service. Since he had been in, he had an influence on me, for sure.

Mr. C. Williams: Where and when did you enlist?

Mr. H. Williams: I enlisted in El Paso in June of 1942. I was fifteen years old at the time. I lied about my age, told them I was seventeen. (laughter)

Mr. C. Williams: Really. What were the factors that influenced you to join the Navy?

Mr. H. Williams: Well, like I said, I wanted to get in the service, and I wanted to get in either the Navy or the Marine Corps. The Navy recruiting office was the handiest for me, so I just went up there and decided I was going into the Navy.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you do it by yourself, or did you have any friends with you?

Mr. H. Williams: No, I did it by myself.

Mr. C. Williams: Where were you on December 7th, 1941?

Mr. H. Williams: I was in El Paso. I went to see a movie that afternoon, "Sergeant York" starring Gary Cooper. In those days, they would put out an extra when anything happened. When I came out, the paper boys were out on the street hollering, "Extra, Extra! Pearl Harbor Bombed!" I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was at the time.

Mr. C. Williams: What kind of reaction did you have to the news?

Mr. H. Williams: Not a very big one.

Ms. Petrey: Where were you stationed?

Mr. H. Williams: I went through boot camp in San Diego, and then after I finished boot camp, they sent us up to San Francisco. We caught a troop ship over

to Pearl Harbor. We went in what they called the receiving ship. The ships were coming back from the South Pacific at the time, and they had a lot of casualties. They would get replacements to go on board these ships for the people that had been killed or wounded. So that's where we were. They put me aboard a destroyer.

Ms. Petrey: A destroyer.

Mr. H. Williams: Yes, it was a small ship. I went aboard that destroyer, the USS Cushing, and then we left Pearl Harbor in October of 1942 going to the South Pacific with the aircraft carrier Enterprise. Then on October 26, we had a carrier battle. The Japanese carriers would send their planes, but we would try to shoot them down, if we could, before they could get to the carriers.

Ms. Petrey: Seaman 1st Class. What does that mean?

Mr. H. Williams: When you are on board a ship, you can go for a rate on that ship, and they had all different kinds of ratings. So I decided I would go for a gunners mate because, at that time, I wanted to see all the action I could. So I figured if I was a gunners mate, then I would see all the action. That's what I was doing when I went into my first action.

Ms. Petrey: How was your first action? Was it nerve-racking?

Mr. H. Williams: Well, it was indeed. Yes, because that was the first time I realized that some day I could actually get killed. The Japanese planes were coming over, and they were going for our ships, and they didn't bother with us really. They would strafe us every once in a while just to kind of keep us honest and so on, but we had the Hornet sunk in the battle and when the Hornet's planes would come back, they had no place to land. So the pilots would pick out a destroyer and they would either do a belly landing on the ocean or they would bail out of the plane and then we would pick them up. One of our destroyers tried to pick up a pilot, and a Japanese submarine torpedoed that destroyer, so every time we stopped we were very nervous. We would be watching to see if any torpedo wakes were coming our way.

Ms. Petrey: Well, I can't imagine that. I'd be stunned. I wouldn't be able to do anything!

Mr. C. Williams: How were the living quarters aboard ship?

Mr. H. Williams: They were crowded. They were crowded because that ship by this time should have about 180 crew members on board, and since it was wartime, we had about 210 people on board. So it was crowded. But

when we were at sea, we were standing watch most of the time anyway. We had four hours on and four hours off, and if you were at general quarters, then you just stayed on your gun all the time until general quarters were over with. So since we were in the South Pacific in the war zone, well, we were at general quarters most of the time so we just had to get a little sleep whenever we could.

Mr. C. Williams: Was there a designated time for you to sleep?

Mr. H. Williams: When you were at general quarters, they would usually just bring sandwiches up to the guns, and so you never had formal meals or anything like that.

Mr. C. Williams: Right. Were you always on watch?

Mr. H. Williams: Most of the time.

Mr. C. Williams: OK, what about your clothing and your equipment?

Mr. H. Williams: Well, we wore dungarees, as we called them back then, and we were supposed to wear the dungarees pants and the long sleeve shirts. That was supposed to protect you in case you got shot or anything like that. They wanted you to wear a long sleeve shirt and also a helmet. If you were the gun captain, say like on the five-inch gun, then you had to wear one of the real big helmets because you had the earphones on underneath it. Everybody else just wore a regular helmet.

Mr. C. Williams: Who were you closest to during that time?

Mr. H. Williams: I was close to two people that had gone through boot camp with me. One was Joe Royable and the other was Roy Wheat. In our last battle, Royable lost a foot. Wheat was killed. So those were the two closest people to me on that ship.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you write back to anyone?

Mr. H. Williams: Well, I wrote, but at that time, they censored all your letters because they didn't want you to say anything that would tip off the enemy, just in case they got hold of your letters. They didn't want you to mention where you were or what ship you were on or anything like that. So, I would write letters back, but not very often. When they said they got my letters, it was usually "hello and goodbye." Everything else had been censored and there wasn't very much in there that they could understand or read.

Mr. C. Williams: Do you have any special recollections of friends or buddies?

Mr. H. Williams: No, not really. Just the captain of that ship. When I went on board that ship in Pearl Harbor, we had an older captain and he was about ready to retire. So he really didn't want to do anything that might jeopardize his retirement. He didn't want to do anything that may cause him to lose his ship, that's for sure. Anyway, he retired and we got a new captain, a lieutenant commander out of Annapolis, by the name of Parker. He was a young fellow ready to make his mark in the Navy, so he was just altogether different. He was very aggressive, and he had already received the Navy Cross, which is the second highest decoration, just below the Medal of Honor. So, he was very aggressive and, at that time, the Commander of the South Pacific had just been relieved of his duty and they had appointed Admiral Halsey to take over. He was a very aggressive commander, so he started replacing all those old captains with young guys and everything started to change.

Mr. C. Williams: Were they nice guys?

Mr. H. Williams: Yes, they were all pretty nice.

Mr. C. Williams: Do you remember flying through the air?

Mr. H. Williams: Yes, I remember flying through the air and I remember hitting the water. When I was flying through the air, I was still strapped to that gun and when the shell hit, it blew the gun right over with me. But I got loose somehow from that strap and I don't know what happened, but when I hit the water, I was away from that gun.

Ms. Petrey: Have you ever been married?

Mr. H. Williams: No, I never did get married. Very strange that I didn't, but I came close two or three times. I caught malaria, so they sent me to New Zealand. That's where they sent people who got malaria two or three times, so they could get over it better and get some good food. While I was there, I met a girl. Very interesting. Of course, I had to leave and go back to my ship and, when I got back over here, it just didn't work out.

Mr. C. Williams: I bet you got a lot of girls getting into the Navy.

Mr. H. Williams: Oh yeah, there were a lot of girls along the way. (laughter)

Ms. Petrey: How long were you in the service?

Mr. H. Williams: I was in the service for 3 years and I was discharged on May 25, 1945. The European war had ended and the Japanese war was still going on,

of course, but they started to discharge people at that time, if they had enough points. They used the point system to discharge you, and you got points by being in combat and being overseas. I was overseas for two years, so I had enough points to get out.

Ms. Petrey: So, you can stay if you wanted to?

Mr. H. Williams: I could have, but I just didn't want to. I just wanted to get out after my three years.

Mr. C. Williams: How was the weather over there?

Mr. H. Williams: The weather was nice over there. It was hot, of course, on the islands, but New Zealand is just the opposite of here. They have winter over there when we have our summer here, and when we have summer, it's winter over there. But I like New Zealand, I really like it.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you have any contact with any POWs?

Mr. H. Williams: No, other than New Zealanders.

Mr. C. Williams: Were you in any of the battles?

Mr. H. Williams: I was in two battles. I was in that first carrier battle at Santa Cruz and then the one on the 12th or 13th of November where I got sunk, and that was the only two battles I was in. When I left New Zealand, I went to the island of New Caledonia and I was going to catch another ship there. I was at the receiving ship. Well, they called my name and I packed my sea bag and I went up there. The O. D. called me in his office and asked me "How old are you?" But I knew if he asked me the question, he already knew, so I didn't lie and I told him I was sixteen. He said, "Come with me." I thought he was going to throw me in the brig, but he put me in the car and took me down to Noumea to a building with two big walls around it—high walls with Marines all around the building. So, the Officer of the Day went to talk to the Marine guard. We went in and there was another big wall and more Marines. I was beginning to think they are not going to throw me in the brig, they are going to shoot me right here. But we went into the building and went upstairs, and there are signs on the doors. There was a Lieutenant Kitchel, Flag Lieutenant it said, and right across from him it said Admiral Halsey. So I knew then it was the Commander of the South Pacific headquarters. So, anyway, Lt. Kitchel called me into his office and asked me, "How old are you?" I told him and he began to lecture me. He said, "You know you could have caused us a lot of trouble if you had been killed out there. We wouldn't have an answer for that. It could have been bad because you're under age." Then he

asked me “Do you want to stay in the Navy or do you want out?” I said, “I want to stay.” So he said, “All right. You’re going to stay right here with us then, until you’re seventeen years old and then you can do what you want to.” I spent almost a year in Noumea, not doing anything really, but I stayed there. Then when I had my seventeenth birthday, Lt. Kitchel called me in and told me you can go to Sydney, Australia for thirty days and come back here and go with us, or you can go home since you have been over here for two years. Take a thirty day leave and then take another ship. So I said, “Well, I’ll go home.” I went home and took my thirty day leave. Then they sent me up to Newport, Rhode Island to catch another ship. When I got up there, the ship wasn’t ready, so they sent me to New Orleans to catch a ship. I got down there and they said we don’t have anything for you here. Then they sent me over to a blimp base at Hitchcock, Texas and told me when we get another ship, we will send for you. That’s where I was when the war ended in Europe. I had enough points to get out, so I got out.

Mr. C. Williams: Was there any hostility towards the Japanese?

Mr. H. Williams: I didn’t feel any. Well, I did at the time, of course. Yes, at the time. But as time went by, I didn’t feel any hostility towards them. They were just doing the same thing we were, so I didn’t feel any hatred towards them. I know when they had casualties, they had families back in Japan wondering what happened to them.

Mr. C. Williams: Do you still have any contact with people you were with?

Mr. H. Williams: No, I never have any contact any more. I was not aboard ship long enough to really get to know people before the ship was sunk. So I just never had any contact with them after I came back.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you have any memorable moments besides getting blown off the ship?

Mr. H. Williams: Well, I thought about it a lot, but no. As time went by, I just didn’t think about it any more.

Mr. C. Williams: Were there any humorous incidents?

Mr. H. Williams: Well, I can’t think of any at this time. No, I don’t think there were.

Ms. Petrey: Would you take any of those memories back? Would you do it again if you had to?

Mr. H. Williams: Yes, I would, yes.

Ms. Petrey: Would you change anything that happened?

Mr. H. Williams: I wouldn't get sunk. (laughter)

Mr. C. Williams: What was your role as a gunman?

Mr. H. Williams: I was, as I say, striking for gunners mate and all the positions on the five-inch. There were six positions on the five-inch gun and two on the twenty-millimeter. So I had to learn all of those different positions on those guns. I had to learn how to clean the guns and load them and fire them, of course.

Mr. C. Williams: Did they teach you where to fire on the ships?

Mr. H. Williams: Yes.

Mr. C. Williams: Where were you aiming?

Mr. H. Williams: We would aim at another ship, an enemy ship. The Japanese would use their search lights and any time they would turn one on, we would shoot at them. Then we would shoot at any enemy ships--the five-inch guns and the twenty-millimeters.

Mr. C. Williams: Your ship was sunk on Friday the thirteenth?

Mr. H. Williams: Friday the thirteenth! Yes, about one-thirty in the morning. There was a friend from boot camp. Yeah, he got killed.

Mr. C. Williams: What was boot camp like?

Mr. H. Williams: It wasn't bad for me. Of course, I was at that time fifteen years old. I was ready for anything, so it wasn't bad. It was six weeks that we got through that boot camp and that was that. We did a lot of marching and firing the rifles, but that was about it.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you personally ever shoot someone down?

Mr. H. Williams: Oh, yes. At the time it felt good.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you have any celebrations on the ship?

Mr. H. Williams: No, never did, no.

Mr. C. Williams: What was your most difficult period?

Mr. H. Williams: I think being on Guadalcanal after my ship was sunk and getting malaria and having the Japanese ships come in at night. They would shell Henderson Field. You could see the shells going right over you. That was pretty difficult and, of course, getting sunk. It was difficult.

Mr. C. Williams: How long did you have malaria?

Mr. H. Williams: I had malaria for-- let's see. I think the first time I had malaria was in January of '43. Then I got over that. Then I had malaria again in about late February, and then they decided to send me to New Zealand to get over it.

Mr. C. Williams: What kind of treatment did you get?

Mr. H. Williams: We had to take atabrine and quinine. It was difficult to keep it down, but that was the only treatment they had. It never did really hurt. A lot of people who had malaria over there would go back home and it would keep occurring for several years.

Mr. C. Williams: Did they ever give shots?

Mr. H. Williams: No, it was just pills.

Mr. C. Williams: How did you hear the war was over?

Mr. H. Williams: I heard the war in Europe was over when I was at Hitchcock, Texas, and I was still in the Navy, of course. Then after I got out, the war in Japan ended, of course, when we dropped the atomic bomb. That was in Hiroshima in August of 1945.

Mr. C. Williams: Was that the first time you heard of the bomb being dropped?

Mr. H. Williams: Yes, I didn't know before then.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you know anything about VE-Day?

Mr. H. Williams: Yes, I had just come home on leave when VE-Day happened. I remember that well.

Mr. C. Williams: Describe your return home...the reactions of your family.

Mr. H. Williams: Oh, they were really happy to see me. We were welcomed back after World War II. Everybody was really happy to see me. I came back and everything was great.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you get any surprises from anyone the next day?

Mr. H. Williams: No, everything was just as I expected it to be. So, it was great.

Mr. C. Williams: Did you get any special care because you were in the Navy?

Mr. H. Williams: No, nothing like that. I just took off the uniform and then went back to work and school.

Mr. C. Williams: Is there anything else you would like to share?

Mr. H. Williams: No, I think that's about all. It was a very interesting time. Everything seemed to happen to me in my fifteenth year.

Mr. C. Williams: Where did you work after the war?

Mr. H. Williams: I went back to school as soon as I got out of the service and I went up to the Texas College of Mines. Now it is UTEP. I went up there a couple of semesters. It was boring to me after all this other business and so I quit and started roaming around. I finally wound up here. Well, I hope that helped you a little bit.

Ms. Petrey: Thank you very much.

Mr. H. Williams: All right. You're welcome.

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