

## ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

AL HIEGEL

Today is 9/18/05. I'm interviewing Mr. Al Hiegel. This interview is in the Fredericksburg High School, one of the rooms at the Okinawa Symposium. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife for the preservation of the historical information related to this site. Al, where and when were you born?

MR. HIEGEL: I was born in Conway, Arkansas, and lived all my life there except two years in the navy during World War II. I was born in 1926.

MR. SMITH: What was the name of your parents?

MR. HIEGEL: Peter P. and Mary F. Hiegel.

MR. SMITH: And what was your mother's maiden name?

MR. HIEGEL: Maiden name was Favre?

MR. SMITH: Did you have siblings, brothers and sisters?

MR. HIEGEL: There were five of us in the family. I had an older brother that was in the coast guard on a destroyer escort in the Atlantic and I was next in line as far as children were concerned. I joined the navy right out of high school in 1944 and the other three were too young to be in the war.

MR. SMITH: Both of you get through alright?

MR. HIEGEL: Yes, we did, both of us came home.

MR. SMITH: Great, great. Where and when did you enlist?

MR. HIEGEL: Enlisted in Little Rock, I think it was about June of 1944, and right at the end of the school year I went right into the navy.

MR. SMITH: Why did you pick the navy?

MR. HIEGEL: I didn't want to dig foxholes and I kind of had a bad right foot and right leg and I didn't think I could keep up with the infantry so I joined the navy.

MR. SMITH: Where did you take your boot training?

MR. HIEGEL: Boot training was in San Diego.

MR. SMITH: And they took you by train from Little Rock to...

MR. HIEGEL: By train from Little Rock to San Diego and went back through my hometown on the way to San Diego and waved at all of my family. They called it a cattle car at the time, an old train car and they put seats in it and we were gone. For some reason they gave me the job to carry all of the records of the group that was going to San Diego that was under my care on the way out there.

MR. SMITH: How many were in your group?

MR. HIEGEL: About twenty-five.

MR. SMITH: Twenty-five, quite a group then.

MR. HIEGEL: Right.

MR. SMITH: All going to the same...

MR. HIEGEL: All going to San Diego.

MR. SMITH: When was the date when you enlisted?

MR. HIEGEL: In June of '44.

MR. SMITH: Let's back up. Where were you on December 7, 1941?

MR. HIEGEL: I would be in the first year of high school in Conway, Arkansas.

MR. SMITH: You remember that date?

MR. HIEGEL: Oh, yeh.

MR. SMITH: What was your reaction?

MR. HIEGEL: I was too young I think to really worry about it and really never thought I would get into the middle of it and it didn't bother me all that much, but I did.

MR. SMITH: You thought we might finish it before you got old enough.

MR. HIEGEL: Right.

MR. SMITH: Okay, let's go back. Now you're in San Diego. Tell us about your training.

MR. HIEGEL: We did all types of training of course in just standard boot camp. We did all the calisthenics, boating, rowing, we learned about the navy and the different ships and how to take an ole wooden gun and stand guard over the movie theater all night and that sort of thing. We just learned how to trust each other and they ran our tails off there. I gained fifteen pounds, I think it was.

MR. SMITH: Right, but you were in pretty good condition weren't you?

MR. HIEGEL: Right.

MR. SMITH: You learned to work as a team pretty much.

MR. HIEGEL: Work as a team, right. We would stand up on a high saw horse and let ourselves fall over backwards and a group of them would catch you on the back side and that was teamwork.

MR. SMITH: How long did boot camp last at that time?

MR. HIEGEL: I think it was six weeks.

MR. SMITH: About six weeks.

MR. HIEGEL: Then we got leave and went home for a few days and then back again and went in to radar training after that.

MR. SMITH: Okay, when you finished boot camp were you seaman 2<sup>nd</sup> class?

MR. HIEGEL: Seaman 2<sup>nd</sup> class. You were an apprentice seaman to begin with and then seaman 2<sup>nd</sup> class.

MR. SMITH: How long did radar training last?

MR. HIEGEL: Radar was actually just about a month, it wasn't too long. We took radar training at Point Loma there in San Diego and they gave us a battery of tests. One of them was as a radioman and I guess I didn't do too good on Morse Code. Then they flashed some scenes up on the wall and they would have a circle there and inside that circle would be squares and triangles and so, a dozen of each one. You'd look at that for about three seconds they'd cut it off and then you tell them what was most in that circle. I could tell them pretty good while I was looking at it.

MR. SMITH: You had a good reaction time.

MR. HIEGEL: I think that's what got me; they figured I could look at a radar screen and know what I was looking at.

MR. SMITH: What was your duty assignment from there?

MR. HIEGEL: I went to a Marine base up near Los Angeles and stayed up there for about two or three weeks. Then on February 14, 1945, I left the United States aboard a troop ship. It was packed tight with soldiers and sailors and nearly all of them got sick and it was one big mess, one big mess. It took us seemed like weeks to get to Hawaii. We were going to Hawaii.

MR. SMITH: Were you in a convoy or were you by yourself?

MR. HIEGEL: We were mostly by our selves with a destroyer with us.

MR. SMITH: You had the destroyer escort and you zigzagged going over, do you remember?

MR. HIEGEL: I'm not sure we zigzagged or not on the way over.

MR. SMITH: You probably did because I think each skipper had standing orders when they were by themselves they were supposed to zigzag but maybe the destroyer escort was all you needed. I don't know but I know that the skippers did have that standing order. Okay, you get to Hawaii and what happens?

MR. HIEGEL: Well, went on the navy base there and they told me it's going to be two weeks before you can get a leave and go to a Honolulu weekend. Well, two weeks were up and I signed up to go to Honolulu to go a couple of days off and they said no. Don't go there right now go over in this building they're waiting on you want to talk to you over there. So I went over there and this captain somebody's lieutenant sitting behind the desk and I stood in front of his desk and saluted him. He looked at my records, hmm, radar operator. Yes sir. He said what kind of a ship would you like to be on? I said, "Well, aircraft carrier." So he said what do you want on an aircraft carrier for? Well, I don't know, I've always loved airplanes. He hem hawed around a little bit and then he said I tell you what, U. S. S INDEPENDENCE carrier is right out here in the dock, gather up your stuff and get on.

MR. SMITH: Get aboard.

MR. HIEGEL: So I never did have leave, I never did. I went right to war.

MR. SMITH: Never got to Honolulu.

MR. HIEGEL: Right.

MR. SMITH: Well, that's just as well. Okay, and you were assigned as a radar man aboard the ship right away?

MR. HIEGEL: I was assigned radar man right away aboard that ship. Most of the boys on the ship had been in the war at least a couple of years and they were old salts and here I was right out of boot camp and just very few weeks' radar school. Those ole salts would do anything to you they wanted to and you can't fight back. You don't know any better and they asked me to follow this seaman and I followed him. They gave me a bunk in the library, a little place about twelve feet square down in the bowels of the aft of the ship. It looked alright to me so I took the bunk and the next day we left to go to war. They ran that ship's flank speed wide open to Ulithi so we would be there in time for the Okinawa campaign.

MR. SMITH: You were going to join the task force?

MR. HIEGEL: Right. I was right above the screws underneath there so the whole ship vibrates down in there all night long. The next day I said I've got to get out of there. I was in my radar room and CIC room which is right close there and rubbed shoulders with different ones. The photography boys were in my unit and I asked one of them don't you have a bunk somewhere that I can get out of that library down there. Yeh, we've got one over the hatch, it's about seven feet up. I said, well, I'll take it. So I did and I spent the year way up off the deck above the hatch and it was quieter and real nice. I knew enough about photography that I could pull out one of his drawers that had all these film in it and pick me out a film that I thought was a good action picture. I would print this picture and maybe enlarge it to an eight by ten and run it through the baths that it needed and the

drier. I kept all of those and sent them home after the war so I was real lucky that I stayed in there.

MR. SMITH: Let's back up a little bit. Where were you issued your clothing, when you left boot camp?

MR. HIEGEL: Of course, we were issued clothing when we first arrived in San Diego.

MR. SMITH: Yeh, but you just had your blues, your denims and did you have whites and the whole...

MR. HIEGEL: They gave us whites and dress blues and shoes and sneakers and black shoes and the whole works right there. You walked across this table, it was about four feet high, they'd just reach back in the store room and hand you something and they'd measure your feet and hand you a pair of shoes.

MR. SMITH: Did they issue blankets?

MR. HIEGEL: Oh, yeh.

MR. SMITH: You had US issued blankets?

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, had my own blanket.

MR. SMITH: Do you still have it?

MR. HIEGEL: No, still got my dress blues and dress whites.

MR. SMITH: They don't fit too well, do they?

MR. HIEGEL: No, they don't.

MR. SMITH: How about the meals aboard ship, were they pretty good?

MR. HIEGEL: They were real good as far as I was concerned. That was one of the things I was on KP duty an awful lot because nobody else wanted the job. They said you go do this and so I did and they wanted to know if I wanted to cook or dish out the food.

I didn't know anything about cooking so I'll just dish it out. So I worked in the galley there for a long time

MR. SMITH: Did any of the guys that left Arkansas with you come aboard the INDEPENDENCE?

MR. HIEGEL: No. When I joined the navy in Little Rock I joined with my best friend and we were going to the navy together. We joined together and swore in together and they sent him to Idaho and they sent me to San Diego. So we were on our own.

MR. SMITH: Did you ever run across him again?

MR. HIEGEL: No, I didn't.

MR. SMITH: So you had to make new friends once you got aboard.

MR. HIEGEL: I didn't know anybody on that ship.

MR. SMITH: Tell us about your chief and some of your officers, any of those that stick in your mind?

MR. HIEGEL: Well, no, not necessarily chiefs and officers. I had my radar screen and I can get into that in about a minute about all of my battle stations and that type thing.

MR. SMITH: We'll find a good place to bring that in. You remember the skipper aboard the INDEPENDENCE, probably a full captain.

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, he was a captain but right at the moment it escapes me

MR. SMITH: How frequently did you write letters home? Did you correspond with your folks pretty often?

MR. HIEGEL: I tried but sometime it was a month between letters getting to us, you know, from the States, and, of course, it was all V mail at the time.

MR. SMITH: You weren't able to send any of those pictures that you developed.

MR. HIEGEL: Oh, no.

MR. SMITH: Did you receive mail pretty frequently?

MR. HIEGEL: Pretty good. I had a girlfriend back home and I was always waiting on letters.

MR. SMITH: Did you eventually marry her?

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, I did. I've been married fifty-eight years.

MR. SMITH: That's good. Do you have any special recollections related to packages? Did you get packages of cookies or anything from your mother or girlfriend?

MR. HIEGEL: Not a whole lot.

MR. SMITH: What did you miss most about civilian life when you were aboard ship?

MR. HIEGEL: I think it would be a full night's sleep. I went for one solid year without a full night's sleep.

MR. SMITH: Four on and four off most of the time?

MR. HIEGEL: Right.

MR. SMITH: How about the weather? Was the INDEPENDENCE a pretty seaworthy ship?

MR. HIEGEL: I'll get into that a little later, too. We got into one typhoon and that sort of thing.

MR. SMITH: Why don't you tell us about your ship? This might be a good place to bring it in.

MR. HIEGEL: Okay. My ship was a CVL which stands for Carrier Vessel Light and it was converted from a cruiser hull. At the beginning of the war, the United States wanted more guns and larger guns; then as the war progressed, they decided that they needed

more carriers and they built three size carriers, one was the CVE which was an escort carrier.

MR. SMITH: Was the CVL larger or smaller?

MR. HIEGEL: CVL was larger than a CVE. CVE was a carrier vessel escort which was the smallest and they called them jeep carriers. It carried about fifteen to twenty airplanes depending on whether their wings folded up or not and that sort of thing. Then they built the CVLs. My carrier was the USS INDEPENDENCE and it was the first CVL that was built therefore you hear about the Independence class carriers. They built nine of those during the war. My carrier began as a CV, if you look in history books you'll see USS INDEPENDENCE CV22. After the first shake-down cruise and so on they saw they had a new class carrier coming in here they changed it to CVL, that's where the light part came in and it was converted from a light cruiser hull. The top deck was turned into a hangar deck on this ship. Then above that they built a run way flight deck across the top and then the tower over on the right side and it was pretty tall, heavy, and a crane up there at the top. They elbowed all the stacks over to the right side to get them out of the way and actually we were top heavy. We wallowed all over that Pacific.

MR. SMITH: Had quite a roll, did it?

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, it never would sit real quiet in the bay, we would roll over and back. We'd look at anything else and it was solid as a rock out there. We carried about thirty-three airplanes and we could get about thirty flying.

MR. SMITH: Were they mostly fighters?

MR. HIEGEL: Fighter planes. By 1945 most of the Japanese shipping was gone and we had three or four TBMs aboard and rest of them were F6F Hellcat fighter bomber type airplanes.

MR. SMITH: Later versions of the fighters started out with the F4Fs and then went up.

MR. HIEGEL: My ship started with the F4F Wildcat on it and then it went to a F6F Hellcat. By the time I got on it we had all hellcats and a few torpedo bombers which they very seldom used.

MR. SMITH: Did you get to talk very much with the pilots?

MR. HIEGEL: Yes, because I was radar operator and our radar set was right there at the CIC room. All the pilots came through the CIC room to their ready room when they would go out and back. Anyway, back to these aircrafts, the larger aircraft carriers, the largest one was the CV and it carried up to right close to a hundred airplanes. So they built three size carriers during that war and by the end of the war they had built ninety-nine carriers.

MR. SMITH: I know it was right close to a hundred and we started with about three.

MR. HIEGEL: That's right. The ship after they built it went on a shake down cruise and it had five-inch guns on the bow and the fantail and then they had anti-aircraft guns which were 40mms and 20mms. The five-inch gun during shake down cruise had so much recoil and all it was tearing the ship apart, so they got back to the port and they took them off and put quad 40s which was four 40mms on the bow and fan tail. So we didn't have any 5-inch guns.

MR. SMITH: The 40mm would have been the largest then?

MR. HIEGEL: That's right, the largest one we had.

MR. SMITH: The light cruisers, what did they have? They didn't have 16" guns; they had a 14 or a 12 or something like that.

MR. HIEGEL: Something like that. I'm not sure what they had.

MR. SMITH: It's sorta strange that your hull couldn't take a 5 inch.

MR. HIEGEL: It wouldn't take a five-inch gun. They must have only used the keel and then the rest of the whole ship was built for a carrier after they laid the keel.

MR. SMITH: You said it was top heavy anyway so that...

MR. HIEGEL: They widened the fender of the ship out five feet or two and one-half feet on each side or so to give it a little more stability but it didn't help much. We were still top heavy. Of course, we were an aircraft carrier and the first night landing that was ever made on an aircraft carrier was made on the INDEPENDENCE. Of course, the crew they were talking about this and they said oh, that crazy son of a gun, he's nuts. Nobody lands on one of these things at night, but he did. They started to refine that operation and the INDEPENDENCE turned out to be the first night carrier that there ever was. The night carrier their job was to keep airplanes over the fleet all night so no Japanese or Kamikaze or whatever could come in. They were protection. My ship got into the battle of Tarawa, I think it got eight battle stars total, but the battle of Tarawa is just one torpedo and it killed seventeen boys at the battle of Tarawa. There was two other torpedoes hit the ship and dented it. If they would have gone off it would have sunk but luckily it didn't. So they only took that one torpedo and it was on the starboard side aft of the ship and what we called the gun bucket that had 40mm guns in it. It blew it all the way across the deck and out into the ocean on the opposite side. It strewed boys all the way across. I am the

historian for the reunion group and I have these boys' names and I've contacted many of their families and sent them copies of the stories about this and all that stuff.

MR. SMITH: Tell a little bit about the reunion groups, you meet annually?

MR. HIEGEL: Now we meet annually and this next October we will meet in Kansas City and I think we have about eighty still attend the reunion group.

MR. SMITH: You will meet in Kansas City and about 80 fellows show up.

MR. HIEGEL: Yep, that's right.

MR. SMITH: It gets smaller every year.

MR. HIEGEL: Smaller every year. I think about up to the battle of Okinawa here I came aboard in Hawaii, of course, and went to Ulithi and joined the fleet there. They have a large harbor at Ulithi and Task Force 58.3.4.5, I think it was, all gathered there. It was after the battle of Iwo Jima and we went to the battle of Okinawa then with that fast carrier fleet.

MR. SMITH: Who was the admiral in charge, do you recall?

MR. HIEGEL: Admiral Halsey. I was lucky enough to be aboard the only carrier that did not get hit at Okinawa. We got a boy or two killed from friendly fire. The other ships shooting at the Japanese kamikaze on down and the flack killed a boy on our own ship. They dove in the water all around us but never did really hit the ship. And, of course, most of the time I'd be on the radar shed or I was in a firefighting party. You could hear those 40mms going off and when the 20s started popping you knew it was time to hide. I'll get into that in a little bit but...

MR. SMITH: Let me ask a question. Did your ship pick some of the survivors of the ships that were hit by kamikaze?

MR. HIEGEL: No, I watched the FRANKLIN blow up and we traveled through the waters where it had been. We would see boys in the water; most of them had a kapok life jacket on. We would radio a destroyer and he would pick them up. They would not stop that carrier for any reason. We would see them we would wave at them and we'd hope somebody would come back and pick them up. Plus that we were zigzagging the whole while which stopped the submarines from getting a bead on us. I knew one of the boys from my hometown that was on the FRANKLIN and in the water for a couple of hours but he got picked up.

MR. SMITH: You saw him after the war?

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh. Back to our task force we had three of them out there which included battleships, cruisers, fast carriers and destroyers. We did not have any destroyer escorts or CVEs because they were too slow. They could not keep up. When we would catapult airplanes and land airplanes, we would always have to head into the wind at about twenty-five knots. These other ships could not keep up so they were not part of it. That was the greatest armada that was ever assembled on the face of the earth right then. The navy sustained more losses during the battle of Okinawa than any other battle the navy ever fought.

MR. SMITH: And that was primarily due to the kamikaze.

MR. HIEGEL: Kamikaze boys. We had two pilots that were navy aces aboard our ship at different times and one of them was Butch O'Hare that the Chicago Field is named after.

MR. SMITH: Did you ever get a chance to talk with him or anything?

MR. HIEGEL: No, that was before I got on it. It was not during the battle of Okinawa.

MR. SMITH: Yeh, he was off by Okinawa.

MR. HIEGEL: He was on there and the other one was Vraciu. I think his name was. Of course, to be a navy ace you have to down, I believe, at least five Japanese planes and so we had two of them aboard.

MR. SMITH: That was the same in the air force as I recall. To become an ace you had to have five kills they called it.

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh. Do we want to get into my battle stations?

MR. SMITH: Yeh, go ahead. That will be interesting to people.

MR. HIEGEL: I had three different places that I could go depending on what I was doing at the time; to general quarters or GQ as we called it. During the battle of Okinawa we stayed at general quarters days and nights on end, seemed like forever because the kamikazes were always somewhere around and we needed those hatches latched down locked and all.

MR. SMITH: Let me ask you a question. Your station at the radar was not considered a general quarters, huh?

MR. HIEGEL: Yes.

MR. SMITH: You could have stayed, that would be one of them.

MR. HIEGEL: Yes, that would be one. My radar was designated as a SG which was search gear and my radar would pick up our other ships. The whole fleet tells us where they were and what direction they were traveling and all that sort of thing and would also pick up aircraft. It would tell us say, a Japanese airplane I picked him up twenty miles out. Okay, we had another radar set called a SK and it was like a big bed spring, if you remember those, and it would tell us about how many degrees above the horizon that

airplane was. Alright you could use some triangulation mathematics and tell his altitude and then we could track him awhile and tell what his direction of travel was so we could direct our hellcats around behind him and shoot this airplane down and maybe he didn't even know we were around.

MR. SMITH: You could help your gunnery team as well as the navigator.

MR. HIEGEL: Oh, yes. We were zigzagging the whole while and we would go so many minutes or seconds in one direction and turn to another degree and all these ships would have to turn at the same time. If you get an old battleship or something turned the wrong direction it takes a long time for that guy to get straightened out and to avoid a collision. We helped to do this and especially at night time. Say we picked up this Japanese kamikaze or whatever out here and we would turn this information in to the CIC room. They had a man behind the big square plastic plotter board that wrote backwards and we would track him and put him on there. The air officer would send his airplanes out there and our F6F Hellcats had some airborne radar on them. In those days only reach a couple of miles or so for an airplane, so we'd vector around behind the Japanese and then go into radio silence. Those of us that knew what was going on would go topside and watch the fireworks.

MR. SMITH: You'd have a grandstand seat.

MR. HIEGEL: Oh, yes. One of my duty stations was on the bridge standing right by the OD, officer of the day. I had a remote PPI (plan position indicator) scope up there with the hood on it to darken it so I could show the OD where the other ships were and what direction they were traveling and how far out the other airplanes, Japs or whatever, and where the rain storm was and that type thing.

MR. SMITH: Do you recall did you have certain destroyers attached to the INDEPENDENCE?

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, we always had a destroyer behind us to pick up downed pilots that had to ditch into the sea.

R. SMITH: Would it be the same ones or did it rotate?

MR. HIEGEL: It kind of rotated around. My heroes during that war were the pilots, many of the pilots didn't come back, many of them came back shot up and had to ditch. Then my other heroes were these boys on the destroyer picket lines between me and Japan. One good thing that we had going for us was that the kamikazes had to travel quite a ways over water like we spoke about this morning. Most of them were downed before they could get over the fleet and if they got over the fleet all hell broke loose. I have seen them shot down, some of them would sneak in and we didn't even know they were around til things started shootin' up; be standing out in the open bridge and I'd see that ole Jap catch fire. I've seen the Japs jump out in a parachute and they'd take gunnery practice on that guy on the way down. They couldn't stop shooting Japs.

MR. SMITH: Do you recall any exercise on one of your guys that ditched picking him up?

MR. HIEGEL: I saw many airplanes that ditched. If an airplane came back from a raid or especially a bombing raid over Japan itself and so on, if their hydraulics were shot out and the wheels wouldn't come down they would have to ditch, or some of the control surfaces were bad and they were afraid they couldn't come down. You see, we had a straight deck and if things didn't go right they would tear up all these good airplanes on the front so they would tell them to ditch. What they would do is bring that airplane

down real close to the water, about three feet off the water, start pulling back on that stick and slowing it up getting more angle of attack and adding power so it was drag in. That is as slow as an airplane will fly and the tail wheel would begin digging a furrow in that water and when it did they would lose all air speed and that airplane would hit the water. That big ole three-blade propeller with radial engine and all it was all heavy and it would throw water way up in the air and it would rain back down and you couldn't really see what was going on at that time. The pilot would have his seat belt on but soon as they hit the water he yanked that seat belt off and he had his Mae West life jacket on where he could float, had his canopy back where he could get out and by the time this water rained back down where we could see what was going on, the pilot would be floating up here in the tail and half of that airplane would be going down behind him.

MR. SMITH: Would they usually try to ditch next to the carrier?

MR. HIEGEL: They would ditch fairly close to the carrier but the destroyers picked them up and bring them back to us. I never saw one really drown or get hurt bad in that water landing.

MR. SMITH: Their basic training that was the way they would make most of their landings with that tail low.

MR. HIEGEL: That tail low and our navy pilots liked the F6F Hellcat because you could see over the engines and the nose better for a landing. The marines flew the F4U Corsairs and if you landed one of those on a carrier they would make a circular flight pattern with the head hanging out the left side. Pilots sat fourteen feet from their propeller back toward the tail and he could not see even the ship on final approach. So they would come in a circulation flight path, their head hanging out the left side and then

right before they landed straighten everything out right quick and try to land. So that's the reason that most of our pilots liked the Hellcats. Anyway, my other general quarters station was in the fire fighting party and because my other stations were taken, go to this fire fighting party. It was about three decks down and we would stay there in what we called flash gear. Flash gear was something to keep you from getting burned up. If a bomb went off in other side of a hatch in another room and it blew that door open and a ball of fire came through, if you could live through that ball of fire you could probably help fight the fire and save your ship. We had a pair of kind of overalls that we would put on bottom up, then a jacket, long gloves, helmet, etc.

MR. SMITH: Was that asbestos gear?

MR. HIEGEL: No, it wasn't asbestos.

MR. SMITH: It was some other fire resistant material.

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, and we had a jacket we'd put on and we'd put gloves on that came up nearly to the elbow. We had helmets and a visor over our eyes and we stayed like that the whole time, and they would bring us sandwiches and coffee something to keep us alive.

MR. SMITH: Did you actually get into some fire fighting?

MR. HIEGEL: Never did, never did get hit. Only what I learned in boot camp, we had fire fighting courses in boot camp. We were an airfield for the pilots is what we were there for. The Japanese kamikazes the main ships they wanted to sink were the carriers. I think I was lucky because I was not on the largest carrier and they would go after the largest ones.

MR. SMITH: That was number one.

MR. HIEGEL: That was number one target so we were one of the number ones that they wanted to sink. All our other fleets assignments were to keep us afloat so were right in the middle and with my radar set we always kind of knew what was going on out there. The B-29s flew off of Saipan and Tinian and Guam at that time and they would cross over the fleet and they looked like wagons on my radar set. Down toward the end of the war and they were ready to drop the A bomb they told us to get out of the way. So we were about three-hundred miles away and we didn't know when they would drop the first one anyway. Of course, everyone was jubilant, you know, we were big time like the army boys and marines were when they dropped that bomb, said, oh, boy, we want to quit, you know. We knew when they were going to drop the second one and we listened but we were just too far, we never did see a thing. After the treaty that was signed, the next day they had a victory parade which you don't ever hear anything about. This victory parade was every airplane they could get flying they marshaled together out a way from the fleet and there was a thousand of them came in over the fleet right low, right over the fleet, just roared and those big ole radial engines sure sounded good. All had a victory parade. We sent airplanes into Tokyo and Honshu and on up to Hokiado and they bombed a lot of plants and things up in northern islands, too. Some of our planes would get shot up over land and the first thing they would do was head to sea. If they could ditch out at sea they would stay until that night and then they had a little generator that they could turn and submarines could home in on that signal. They would pick them up, give them to a destroyer, and they'd give them back to us. Halsey led his fleet into three typhoons during that war and I was in the last one. The second one toward the end of '44 there was I think three destroyers rolled over. When you enter a

big storm like that the first thing they do is try take on fuel and use it for ballast way low so they can keep right side up. If they couldn't do that, the last ditch thing was to flood them with sea water and they didn't do either one and I think that's the reason. You get one of those heavy ships upside down it goes to the bottom and they lost almost every man. I was in one typhoon. We were six miles from the eye of that thing and that carrier...

MR. SMITH: You picked that thing up on your radar?

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, but I don't know. Halsey was so bad about going after those Japanese he would do anything, he'd stay in close.

MR. SMITH: That's where he got the name Bull, wasn't it?

MR. HIEGEL: Bull Halsey. I heard that carrier would list all the way from 30 to 32 degrees, on up to 40 degrees, somewhere in there. For some reason it would list roll to the left awhile and it would gradually straighten up and roll to the right the same distance. Why it would do that I don't know but it didn't hang on one side or another, it would stay on a constant roll over and back. You don't have little ole choppy waves out there, or rollers like you see on your television, you've got swells. Well, these big ole swells would lift that carrier up and you could see under the bow of that thing and you could see the screws on the rear if you went out into a gun bucket. As this swell was trying to push you forward all the time and you'd see a little screw vibrating back here, finally that thing would quiver a little bit and then start to move, by the time it moved a little ways it was already on top of another one and for days on end. We did all that sort of thing.

MR. SMITH: Tell us a little bit about the typhoon that you sailed through.

MR. HIEGEL: Well, the station that I said was the talker for the OD and at that time the OD stood on the super structure of the ship out in the open. That's where I was out in the open but anyway the only way I had to get there was to come out of the CIC room into the catwalk. I was staying in that catwalk during this typhoon now. I was staying in that catwalk until that ship started to roll, say it was starting to roll to the left a little bit before it got flattened centered out I was going in a dead run to the other side of this super structure and I'd get hold of the ladder and I'd hold on to that ladder while this thing rolled back behind me to the left and I'd stay there until it started rolling and before it got centered up again I'd shimmy up that ladder like a monkey and I'd be up there beside the OD. I actually had suction cups on the bottom of my shoes to keep me from being blown over the side. I'd walk across the deck, of course, we had a wood deck and tie downs all built into it and then right around the corner from the OD on the super structure was the captain's chair so he could see the whole flight deck from one end to the other. We had an airplane that came in and landed, made a bad landing, rolled up and hit the barrier cables and that nosed it down into the flight deck and it rolled over upside down and the tail of that airplane ended up in the captain's chair. He wasn't in the chair, he was lucky. The F6F Hellcats had the belly tank full of gas and he still had gas in his and that thing ruptured and caught fire and then spewed fire everywhere out each side of the flight deck and I thought things were going to burn up but it didn't. We were talking about asbestos suits, we had boys that we called hot poppas and they had on asbestos suits and masks and helmets and all. They would jump up on the wings of that thing and help that pilot out of there before he got burned up.

MR. SMITH: Did the pilot survive?

MR. HIEGEL: Oh, yeh, he survived it. When an airplane comes in to a carrier across the fantail and if things aren't exactly right the landing signal officer would wave him off. The first thing he did give it full power and these radial engines take a little bit for them to spool up and make a left turn away from the superstructure and the other airplanes and go back around. We had one that came in and landed and his tail hook caught. He didn't think it caught and he gives that thing full power and started off to the left and it unreeled the cables. The airplane was in the water down here dragging along the side with the pilot in it. He crawled out and they threw him a knotted rope and he crawled out of it and then right after that it sunk. He was lucky, too. We had one that landed and he figured he'd made a good landing, his tail hook would have caught but, anyway, he rolled on forward. All these other airplanes are parked at the front of the deck; we had a straight deck, barrier cable in between the two like we were talking about. He ran through that barrier cable and tore that barrier cable all to pieces and it wrapped around his prop and he rolled into these airplanes up ahead. It killed another pilot that had already made a good landing and he was doing his paperwork and this cable popped him over the head. That happened about ten feet above my head; I was in the CIC room at the time. There was never a dull moment on aircraft carrier and a war.

MR. SMITH: I imagine that's true.

MR. HIEGEL: After the war ended our airplanes flew off the ship and they welded bunks on the hangar deck.

MR. SMITH: Where were you at this time?

MR. HIEGEL: We were right off of Japan there a little ways. Even after the treaty was signed we still flew what they called sorties over looking for prisoner of war camps and

just doing patrol duty. It was a few days before we actually got into the harbor and anchored and I went on leave or whatever on the land there.

MR. SMITH: Was this Tokyo Bay now or what?

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, actually I went into Yokohama and it was flattened just like Tokyo was and all the houses were down and the people couldn't speak any English. The only one I ever heard one word that the kids learn right quick when we'd walk by the kids say sista, wanted us to visit his sister back behind. That's all he ever knew. It had a stench to it of burned human flesh and we looked around. I stayed out there about two hours and I got back on the ship and I never did go back. Our airplanes flew off then and we welded bunks on the hangar deck and we brought the boys home from the South Pacific. We made three trips with a full load of troops bringing them back to the United States.

MR. SMITH: All the way into the West coast?

MR. HIEGEL: Yeh, well from Guam, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, all around in there. We'd pick up some from Eniwetok. Our first load that we brought in we came into Portland Oregon. We came in through the Columbia River and you talk about something looking good, those hills full of trees, this was America. Those boys were elated that they made it back home and we came in past all these sawmills all these logs out there with ropes around them tied up another thing, it was an education of its own. We branched off from the Columbia River onto the Wilamet River which is a little bitty river of sorts and that ole carrier almost drug bottom up there. We docked there in Portland and Kaiser had his band out there, his band was playing and all these people out there waiting on their husbands and boyfriends. It was cool and rainy and they were jammed up so tight trying

to get closer to that ship and get a good look at it they were fainting some of them out there, you know.

MR. SMITH: Was the INDEPENDENCE built by Kaiser?

MR. HIEGEL: No, I don't think so. It was built over in the northeast but Kaiser didn't build it but we were the largest ship that ever docked at Portland, Oregon. I remember that we were there during Memorial Day or some time and they had a big parade and all. One of the things they did that I remember most they had a submarine that was there away from the crowd and they had on the top deck of that submarine solid red roses. That submarine came on up until it got right in front of the crowd and he blew his ballast or whatever and it just sunk to the bottom and left all these roses out there on the water.

MR. SMITH: Well, you know, Portland is called the rose city.

MR. HIEGEL: City of Roses, that's right. Our other two loads of troops came into Los Angeles or Long Beach there at Los Angeles and San Francisco. At that time after the last load disembarked we began chipping paint and painting the ship and getting it all ready to go to the Bikini A Bomb tests.

MR. SMITH: What's the time?

MR. HIEGEL: I don't remember when that was exactly.

MR. SMITH: Still in '45?

MR. HIEGEL: Still '45. It might have been the first part of '46.

MR. SMITH: Early part of '46.

MR. HIEGEL: I think so. We had the ship all painted up and we were tying on goats and billy goats, this sort of thing, chicken coops on top flight deck, getting it ready to go back out to Bikini for the A bomb test. I had enough points built up, you got a point

system that you get so many points for overseas, so many points for different battles and so I had enough points to come home so I did. I left it at that time.

MR. SMITH: What time was this?

MR. HIEGEL: Early '46. So my ship then they took it out and they had a crew on there took it out to Bikini and tied it out in the bay and it was one of their A bomb targets.

MR. SMITH: They were actually a part of the test.

MR. HIEGEL: They were going to sink that sucker so the crew got anchored and they got off and they went so many miles away. They watched the test go on and the first test was the test above water. It went off and it just bent that ship and tore it all to pieces and so on. Within a couple of days I think some of them went back aboard and checking it out and they didn't know really how radioactive that sucker really was. So it stayed there and then just a few days or weeks later the second A bomb test was an underwater test. It blew that ship way up in the air and it came back down and it still didn't sink. So they towed it to one of the islands out there, I don't know which one it was, and then they towed it into Hawaii and it stayed there for awhile. They studied it there and they brought it into San Francisco or Alameda and they tied it down there for a few months. It stayed there and they studied it there, everybody studied the ship, and they finally pulled it out about thirty miles west into the ocean. From San Francisco there's some Farallon islands out in there.

MR. SMITH: Along the Farallon

MR. HIEGEL: Farallon Islands, that's where it was, that's where it was sunk. They finally used target practice with torpedo on it, I think, and sunk it along with about two hundred fifty-five gallon barrels of other radioactive material they didn't know what to

do with so they sunk it out there. Now the people of San Francisco have a fairly high incidence or rate of cancer and some of them got to thinking that maybe that ship and the currents bring that in and they're getting radiation and so on. They found my name on my website, and I'll give you that website in a minute if you'd like to have it, and asked me where the ship was. They didn't know and I had all the stories. Being a historian I knew where the ship was so I gave them the coordinates to them, the latitude and longitude, and I think it's down about two hundred feet or so but that's the last I heard of it. I don't think they ever went out to pick it up. But the CVLs are all gone, none of them afloat. The USS CABOT was the last one and they fought to save it and make a museum out of that CVL but it finally went to the scrap yard and they're all gone. They have a mock up of the flight deck and so on of the CABOT in Florida in Pensacola and it's a pretty good mockup. That's about the end of my story there, you know.

MR. SMITH: Is it near the air museum there in Pensacola, do you know?

MR. HIEGEL: It's inside the building this mock up of the USS CABOT Flight Deck in Pensacola. That's the closest thing to a CVL that there still is.

MR. SMITH: You ended off on the INDEPENDENCE, tell us about you now. You got out on points and then what happened?

MR. HIEGEL: Well, I came home and got married and started raising babies like all the rest of us did. My dad owned a lumber company, lumber, hardware, building materials, glass, plumbing, everything to build a home. I got into that business with him and he finally decided to retire. My brother bought into the business along with me and my brother and I ran it for many years. I was in the lumber business for about fifty years until I retired.

MR. SMITH: You never did take advantage of the G. I. Bill to go to school and buy a house?

MR. HIEGEL: Never did.

MR. SMITH: That was one of the better things that...

MR. HIEGEL: I went to a little bit of schooling in Little Rock, then collected what we call rocking chair money. If you didn't have a job you could withdraw a little bit so I went to Florida on the rocking chair money until I went to work for my dad. As historian of the reunion group, I put together a book of my memoirs which was about a hundred and thirty pages or so. It was copies of everything that I had sent home, all these stories and all this sort of thing. All the boys wanted one of those books, all my shipmates, so I published that book and I sold it to them at my cost so they would have something. A lot of them didn't even have a picture of the ship they were on. Well, as time rolled on the shipmates would give me material that they had and I didn't have and pictures and that sort of thing. We had a chaplain on there, catholic chaplain, and he died several years ago but his sister gave us all of his pictures. We've got a good record. So I put out a second book of memoirs of my shipmates and sold that to all these boys. There's been like three hundred of them. Three years ago everybody wanted one to leave with their kids show their family where they had been. Then I also put out what I call an album which had about twenty-five of my best eight by ten photos and good captions of when it was and what was going on describing that photograph, you know. So they all got one of those and we're well documented but if you watch your television and they talk about Halsey's fast carrier fleet they won't ever mention the CVL. The INDEPENDENCE is never mentioned. Have you ever seen it? Do you remember hearing it?

MR. SMITH: I remember the name is all.

MR. HIEGEL: We're hoping to maybe change that one of these days.

MR. SMITH: Tell us a little more about your emotion when you were released from active duty, the feeling when you went home. Do you recall? I'm sure you were happy to go back to civilian life.

MR. HIEGEL: I was. Actually I got transferred to Memphis which is close to my home about a hundred fifty-sixty miles. I would come home every weekend then for a couple of months before I got really mustered out. I worked in the control tower at the Naval Air Station in Memphis at Millington, Millington Naval Air Station. I would check out airplanes as the young pilots were learning how to fly. Students would roll out and I would check their numbers and see how long they were gone, check them back in, that was my job over there. Then I would ride a bus to Conway. One night I came into Conway and it was one big storm and I lived about two blocks from where I could get off the bus and walk home. It was after midnight when I came in and lightening and thunder and raining and I knocked on the door and my mother said were you out in that mess? I said I sure was. She said I won't ever worry about you again.

MR. SMITH: You could take care of yourself. What was your rate when you got out?

MR. HIEGEL: I was a 3<sup>rd</sup> class petty officer.

MR. SMITH: Thinking back what are your thoughts about the navy. Did you make a good selection?

MR. HIEGEL: I think I made a good choice and actually I enjoyed my time in the navy. I never did really worry about myself and I had plenty to eat and I was high and dry.

MR. SMITH: You said you enjoyed airplanes but you never learned to fly one of them.

MR. HIEGEL: I learned to fly after I got home. I joined the Civil Air Patrol and you could fly if you bought the gas. That's where I really learned to fly. I learned to love airplanes on this carrier and so I got my pilot's license in 1952 and I have been flying ever since. I'm still active, I still pass my physical, I've got two thousand eight hundred hours in flight time, pilot and command.

MR. SMITH: You have your own aircraft?

MR. HIEGEL: I have a 172 Cessna 4-place and I take up all my friends. It has made more friends for me than any other thing.

MR. SMITH: I'm sure it will. That's great. The way this thing is going to work now, the tape will be transcribed by transcribers and they're way, way behind in their transcriptions so it may be two or three years before you get a copy of this to review but you eventually will get a copy to review. Once you've made corrections or additions or deletions whatever you want, you send it back and then it will be finalized and it will end up in the archives of the Museum for future study for anybody interested in World War II. Is there any last thing you'd like to add, can you think of anything? You might give me your website.

MR. HIEGEL: Okay. [www.ussindependence-cvl22.com](http://www.ussindependence-cvl22.com), all low case letters and all my pictures are on there. You can fill your screen with a picture and you can read all about that photo and it's a nice web site.

MR. SMITH: On behalf of the museum, let me thank you very, very much for taking the time to give us your experiences and I think a lot of the future students will be really impressed with what the INDEPENDENCE did at Okinawa.

MR. HIEGEL: I hope they enjoy it. Thank you a lot, Mr. Ned.

MR. SMITH: Thank you.

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