

**THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR  
(Nimitz Museum)**

**CENTER FOR PACIFIC WAR STUDIES  
Fredericksburg, TX 78624**

**Interview with**

**JAMES W. NELSON**

## ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

JAMES W. NELSON

Let's start by having you tell us your name. This is 18 February, 2005, oral history session and Mr. James Nelson. If you will give us your name and also tell us where you are from and then tell us your story and you can begin by how you got into the service and what you did.

MR. NELSON: You want me to go back and tell what I said the first time.

DR. LINDLEY: We'll get to that later.

MR. NELSON: Where do you want me to start then?

DR. LINDLEY: Tell us when you joined the service and how that came to pass.

MR. NELSON: I was always crazy about airplanes. When the war came along I was on the verge of getting married and we put off getting married until the summer before Pearl Harbor. They had the draft at that time. You wouldn't remember that but...

DR. LINDLEY: I know from history.

MR. NELSON: I had a very high draft number and they weren't drafting teachers in our area at least. So we got married in August and, of course, in December came Pearl Harbor and what am I going to do. Here I am, war on. I had registered for a job as a chemist when I got out of school. It was Burlington, Illinois, an ammunition factory, shell factory, and they put me on the list. About that time we talk about what to do and Sue wrote me a letter or a call from the factory saying they needed a chemist, would I be interested? Well, of course, I was interested but I didn't feel right at that time. We finally talked it over the weekend; we decided to pass it by. I finished a year of teaching

and all our male teachers quit and we all joined the service. That's how I got into the service. I went over to Chenute Field in Illinois, you've probably heard of Chenute.

DR. LINDLEY: Yes.

MR. NELSON: And enlisted. They asked me what I wanted to do. After that I don't know if I said anything about anything, I just stood there kind of gawking, you know, and anyway it turned out that I wanted to fly. The guys say, "You want to fly?" tipped his head kind of, I said "Yeh, yeh." Says, "How old are you?" I said, "Well, twenty seven." Now the first thing he asked me is how old I am, and when I said twenty-six and a half I think I said. He looked at me. He said, "How many months?" I told him, I was almost twenty-seven and so I made a mistake so they turned me down.

DR. LINDLEY: Too old to fly.

MR. NELSON: Too old to fly. I didn't fly there. Anyway, I didn't know what to do. Some guy heard the conversation and says, "Why don't you try to get into the University of Chicago, the Institute of Meteorology?" I told him I think I can get in. I was a college graduate in the right field and so I got my commission as a meteorologist.

DR. LINDLEY: So how long did you go to the University of Chicago to become a meteorologist?

MR. NELSON: Well, it was a year. I was in the classroom several months more, some of us were not as good in math as others because we hadn't gone to a big school and into that kind of science, you know. We started off where we had never been and so I enjoyed it. At that time the University of Chicago was one of the leading universities in the world, very interesting. We had to take an hour of P.E. a day and the University of Chicago had a big stadium. Under the stadium they had a lot of rooms and they were for

overflowing and other things you know. We didn't know it at the time but we played oh, handball, or touch football, you know, and they'd have a request now and then. I guess I'm getting myself mixed up. We went in there to swim and so on and you didn't know what was the next, handball. So I found out that was where Sherman and his men did their work. We were there when they got the ole file out and that was a thrill. I didn't know it at the time and the next room where we played handball. That's what made it something for me. We shouldn't be tangled up with those guys. Anyway, that's about all my pre...

DR. LINDLEY: After you finished your training, then where did they send you?

MR. NELSON: Well, they sent me down to Texas.

DR. LINDLEY: San Antonio?

MR. NELSON: No, it's up the river.

DR. LINDLEY: Austin?

MR. NELSON: It's on the river.

DR. LINDLEY: Waco? Which river?

MR. NELSON: Laredo. As a beginning weatherman, then they moved me up the river to...

DR. LINDLEY: El Paso?

MR. NELSON: No.

DR. LINDLEY: Del Rio?

MR. NELSON: No, it's below Del Rio. Isn't that awful? I'm sorry.

DR. LINDLEY: That's okay.

MR. NELSON: At any rate I had three assignments on the river. Each one a little farther up the river and the last one I got a call from home my daughter had been born. So I went into the adjutant's office and said I'd like to apply for a, I didn't call them virtue I said...

DR. LINDLEY: Courtship leave or something?

MR. NELSON: Anyway, I asked for a leave and not being a normal ??? and then the guy said you don't need to go do that. ?????? You've been transferred. I said, "What's that all about?" They didn't tell me anything so I went home and sent a little letter and found that I was going to night fighter school in Orlando, Florida. So we went down there for twenty weeks or something like that, I don't recall, and when we got out we were supposed to be able to handle aircraft in combat. We weren't flying but we were on the ground and we had radar and we knew the situation. We could see what they couldn't see. The controller in Memphis when the planes took the air after they cleared the field they were in our ??? so they finished what they were trying to do ??? It was a thrilling job many times but you weren't involved in combat that we had. We were not in that area but you knew what was going on.

DR. LINDLEY: Where were you sent?

MR. NELSON: Oh, sent to Hawaii for the first four or five months, had no idea what we'd do there. They put us in the area fence the island, as you know, and we just tried to improve our behavior so we could do a better job when we shipped out. I guess we did alright. We didn't have near as much conflict as I thought we would in the air. I guess they had all been killed off, but we had enough for me. The big thing that we did besides we had a few night...

DR. LINDLEY: Attacks?

MR. NELSON: We were bombed some. After Iwo, you see, I stayed on until after it was over. I stayed on until December of that year, and we helped a lot with the B-29s. I'll tell you about that in a little bit. Our job basically was one of the better jobs in the air force, I thought. If I couldn't fly I could be with them. That's kind of silly but I never learned to fly.

DR. LINDLEY: Tell me about your experiences at Iwo Jima.

MR. NELSON: Our outfit was ready. They had an idea that if they mount our radar sets and we had several vans, they looked like a van, had our equipment and then we had the electrical, everything to run the ship. They had an idea to put that on the deck of the LST, leave it on, and when we got in there if they needed help against an air attack from the Japanese they would have supplements for themselves. We never did this but at any rate I didn't do any of this until after the Iwo Jima battle was over. We spent our time just dodging and we were on LST 792 and had a real good crew, good commanders. We were supposed to go in the first day when the Marines do but we were told that things we wanted to be a beach horse(?). It was supposed to end in three days that was one of the diagnoses but finally a couple of days later they found a hold to put us in. We got up on the beach and I think we were there just long enough for the Japs to fire two shots and second one tried to hit us. Then they plastered us, they had run in, you know. I don't know how many we had injured but twenty or so, that was the crew. None of our men were injured but it tore up some of our equipment, little markers, not very little but I don't know how to flash find it, scared the heck out of you. Anyway, after that battle we had to get off they hit us so hard. I think the captain said they had fourteen or fifteen

holes in the sides covered like sheets of plywood, you know. We had to get off, we were sinking. So they got us off the beach and they plastered it us, guys did, and we made it. We just discharged our, we had a bunch of Marines on the ship and they were the main purpose we were there.

DR. LINDLEY: Do you remember the date that you landed?

MR. NELSON: We were there I think it was two days after the 19<sup>th</sup> which was D Day. We were on ??? on the 19<sup>th</sup>. We had several hundred range and we had supplies, we had trucks, we had I can't think of...

DR. LINDLEY: Jeeps or...

MR. NELSON: It'll come to me. Tanks!

DR. LINDLEY: Tanks

MR. NELSON: We had quite a few tanks and some weapons, not weapons but rather...

DR. LINDLEY: The troop carriers? Take your time it's okay.

MR. NELSON: I can't tell you, long, big black, looked like a telephone pole, but they didn't look like telephone poles really, but that's what we??? looked like but in this ??? being a chemist I can't even say the name of it. I can't remember, it won't come, five minutes from now I will think of it.

DR. LINDLEY: Well, when you think of it, tell me.

MR. NELSON: I feel so silly.

DR. LINDLEY: Oh, that's okay, very understandable, don't worry about that. So then you backed off of the beach and...

MR. NELSON: Yeh, we pulled off the beach; that was the second or third day. It was the day before the flag was raised, the afternoon, evening of the day before and we pulled

off somehow. The weather's not too bad, it didn't beat us. We finally got back and got down to Saipan and got patched up and we went to, I hate to talk about it, can't say it. Anyway, we got back out to sea and they're having a big battle. The Japs had finally sent in their aircraft that evening of the day we landed. Somehow we were around some place and we got pretty close to where they're shooting at the...

DR. LINDLEY: Kamikazes?

MR. NELSON: No, the Kamikazes were going for our aircraft carriers and somehow we got pretty close to them. We didn't witness it, we listened to our radio calling for, you know I guess I'm scared or something but I can't say anything right. We were earliest carriers S. Dutch Finesse(?) Oh, forget it. Anyway we got through that alright and the next morning we went in on the biggest part of the beach and unloaded everything that we were supposed to unload. My buddy and I weren't doing anything. We asked the captain if it'd be alright if we walked down the beach. The beach was full of people at that time, I think it was the third day, first, second, maybe third or fourth, I can't remember. It was the day that the flag was raised on Iwo. We go down in front of the bowel doors and we ran into a navy working party and stopped to talk to the commanders. I said, "How bad is this area?" He said, "Well, I had a working party of twenty-five men down in front of this LST and it's nine or ten o'clock. I had twenty-five and I've got twelve left." That was off in the mild place, you know. So my buddy and I walked down the beach. We were about half way down the beach, I forget what the name of the beach was, but, anyway, we were going along there and you could hear boat whistles now and then. We were on the east side of the six or eight LSTs down from the



mountain. We didn't know what was going on but all of a sudden there was a burst of fire and there up on the plateau right next to the beach. I bet you've heard this story a lot.

DR. LINDLEY: Well, I've heard some of these, but go ahead.

MR. NELSON: Anyway, we hit the dirt. We were kind of green, we hadn't been under fire and everybody else round the slot, too, and then something happened started yelling and the awfulest roar. We got up to see what was going on, and there it was going up.

DR. LINDLEY: So you saw the flag?

MR. NELSON: Oh, yes.

DR. LINDLEY: That was the first flag then.

MR. NELSON: No, I don't think it was the first flag. I don't know which flag it was. I never thought about it.

DR. LINDLEY: I bet that was the first flag.

MR. NELSON: Oh, it might have been. We went back on the beach, but the roars that you heard I can't describe it. It just started slowly and just expanded, eighty-thousand marines there, over eight hundred everyone of them a battleship they were loaded but they were big ones too. Several thousand guys like me that didn't know why he was there but just standing around waiting for your job to start, you know. Well, of course, it was the most inspiring moment of our life. I didn't do a thing but I was there and it was a big thing for me.

DR. LINDLEY: Sure, a moment in history.

MR. NELSON: A moment in history, that's right. We got back to the ship. We were unloading everything on the ships that we had and we had quite a bit, all of us on the

weather vick(sp?) was released. We got a spot up there on the first air field, you started and you walked up the beach there and...

DR. LINDLEY: Here's a map.

MR. NELSON: Well, here we were right in here, the first air field. So they assigned a place for us to wait it out til ????. You know those big boats, they look like a boat but they got wheels...

DR. LINDLEY: The Ducks?

MR. NELSON: The Ducks, I couldn't think of that. They gave us this place probably two hundred yards square or something like that to make a hold. We dug in there and we worked around bringing in our supplies for our own job. We weren't fighting with the guns, we had a gun there, each of us, but we were shot at some. None of us was killed but you're always aware that you're on the verge of it, you know. I don't have anything to brag about because I wasn't a musketeer. It didn't bother me that I wasn't but I sorta felt strange in the present of the fellows who had been shot and shot at because I wasn't in his shoes, my job was not the ??? so no use pretending. One end of the island got pretty well wiggled but I didn't know it. I went down to Saipan for awhile. They had a big new radar and they wanted someone to learn it. We came back and a few nights later a hundred and forty some five-hundred-pound bombs blew up all at once and the islands kind of got that shape so we were on this side, the bombs are here and they had a parachute lights, you know. I guess what happened something failed I don't know but anyway things lit in the middle of ??? and was still burning, made in candle power I think they called it. It kind of scared everything. I was working with one of the fields at the time, we had three fields, three air airfields, and we had radars. We had about nine, I

think. I don't know how many sets but we had the master radar up on Suribachi. We used it mainly, we made some interceptions that was when night riders jets came down hanging around getting fresh. Some got in another way.

MR. LINDLEY: What about the B-29s? You were going to tell me about the B-29s.

MR. NELSON: The B-29s was our main contribution. They started going up to Japan and the planes on Iwo would rise up and bust them. The Japanese planes when they decided the big birds decided that we would take the island and stopped us so we took the island and stopped them. Then they started the raids on Japan in real earnest and there have been numerous I've seen over five hundred planes pass over our island the day becoming annoying. My principal job and the day fighters, too, we had 51s and we had forty, the other fighter group, I can't think of the name of it, B-47s. Then we had the course of navy ships, navy planes, around most of the time until it was all over. We did a good job, we took care of a lot of people, saved a lot of lives. I'm kind of jumping back and forth. You come into a plane, you don't know where the ground is, you have the fog, and you haven't got enough stuff to get anywhere else, so you had to bring them down how you could. We'd talk to them a little bit on the phone and get them acclimated and then they'd come down, depends on the direction of the wind where they'd try to land. So we tried to turn them in either this way or this way or ??? to the island. They you'd run out and look up into the fog to see where they were, all of a sudden here's a man come through the fog right ??? where you hit. We did some of that. It was quite a thrill to save somebody. We lost a number of planes that crashed on the island, made you feel sick because maybe the pilot was dead, pilot and navigator both were dead, put it on automatic pilot and come down and spray out the rest of the guys if they were alive and

press someplace. We had a number of those things happen that were pretty, oh, it hurt you.

DR. LINDLEY: I interviewed a pilot yesterday who told me about an episode, a B-29 that was crippled came and the men parachuted out, the plane was on automatic pilot and it circled the island and then crash landed off the beach. Do you remember that?

MR. NELSON: Not very far off the beach 'cause, our quarters were here right under Suribachi, this plane came down like this. I didn't see them bail out but we stood there just transfixed. We didn't know what to do, whether to run or stand, so it lit about right here.

DR. LINDLEY: Oh, my goodness.

MR. NELSON: We didn't know which way to run, we just stood there and watched him. It crashed just off about a hundred yards from us.

DR. LINDLEY: That's strange. Well, he saw it, too, he was there. He was a P-51 pilot.

MR. NELSON: A P-51 pilot, my college roommate was a 51 pilot. I met him there.

DR. LINDLEY: My goodness.

MR. NELSON: Isn't that strange?

DR. LINDLEY: Yeh. This fellow's name was Branenberger.

MR. NELSON: He was a 29 pilot, you say.

DR. LINDLEY: No, he was a P-51. He watched this, he saw this episode.

MR. NELSON: Sounds like what I saw.

DR. LINDLEY: Yeh, sounds like the same story.

MR. NELSON: I remember one time one settled down about, oh, I guess half a mile or more offshore away from Suribachi, just right out here. My tent was on this place end

down here. I don't know, it had circled the islands and they wanted to land but this 29 came in just like this just sit down in the water. The crews swung down on the wing, you know, old destroyer chugged out picked them off. We had a lot of that. I don't know. Seldom a day went by that we didn't have a casualty on the island flying, you know, and so many different things happening. I guess it wasn't anything like Okinawa, the diversity of the way they did things and their willingness to die. There's certainty that they're gonna die 'cause they gotta die because that's where he sent me, this attitude you know and that really is bad. We lost a lot of ships there, too, you know all about it. I didn't do anything heroic but I'm certainly glad I didn't miss it.

DR. LINDLEY: What you did obviously contributed a lot.

MR. NELSON: Oh, I suppose it contributed. I know I had a hand in killing hundreds of Japs with the fire range because we directed the 29s and they had their own targets, but, you know, we'd been there. We wouldn't go up, the airplanes were on patrol across the island maybe ten or twenty-one of us offshore toward Japan just go back and forth, one of ten thousand and one twenty thousands. Sometimes they'd stray, forget to turn on their IFF or something like that, you know, and we'd have to talk with them. If something went wrong we had to go out and intercept and find them. I can't think of anything heroic to tell you about.

DR. LINDLEY: Were you on the island at the end of the war?

MR. NELSON: Oh, yeh, I was on the island until the 12<sup>th</sup> of December. That's what our job was to be there.

DR. LINDLEY: When you were there did you see on the radar or at least hear on the radio the Enola Gay?

MR. NELSON: No, we didn't but I think I saw the Enola Gay come back. I'm not sure about this because I talked to the Gay pilot several years ago. When I was in weather school my roommate was a brilliant fellow, graduate of the University of Chicago, and he taught math there. He came back, he was teaching cadets down in Maxwell, I believe it was, and he came back to Chicago to become meteorologist. I was lucky, he was my roommate. He's a great guy. He went over with the 29s but he came from the States, of course. The 29s became prolific in ??? no weatherman like that and he said he himself didn't consider it. I should have known better but he is famous and he's selling the book and he was the first place his class of officers didn't converse Alzheimers it was the help. I was glad to get home. I remember that after the war ended the word came up from Saipan that on Wednesday, I believe it was, this is not necessarily true but it's not necessarily accurate, and set up a what did they call it? It was an order, I guess. All officers who were surplus, and all the officers were surplus they weren't flying anymore. They were just sitting around waiting for the over on Okinawa quit being upset, and I kind of got a laugh out of it, it wasn't funny. Be up here Wednesdays, that was orders. They're going to send B-29s to haul all those officers that didn't have anything to do down to Saipan and they were going to send them home. We didn't have anything to do so we felt we were going, too. The way it turned out they got out sooner. And this is all hearsay we believed it. So many of them fought on Saipan and they cancelled the order and some of the guys had even sent their clothes home. One guy had some underwear and socks. We wore shorts; we cut off our pants, baseball camp that was our uniform. I thought that was kind of a funny one. There were funny things happening. One bad thing happened one time, we lost about thirty planes due to a cold front came in and hit

the water and they tried to fly through. I think it was Air Force Day and they wanted to have a lot of planes in the sky, maybe, and sent too much. Those guys were all gone, too.

DR. LINDLEY: Now there was one episode, and this may be the one, where the 51 pilots were not instrument rated and they were using the 29s to guide them. They flew through this weather front and the 51s got lost in the clouds and some of them ran into each other but that was a particular mission. This other pilot was telling me about where they lost thirty or thirty-one planes out of a hundred.

MR. NELSON: I'm sure it was the same incident.

DR. LINDLEY: Yes, I'm sure it is, too.

MR. NELSON: In the late days. I know there was one major there. He had his thirty missions and he was ready to go home. He said, "Well, I'll fly this one." He was one of those guys that ran into this, that happened a lot. My former roommate was operations officer for the 51s. I don't know all their inner but he was an operations officer and he didn't fly all the time but he flew enough that he did alright. It was a great experience but I never was warlike and I wasn't interested in killing anybody, I just stopped them. They're experiences I wouldn't have missed, I'm glad I had what I had and what I did. It's not very thrilling.

DR. LINDLEY: How do you feel about the Japanese now?

MR. NELSON: Well, all I thought of was kill Japs. We didn't care about the Japs, didn't bother me a bit, then I get back and I wonder what's wrong with me. I hated them and I really did. We didn't care if they burned up Tokyo, they had other places we could hit, but the guys that were flying those planes wanted to get it over with, they didn't want to extend it. I was going to tell you about the first atomic bomb, kind of humorous. Most

of the guys didn't know much about that type of thing, you know, and they'd just tiptoe around and somebody said there was a whole company of marines up on the middle air???, that's where the bomb was held to. That wasn't true at all. They were all good men. I never had an enemy of my making at least on that island, good people. This is just a little thing, I had a little picture made that went through the war with me and, not that but the inset, that's my wife. I carried her picture through the war.

DR. LINDLEY: Kept you going.

MR. NELSON: Yes, it did.

DR. LINDLEY: That's great.

MR. NELSON: I had a little picture under that, I think. I don't know if I kept that or not.

DR. LINDLEY: Can I help you with that?

MR. NELSON: It might not even be in there.

DR. LINDLEY: It looks like there may be another one underneath that.

MR. NELSON: It may not be the one I was going to show you. No, that's my dad and my mother and my wife and my sister. That's when I went to ??? They're taking me to ??? I had one picture that I was going to bring and show you people. This is a picture of me standing in front of a B-29, that's all it was. I thought you'd like to see what the 29 looked like as if you didn't know.

DR. LINDLEY: Those are important cards.

MR. NELSON: I guess I didn't include that picture. It was kind of one of my bragging pictures. Oh, yeh, here they are. Well, that was a 29 there, or 61.

DR. LINDLEY: I like your uniform.



MR. NELSON: I went home, my wife looked at my legs and she said I was black and I was. There's the uniform. Here is one, Foreign Wars, American Legion, that's about all I did. I didn't do much but I'm glad I didn't miss it.

DR. LINDLEY: Well, I think you did a lot. I think all of you did a lot. Our country owes you a great debt of gratitude for what you did. Your sacrifice I think is something our whole country appreciates.

Transcribed March 19, 2011, by Eunice Gary.