

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

**NIMITZ EDUCATION AND RESEARCH CENTER
Fredericksburg, TX 78624**

Interview with

**GEORGE KEITH
U. S. NAVY
SEABEES**

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

KEITH, GEORGE

Two thousand and five we're at Fredericksburg High School doing interviews for the symposium for Okinawa. At this point we're interviewing Mr. George Keith who has agreed to share with us his experiences during World War II. This interview is taking place, as I indicated, in Fredericksburg, Texas, and the interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wild Life for the preservation of historical information related to this site. And at this point, the way we will start this interview, Mr. Keith, is just have you tell us in your own words, like start from the beginning where you were born and where you went to school and eventually how you ended up in the service and we'll let you carry it on from there.

MR. KEITH: I was born in a little small ? farm and county Sutton, Massachusetts, on a dairy farm and I stayed there while I went through high school and after school I stayed with the folks for about a year.

MR. RABALAIS: What did your folks do over in that area, they worked in town there?

MR. KEITH: Dairy farm.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, dairy farm.

MR. KEITH: Dairy farm and we grew cauliflower, cabbage, and Holstein, Guernseys and Jersey cattle, all milk cows. Us kids had to work on the farm after school and during

the summer so I decided this is not for me. So I went to work for New England Bell which was AT&T at the time. In May of '42 I enlisted in the navy Seabees.

MR. RABALAIS: So you went to high school there in Massachusetts?

MR. KEITH: Yes, in May, 1942, I enlisted in the Seabees, went through boot camp at Camp Allen; that was the 10th Battalion.

MR. RABALAIS: Where's Camp Allen at?

MR. KEITH: Norfolk, Virginia.

MR. RABALAIS: Is that a Seabee base camp, or is it navy?

MR. KEITH: It was something that was being built and it was about half built. It was a marine base, really, but they had barracks. Contractors hadn't even moved out of there yet.

MR. RABALAIS: Was it pretty much like a navy training?

MR. KEITH: Right. We had twenty-one days of boot camp and along with marine corporals as instructors. From there they sent us off to Fort Wynamie, California.

MR. RABALAIS: Wow, on the other side of the country! How did you all go, by train?

MR. KEITH: We went by train and...

MR. RABALAIS: How old were you about when you went in the Seabees? Were you were about eighteen, nineteen?

MR. KEITH: Twenty-one.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, twenty-one already.

MR. KEITH: From there we spent two months, I believe. The first of August we boarded a ship at San Francisco headed for somewhere which we didn't know.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you all get some extra training there in California?

MR. KEITH: Oh, yeh, rifles and everything. From there we ended up in Pearl Harbor which we wasn't supposed to. They put us up at ??? Naval Barracks and put us all up in headquarters company of the 10th Battalion stayed in Pearl Harbor.

MR. RABALAIS: What was your impression when you first saw Pearl Harbor and as you said to me earlier there was some evidence of destruction.

MR. KEITH: Of course, there was a lot of destruction. The WEST VIRGINIA and the CALIFORNIA were sitting on the bottom at the docks.

MR. RABALAIS: They hadn't raised them yet?

MR. KEITH: No. The ARIZONA of course was out where it is now, sunk. The OKLAHOMA was laying on its side and then there were several other small destroyers and stuff in there.

MR. RABALAIS: Were the people pretty jittery still at this point? This would have been late '42.

MR. KEITH: Yeh, the big majority of people working in the navy yards were civilians. By August they were all gone. It was all navy personnel. One of the first things that they done with the 10th Battalion, of course, I was an ex-employee of really AT&T and so all of a sudden a note came up on the bulletin board all people worked for AT&T please report to Captain Frazier in the navy yard. So that's where I went and stayed there two years switching equipment.

MR. RABALAIS: At AT&T you had had some training in this...

MR. KEITH: Oh, yes.

MR. RABALAIS: So you were really a good man to have in that area.

MR. KEITH: But I was working for two civilians and there was, I think, four of us from the navy Seabees working there. Then that was about two years.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you have to stand like guard duty or anything like that?

MR. KEITH: No, no.

MR. RABALAIS: You just had a job?

MR. KEITH: I just had a job. It was AIE in naval barracks and from there they shipped us out to ??? marine barracks. That was the 4th Marines Air Force. That's where a lot of things took place. Headquarters Company became a supply place for the rest of the Seabees south. If anybody ever saw a big container marked Mile 94 that came from the 10th Battalion Seabees headed down somewhere, I don't know where they were going.

MR. RABALAIS: During this period of time in '42 especially did they have any scares like maybe the Japanese submarines might be offshore or anything like that?

MR. KEITH: Not as I remember.

MR. RABALAIS: Not as you remember, okay. There probably were still some antiaircraft guns and things like that in placements here and there

MR. KEITH: Oh, absolutely. Schofield Barracks were torn up and Hickam field was torn up. It was one time when I was at the marine barracks I got in on a demonstration of a flame thrower. They put the nozzle on the Sherman tank. You know what that is, that's liquid jell.

MR. RABALAIS: Yeh, tank and flame thrower.

MR. KEITH: Boy oh boy. Roosevelt, I think it was James and Elliot, and some more and I think they backed that tank off about fifty yards from corrugated metal and put a charge to it and that corrugated just melted.

MR. RABALAIS: Can you imagine what that would do to a cave—sucks all the air out.

MR. KEITH: Probably burn them up right then just like that. Out in the, oh, not too far from the docks the OKLAHOMA was laying on its side. They rolled that over and they used a set of wenchers on Ford Island and welded cables to it and rolled it over. While they were rolling it over they were pumping lime through it. Also navy people and Seabees, they were on R&R, were gathering up all of what was left of bones and things like that.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, my goodness.

MR. KEITH: They finally got it rolled over and after the war they hooked on to it and was going to tow it to Bremerton, Washington, and it sunk on the way.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, I didn't realize that. That was the OKLAHOMA then?

MR. KEITH: Yep, it sunk. Of course, it was no good, you know, good enough for scrap iron.

MR. RABALAIS: I think that we floated most of the others and I know the TEXAS got back in the battle.

MR. KEITH: I've seen some of the aircraft carriers come in there at Pearl Harbor, which they can take anything, with holes that had been hit by some kind of bomb that you could drive a freight car through. Of course, it used to be civilians who done all that work but it ended up where they were bringing Seabees back for R&R and they were putting them up at the Royal Hawaiian, places like that, but also they were putting them in the navy yards to work. They didn't get any recreation.

MR. RABALAIS: What about you? Where did you stay, at Schofield Barracks or somewhere in that area?

MR. KEITH: No, I stayed, well, when we first were there and I was working in the navy yards I stayed at AIE naval barracks. When we got moved after things got quiet and got things done, a new communications center was built for Nimitz, Chester Nimitz, and all new electronic equipment which today is all obsolete anyway and I can remember the building. As I remember that building was built on Ford Island and it was a foot thick of concrete, the walls, and of course at that time ??? switchboards and equipment were in.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you ever go back to Hawaii later?

MR. KEITH: Yes.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, you have.

MR. KEITH: I didn't even know where I was.

MR. RABALAIS: You could hardly recognize it.

MR. KEITH: No. There was a place they called Red Hill. That's where all the oil tanks were located and it was gravity feed down to where they could refuel their boats and what not. They were all gone.

MR. RABALAIS: I guess real estate is too expensive to be having it ships with oil tanks there.

MR. KEITH: At one time there was a vacant area where they were burying the sailors that got killed there. They were using drag lines and they dug the ditches and buried them and kept them there for awhile until they could move them. They had to get them put away.

MR. RABALAIS: They set that up in another cemetery.

MR. KEITH: They set that up in a cemetery right out of Honolulu.

MR. RABALAIS: Okay.

MR. KEITH: But this was just an open field where they could get a drag line in and dig a big ditch.

MR. RABALAIS: Did that make a bad impression on you or were you bothered a lot by the carnage that had occurred?

MR. KEITH: No.

MR. RABALAIS: When they announced the Japanese attack of course you were still over there at home. What were your feelings at that time about the Japanese? You probably didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was.

MR. KEITH: Absolutely.

MR. RABALAIS: Most people didn't have a clue.

MR. KEITH: Right. Well, you know, the way I felt about the whole thing, I still do. The Japanese took nearly four years out of my life and I'm going to be quite frank with you, anything I see that says Japanese, I put it back.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you get to see the movie last night of The Great Raid?

MR. KEITH: No.

MR. RABALAIS: In the Philippines. That was pretty interesting and it opens up a lot of eyes to what went on.

MR. KEITH: But you know you had to feel sorry for the people. They really gathered them all up and put them in concentration camps out in California. I guess, it was alright but we did have maybe a half mile from IAO naval barracks a Japanese camp, too.

MR. RABALAIS: Did they gather them up in Hawaii also?

MR. KEITH: And they brought some back, too.

MR. RABALAIS: I understand in Hawaii there actually were a few that were involved possibly with the Japanese government.

MR. KEITH: Oh, sure, absolutely.

MR. RABALAIS: It was hard to tell.

MR. KEITH: Hard to tell. But Hickam Field, like I said before, was damaged and Schoffield Barracks was damaged.

MR. RABALAIS: Was there still airplane traffic at Hickam? They cleaned it up I assume pretty quickly.

MR. KEITH: Well, that became, yes, they cleaned that up but at one time, I'll think a minute, when the B29s headed for Japan there was John Roger's airport. They built nose hangers, nose deals because they were so big they couldn't build a building to work on the engines and what not and a big log were worked over the bottoms were painted flint black.

MR. RABALAIS: What color?

MR. KEITH: Flint black.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, really.

MR. KEITH: That's when they took off and then they went on to other places.

MR. RABALAIS: Let's talk about some little things about when you were there. How was the food in general?

MR. KEITH: Seabees always had good food.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, that's right. The army didn't but the Seabees did.

MR. KEITH: We always had good food.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you all have to scrounge any?

MR. KEITH: No.

MR. RABALAIS: You were supplied with good food.

MR. KEITH: Yes, we had one commissary steward, he was a black man and he was sixty. He was called back from the regular navy and he saw that everybody had what they wanted and plenty of it. Sometimes if we went to the marine base we'd have to run the marines off because they were eating up our chow.

MR. RABALAIS: Well, listen, did you write home quite a bit? Did you have brothers and sisters?

MR. KEITH: Oh, yeh, I had one sister. I wrote a letter to my wife every week.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, you were married already.

MR. KEITH: Oh, yeh. I was married three months and I left her in May. I was married January 20, 1942, and I left her May 19, of '42 and I never did hear again until October the 20th of '45.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, my goodness! That's a long separation. Well, did she still love you when you got back?

MR. KEITH: I got off the train in Worcester, Massachusetts, and she didn't even know me.

MR. RABALAIS: Had you changed, like had you put on weight or were you thinner?

MR. KEITH: Yeh, yeh.

MR. RABALAIS: Well, that's a long time to be separated that's for sure but I know you kept in touch with letters and so forth. Did they let you all call home, probably later on.

MR. KEITH: Later on we could call home. We had to go to Honolulu to get a coin station.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you make friends with pretty close buddies while you were there?

MR. KEITH: Oh, yeh, one of my buddies married my sister-in-law.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, okay. Did you keep in touch with them over the years, some of them?

MR. KEITH: Oh, sure. There was one friend from Dayton, Texas, and another one from ??? Texas. We kept in touch all the time.

MR. RABALAIS: How about the weather in Hawaii? I imagine you sort of enjoyed that.

MR. KEITH: Can't beat it.

MR. RABALAIS: Can't beat it, nice breezes and...

MR. KEITH: The rainy season I think is around February but other than that it's beautiful.

MR. RABALAIS: Well, that's quite a change from Massachusetts.

MR. KEITH: There's nowhere to go, though.

MR. RABALAIS: No, that's true.

MR. KEITH: It's ninety miles around the island of Hawaii. We used to gather the group every once in awhile and take off. We'd finagle a weapon carrier and take off and get somebody to go to the officer's mess and get us some steak. His name was Ed Bernhoff from Colorado Springs.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you all go to the beach and enjoy the surf and all that?

MR. KEITH: Down at Couleaf(sp?) That's around the north side of the island. A lot of us had one of those single man little rafts and we'd get into the breakers and it'd push you

way up on to the shore and it'd get you and take you way down and you'd finally get out of that water, had sand in your eyes and everything else. We thought it was fun.

MR. RABALAIS: Beautiful water I'm sure.

MR. KEITH: Beautiful water.

MR. RABALAIS: Well, I imagine around Massachusetts the water is seldom warm enough to really bath there anyway.

MR. KEITH: The Atlantic Ocean is cold.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you miss the snow? I imagine you did.

MR. KEITH: Didn't miss it a bit.

MR. RABALAIS: Didn't miss it a bit, didn't have to shovel it. They have beautiful beaches over there that's for sure. So you were in that area for a long time so when did you head homeward, after the armistice was signed, I mean after the surrender was signed?

MR. KEITH: No, it was, I gotta think a minute. It was about the time when Roosevelt passed away.

MR. RABALAIS: Okay. That would have been I guess the earlier part of '45.

MR. KEITH: We went to Camp Parks first.

MR. RABALAIS: Where was that?

MR. KEITH: In California.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, in California. Did you all go by ship?

MR. KEITH: Yes, it's about fifty miles from San Francisco.

MR. RABALAIS: What kind of ships were you all on, like a Liberty Ship or something like that?

MR. KEITH: The ship we went on going to Hawaii was a ship that was captured from the Germans in World War I, USS GRANT. It was alright but, of course, it wouldn't have made any difference to me, I stayed sick all the way anyway. You could get up on the deck of that big old ship and you could see the destroyer escorts. All you could see was a flag flying, it would be down in a breaker, big swells.

MR. RABALAIS: That will make a few guys sick, I'm sure.

MR. KEITH: Oh, awful sick. It was alright.

MR. RABALAIS: Was it good to see the US again?

MR. KEITH: Oh, absolutely, get back home. You know it was something we had to do and not fuss about it. Today I'm going to be real frank with you, I would be afraid if we really got into a good war some of these young people would run, probably head for Canada.

MR. RABALAIS: When you got to California were you discharged right away or later on?

MR. KEITH: No, shipped to Davisville, Rhode Island. Seabees had a base there.

MR. RABALAIS: All the way to the other side of the country.

MR. KEITH: From there we went to Boston and mustered out ???

MR. RABALAIS: What did you think of your petty officers and officers? Were they pretty decent people?

MR. KEITH: The big majority of them were very nice. Once in awhile you would find one that...

MR. RABALAIS: Cocky or any thing like that?

MR. KEITH: Well, they weren't worth too much. We had one command and his name was, oh, shoot, we had one who was Howard Potter, the commander off Bataan, very nice. We had one command and he was a drunk. He went out and got drunk one night in Honolulu. He came back to get back into the base and the master of arms was on duty, which was a boatswain mate, he put him in the brig.

MR. RABALAIS: He did!

MR. KEITH: Yeh, Kenneth M. West was his name.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, my goodness! That was an eye opener I bet.

MR. KEITH: Oh, yes, everybody thought that was great.

MR. RABALAIS: Well, in Rhode Island then you just sat around for awhile and then they finally discharged you out.

MR. KEITH: A couple of weeks.

MR. RABALAIS: A couple of weeks or so. Did your wife meet you there?

MR. KEITH: Oh, no. That would only be about forty minutes from where I lived. I'd go home on weekends but she did come and get me at Boston.

MR. RABALAIS: Did you go right back to work?

MR. KEITH: I stayed loose a week and I went right back to New England Bell.

MR. RABALAIS: Did that feel pretty strange to get back to civilian life or was not too difficult? You sort of had a regular job in the navy anyway.

MR. KEITH: Right.

MR. RABALAIS: So it was a little bit different than the ones that were in combat that went to a completely different kind of environment. Well, that was quite an experience and I tell you what, we really appreciate here at the Museum your having shared this with

us. It's little stories and little things like that that make interesting history for all the people that are going to be doing research work, the academicians and people like that. And again, George, on behalf of the Museum I want to extend my congratulations for you sharing it with us and want you to enjoy the Symposium.

MR. KEITH: Thank you. I'll add one thing. August of '48, I got a phone call while I was working and said, "George, November the 6th you report to Houston, Texas, and go to work." It was still all AT&T then, so I went to Houston April the 6th of '49, and that's where I stayed. I put in thirty-five years there.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, in the Houston area. So that was quite a shift from Massachusetts.

MR. KEITH: Well, it was all AT&T when I retired. When they went from in '84, of course, it split the SPC. I've stayed busy. My wife and I spent six years, we moved to Kerrville from Houston, and we went to work in Yellowstone Park for six years.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, you did! One of my favorite places.

MR. KEITH: We had to be there April 1st and we left October 15th.

MR. RABALAIS: What were you all doing in Yellowstone?

MR. KEITH: My wife worked in ??? stores and I worked in the maintenance department out from the stores taking care of everything that needed to be done in the stores.

MR. RABALAIS: I'm real familiar with the Park.

MR. KEITH: Then in '82 we came home. A friend of mine who I used to work for, one of the managers of Southwestern bell, called the chief deskman which was the worst job he could ever have. He called and said, "George, I got a job for you." I said, "Oh." He said, "It's Raycamp Corporation who makes the equipment for all the phone companies,

outside equipment.” I said, “Well, I’ll think about it.” So I thought about it and I called him and so I had an interview in Conroe, Texas, with representative from Raycamp and I spent ten years with them.

MR. RABALAIS: Oh, really. You were all still living in the Houston area then?

MR. KEITH: No, Kerrville. I worked all over the state of Texas and Florida and Louisiana. Finally after ten years of it I decided...

MR. RABALAIS: Well, it’s time.

MR. KEITH: I quit.

MR. RABALAIS: Okay, well George I’m going to say goodbye to that.

Transcribed November 4, 2011, by Eunice Gary.