

The National Museum of the Pacific War

**Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas**

**Interview with
Dr. Eugene Conklin (LTjg)
United States Navy
USS Lexington – Air Group 16 – VB-16/VF-16
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Interview with
Dr. Eugene Conklin

Mr. Zambrano: This is Mike Zambrano. Today is March the 17th, 2007. I'm interviewing Dr. Eugene Conklin. This interview is taking place over the phone. He lives in Dubuque, Iowa and I am in Round Rock, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to this site. Dr. Conklin, I'd like to thank you for your time that you've made for me this morning to interview you for the Nimitz.

Dr. Conklin: You're entirely welcome.

Mr. Zambrano: I hope that you're doing well.

Dr. Conklin: I am. Thank you.

Mr. Zambrano: Now let me start off a little bit with some of your childhood history, for example, where you were born and when were you born?

Dr. Conklin: I was born on December the 4th, 1923, in Chanute, Kansas. That's spelled C-H-A-N-U-T-E, Kansas. It's in southeastern Kansas. I grew up in Chanute, Kansas and attended schools in Chanute, Kansas and after the war I returned to Kansas to complete my education at the University of Kansas. I went to KU for four years and then entered the medical school at Kansas and attended medical school in Lawrence, Kansas and in Kansas City, Kansas. Then I graduated as an MD and became a pediatrician and practiced pediatrics in Dubuque, Iowa for forty-three years. I've been

retired now for the past seven years and lived continuously in Dubuque since arrival here from Kansas.

Mr. Zambrano: Really! Wow! That's a long time to be a doctor.

Dr. Conklin: It was, but it was a good job. I enjoyed it greatly.

Mr. Zambrano: I understand that people that go into the field really have a love of caring for children.

Dr. Conklin: Yes, it is a good job.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow. Well, speaking of children and childhoods do you remember anything about the Depression and your growing up during that period?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, I do. I remember it rather painfully. My mother and father had inherited a jewelry store established by my grandfather in Chanute and my grandfather worked in that jewelry store and did very successfully well until the Depression and then my father inherited the store from his father and nearly all the time in my memory my mother and father worked in the jewelry store in a state of the Depression. We would kind of almost live from the shelves of the jewelry store and it was a, uh ... not a happy time. We had some good help, it just myself, I was an only child. My mother and father worked in the store together and did so until my fathers health failed and then they sold the jewelry store. It was a difficult time from the Depression point of view. Jewelry stores were among the first enterprises to fail in that Depression circumstance. People couldn't buy jewelry. And that was the way we were raised. Chanute was a comfortable place to grow up. It was a nice town. It was a town of about ten thousand people and I had

good friends in Chanute and still do as a matter of fact. I still visit Chanute occasionally and visit friends of very long standing there. Many of my friends were in World War II. I had some friends who became pilots. In Chanute we had a program called a Civilian Pilot Training Program. The Civilian Pilot Training Program was an effort by the government to train young men to become aviators either in the navy or in the army air corps and we attended a flight program designed by the government and I have to say that it was a very, very good program. I've never been sorry for a minute that I was afforded the opportunity to be a member of the Civilian Pilot Training Program. The program was directed by a local pilot who had taught himself to fly. We went through three levels of training. We were primary trainers in light planes like the Aeronca and then we became secondary pilots and we were trained in an airplane called the Waco UPF7 and that was an aerobatic, open cockpitted airplane in which we were taught to do aerobatics. We were in that time enrolled either in the army air corps of the navy and I chose the navy. There were several of my classmates in my school in Chanute who attended the CPT program and went on to fly either in the air force or in the navy. The course was really well laid out and we were better aviators for having had that opportunity. When we finished that training program we finished our school, we were in junior college at that time. Kansas was an early state to have junior college programs. We went there, from there in 1941 I went to, after Pearl Harbor occurred, we were signed up in the regular naval aviation program and went from

Chanute to Oakland, California and there we were enrolled as naval aviation cadets and spent a year in Oakland in a ... excuse me, I was wrong about that. It was about five months in a program designed to improve our physical conditioning. It was a lot of athletics and exercise programs as well as some ground schools that dealt mostly with basic naval life. From there I was sent to Norman, Oklahoma where I was enlisted in the primary flight training for the navy and spent several months in the primary program and then went to Corpus Christi and was in the secondary flight training program and from there to advanced training and graduated from the naval aviation cadet program in Corpus Christi in 1942 and was sent to Daytona Beach, Florida. Daytona Beach, Florida was a training program for pilots that had finished their naval aviation training and had been assigned to fleet level activities. I had chosen to be a dive bomber pilot at that time and I was flying an airplane called the Douglas Dauntless, the SBD was the name of the airplane. It was a very strong, heavily built airplane that wasn't very modern, but it did the job very well and following that training there ... for about I think we were there a little over six months. I'm not sure about that time. We were then sent to the fleet. We went to California, from Hawaii and met the air group that I was to become a member of for the remainder of my experience as a naval aviator. The air group was called Air Group 16 and was the permanent assigned to the USS Lexington. We went to war from there. We would leave Hawaii and go out from Honolulu from Ford Island into the Pacific to attack the bases that had been captured by the

Japanese since the beginning of the war. We would go out and turn around and come back into Hawaii to Honolulu and refill and redo and go out and attack again. We did this for I think about three or four times before we had captured enough land, had recaptured enough land that we went beyond the range of going back and forth to Honolulu and so that the fleet supplied our needs and we went on further west. That was the beginning of the recovery of the land that Japan had captured and to deal with what had happened at Pearl Harbor, as we went west. We went west for then about eleven months of doing that, went to various land bases, Eniwetok and the Majuro Islands and we went that way for about eleven months from our beginning at Pearl and then we turned around and returned to America and went to the east coast still designated as Air Group 16 and by this time I was switching from flying dive bombers to flying fighter bombers. This was in the Hellcat, the F6F, and as a matter of fact, I had been further trained to be a photographer pilot. There were four of us in a group of four fighters, three of us had cameras, very advanced, high level, technological cameras for our day and what we did during the war the second tour out was photograph targets prior to their being attacked by our carrier based airplanes and then go in after the attack and take photographs to record the evidence of damage that we had been able to inflict upon the enemy.

Mr. Zambrano: So you would go in before and you would go in after?

Dr. Conklin: That's right.

Mr. Zambrano: So you were in essence doing reconnaissance.

Dr. Conklin:

Yes, really, It was kind of a two edged sword. We weren't there during the attack but we were vulnerable quite a lot following the attack and before the attack because the cameras worked in such a way that we would fly straight and level over the target at a predetermined speed and a predetermined altitude and anytime you flew over an enemy encampment you were a target of value to them because an airplane flying straight and level at a level altitude at a predetermined speed is an easy target for the anti-aircraft people so that our job was kind of, uh ...I guess it was sort of ... well, it was really hair raising. We made that pass over the target and sometimes made a second pass back over it and then stood off to the side while the fighters and the bombers and the dive bombers and the torpedo bombers came in and attacked the target. Then we would pass back over again at a predetermined speed and altitude. The reason for the cameras operating as they did was that if we flew the airplanes over the target at a predetermined rate and altitude, the film overlapped and the pictures that we took were three dimensional if examined under special glasses that were available to the intelligence officers aboard ship. The film was really, considering the times and all, the film was spectacularly good. It was Kodachrome film and I think it was seventy millimeters wide and the pictures were really, really quite dramatic. At one point in time after the war had ceased and Japan had declared that they would stop the war, we were told to map Tokyo. Tokyo and the other Japanese cities were designed and built, rather unofficially and not by purpose, but they were sort of naturally camouflaged. The little

houses, the small houses, and different colored roofs made for a kind of a natural camouflage. The Japanese were directed to put huge signs on top of the buildings where prisoners of war were being held. The plan was that we would drop medical supplies and food to those prisoners in those locations but when we attempted to find them simply by flying over them, we found that the natural camouflage made it a not very effective way of looking for them but our cameras out of our airplanes sort of reduced that camouflaged effect and the intelligence officers using these 3D glasses were able to spot the targets that we were looking for and we could effectively drop supplies to the prisoners of war. So four of us mapped the entire city of Tokyo and I think if my memory serves me correctly some other cities too. That jumped way ahead in the war. I'm not sure that ... maybe you'd like to know about the, probably the best known and most well known battle that we were in. At a time when we were supporting the landings at Saipan and Guam the Japanese fleet was located west of our operation there and the admiral and the navy were, of course, very much interested in dealing the Japanese fleet with as much damage as possible and so we, first of all while we were at Saipan and around there, the Japanese had come out with their fighter planes and dive bombers and so forth to attack our navy.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Dr. Conklin: They did so but our fighters really came through that day. It was called the Marianas Turkey Shoot and it has received a lot of publicity. There's a book printed called *Mission Beyond Darkness* that very well details the activities

surrounding that event. The fighters shot down a huge percentage of the Japanese fleet's fighter protection. The next day following that Admiral Mitscher and his staff made the decision to launch an attack against the Japanese fleet. The discovery of the fleet, the location of the fleet, came toward the latter part of the day on this particular day and the decision to launch planes to go west to attack the Japs was one that was not made without very, very careful consideration because the location and distance between our fleet and the Japanese fleet was just barely reachable considering the fuel levels in our airplanes. It was quite clear that the fighter planes could make the trip out and back, the round trip to attack the carriers, but the dive bombers were just barely having enough gasoline perhaps to get out there and come back. The torpedo bombers were ... it was pretty much decided they could not really make that trip. The Admiral did this with great concern, I'm sure. And the second difficult thing about that, the third really, was that we would return in the dark. The attack on the carrier would occur late in the afternoon, on the Japanese carriers, would occur late in the afternoon and then we would start home. We started home in a state of great confusion having just carried out a vigorous attack which did amount to considerable damage to the Japanese navy and I think it has been said that this really was the beginning of the end of the Japanese fleet. We all began to fly back east to where we knew our carriers were and it took about ... I don't remember how long now. I've forgotten that. I think it was a matter of hours like an hour or so, two hours perhaps, I'm not sure of that,

but by the time we arrived back at the ships it was total dark. We had no way of determining which carrier we belonged upon. The instructions were ... and there wasn't a lot of ... we couldn't use the radios as well as we would like to have done so had it not been a combat circumstance, but the instructions were to land on any carrier. So that is what we attempted to do. Not everybody made it. On the way back from the Japanese fleet our friends were talking to each other and evaluating their circumstances and announcing that they were going to land in the water. The torpedo bombers were the first to go, then the dive bombers, and the fighters as I said because of the fact that they had extra fuel and exterior gas tanks, had enough to make it back. We returned to the carriers and Admiral Mitscher made a magnificent decision and saved many, many lives when he decided to turn on the lights. The carriers with the lights on were good targets for submarines.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Dr. Conklin: And that was an immensely important decision on his part. So he turned on the lights and we began to try to bring our planes back aboard the carriers. There were some hugely exciting and frightening circumstances that occurred. One of my friends ran out of gas just short of landing on the carrier and landed in the water, spent the night in the water, and was picked up the next day. Many pilots had such experiences as that. I've forgotten the details of the percentage of recovery but the percentage of recovery of pilots out of downed airplanes as we landed that night aboard the carriers was

great. The next day the navy was able to bring about the rescue of a very large percentage of those who had run out of gas and not been able to get into the fleet, into the carriers.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. If I could ask...

Dr. Conklin: Oh, you'd like to say something.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, I was just curious. During the battle what type of plane did you fly?

Dr. Conklin: I was flying a SBD at that time. That was before the, uh ... I was flying a dive bomber at that time. That was before we went back to regroup. That battle occurred before we went back to America to regroup.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. And what was it like for you? I imagine that you were in on the attack on the Japanese. Could you tell me some more specifics about that?

Dr. Conklin: I'm sorry, say that again please.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, I'm sorry. Can you tell me some more specifics about your personal experience in attacking the Japanese fleet?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, well, yes. We approached the carrier and, uh ... the fleet and we had a routine. The routine was that the fighters would go in and strafe the carriers and attempt to protect the dive bombers and the torpedo bombers as they attacked the fleet. And the fighters would go in a deal with trying to suppress that anti-aircraft fire from the ships. Then the next thing would be the dive bombers would go in and because we could dive straight down we weren't as easy a target as were the torpedo planes. Torpedo planes were rather disadvantaged by the fact that they had to fly in right at the carrier, right at the enemy ship, and at a low altitude and on a straight course and

needed a lot of protection from the fighters and that was one of the purposes of the fighter escort. In spite of that, torpedo bombers took what seemed to be a greater risk than others. The dive bombers in the perpendicular dive are a hard target for anti-aircraft fire. So we did that, we came in, approached and our targets were assigned and we began our dives onto the carriers. As I said we dived straight down. We had become pretty darned accurate with dive bombers. Dive bombers were very, kind of considering the times, an accurate weapon. You could dive straight down and you could count on getting a hit fairly often. We had done a lot of practicing. There was a time when our ship had been torpedoed while we were going west on our first cruise out, when our ship was torpedoed and we had to give up the Lexington while it went back to Bremerton, Washington to be repaired and we flew off the Randolph and at another time we were on the Bon Homme Richard and we were stationed at Maui for, oh, I've forgotten how long. It seemed not very long at the time because it was sort of a paradise, but we were there and we practiced dive bombing a lot. And I have to say that our scores in our dive bombing group were pretty high. And the likelihood of hitting some of those carriers was pretty good. The fact is that it was really pretty difficult to tell exactly what you had done. You made that dive and you went down to about a thousand feet or below a thousand feet and then pulled out and then ran for the water to keep out of the radar if you could and it really was difficult to turn around and evaluate the damage done by your bomb. We had rear seat men and the rear seat men would try to

evaluate that and they would report what they thought they saw. But in my own experience, I really didn't know whether I hit that carrier or not and my rear seat man was not really sure he knew what he was seeing, but some of us hit it for sure because we sunk them and the effectiveness of the attack was very good and I can say that our attack on the Japanese carriers and the rest of their fleet was well done and was an effective effort but I can't say exactly whether I hit anything or not. That is what we were up to and when we came out of that we didn't know exactly with whom we were joining up. We just simply found another one of our airplanes and we joined together to make the return trip back east to where our ships were. I had the good fortune to join up with a friend of mine named Kirkpatrick and Kirk was an older fellow. I was the youngest member of the group in our Air Group. I had gone into the navy when I was just nineteen years of age and I had been to sea the first time out for eleven months when I was still under 21 as we returned from the Pacific to San Diego so that we could begin to rebuild our squadron and so forth. We were up on the flight deck approaching the San Diego harbor and it's really quite a spectacular view to see that and all of us were up there enjoying it greatly and we went ... as we were standing there, the fellows were all saying, 'Oh, great! We're going to have a big night in San Diego tonight! Everybody we'll all meet at the bar.' It was the name of a bar, the longest bar in America and I can't remember the name of it but with great excitement the fellows were planning a reunion in that bar tonight ... well, everybody as they were saying that, one of the guys says,

'No, not everybody will be there. Conk can't be there because he isn't old enough', and I wasn't I was only twenty years old. So the skipper heard that and, we were all gathered together on the flight deck, and the skipper heard that and he said to one of the yeomen, who are the secretaries in the navy, he said to one of the yeomen, he says, 'Go down. Take him down to the ready room ...' or to the office, the yeomen's office, '... and make out an identification card for him that makes him twenty-one years of age.' So I have a navy ID card that makes me eighty-four years old instead of eighty-three years old now.

Mr. Zambrano: Well that was considerate.

Dr. Conklin: So that was part of the ... we had a lot of activities like that. I must say that we had a lot of activities that were not all bad. We had good times and bad times as well.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you remember your commanding officer? I mean, that seems like a really thoughtful thing for him to have done.

Dr. Conklin: Well, I think it was a fellow named Elmer Craft. Elmer was a member of our fighter-bombing group at that time. I'm not sure of that however. I can say ... oh, another thing that occurred to me was that as we went back out at one time on my birthday we were at sea and, the memory of this is a little fuzzy now, but we were attacked one night by the Japanese carrier planes. They were torpedo bombers mostly and they torpedoed ship. The Lexington took a torpedo in the aft end of the ship and we were all, because we were sort of silly, we were directed to stay below and not be up there on the deck

at that time. Well, we were because we were kind of young and not very serious about the possibility of getting killed. We were up there observing this huge fireworks show that makes up a carrier returning fire against attacking airplanes and the attacking airplanes themselves. We were watching this and we were standing up on the wing of an SBD, my roommate and myself and a couple of other fellows, and when the torpedo hit the ship it shook the entire ship. The ship went up and down, up and down, and we were knocked off the wing of the airplane. We weren't hurt or anything, it was just part of the excitement and that was my birthday. I was twenty years old at that time.

Mr. Zambrano: That's kind of a strange birthday present.

Dr. Conklin: I guess it was. That, you know, really kind of tells the story of my experience in the navy. I developed a huge fondness for the navy. I thought the navy did a great job. They may not have done a perfect job but what they did do was well done and I was proud to be a part of it. I hate to say this but I enjoyed my experience in the navy. I felt guilty; I've always felt guilty for feeling that way because I ... excuse me just a minute.

[Interruption]

But we had great comradery and I maintained that relationship with those fellows. We've had many Air Group reunions over the years. We started out meeting every three years and in the latter years we've been meeting every two years and last year we had what we called the last reunion. I hope it turns out not to be the last reunion. I hope we meet again. Our numbers are

dwindling, of course that's to be expected but naval aviators were good people. They were well chosen. I've always had the feeling that the navy had developed an intelligent way of deciding who should become naval aviators. Naval aviators by and large did what they were supposed to do and they did it proudly. I'm proud to have been able to call myself a naval aviator.

Mr. Zambrano: I'm just curious but what initially drew you to the navy as opposed to the army air corps?

Dr. Conklin: Well, when I was a kid in Chanute, I became interested in aviation very early at a young age. There was a dentist in Chanute who had an Aeronca C-3, which was a very primitive kind of early day private airplane and I hung around the airport. I always wanted to fly and I would wash that doctor's airplane for him if he would take me airplane riding. And I was hoping to become an aviator many years before I did. Being an aviator was one of my main goals in life and then when that CPT came along that was like heaven. It was such an opportunity. There I was in junior college and not doing very well in school because I was a learning disabled individual, and that was another thing that has made me very proud of the navy. I was a learning disabled individual, I'm dyslexic, and my experience in school was very bad. I didn't do well in school at all, however the navy for some reason and I have never understood how this came about, developed a method of teaching people aeronautics and engines and navigation and other parts of

the ground school of naval aviation by a method that circumvented my learning disability.

Mr. Zambrano: Really!

Dr. Conklin: And I think it's because it's mostly designed to be learned by people whose memory was good. My memory is very good, particularly at that age, it's less good now I've got to say, but it was good at that time and I memorized as I learned. And I think that the navy's courses were very basic and they mainly got the information to us by methods that circumvented the problems I had and I think perhaps a lot of other would-be naval aviators had. And that was one of the reasons that I got into naval aviation. And another thing I did was I collected naval aviation magazines and in those days there was a magazine called *Flying* and it was about airplanes and it was about, not only about the navy but the air force too. But the navy attracted me and the ocean and the boats and all. I was after that from the day I really knew what I was thinking about. So that's why I became a naval aviator. Hell, I'd do it again if I had a chance.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow! It sounds like you had that love for flying early on. That's great!

Dr. Conklin: Yeah and I never lost it either. I continued to flying after the war. I flew in the naval reserve while I was in college and in medical school and I continued to fly after I started practicing medicine and belonged to a flying club here in Dubuque and I also learned to fly soaring gliders, I flew gliders for about five years.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow.

Dr. Conklin: That was a great experience. I didn't quite flying until it was necessary to quit because of my eyes and when I pray at night I thank God for what occurred to me. That I became a naval aviator and that my experience in the navy was what it was. I thought it was a good thing. Again I say that with some sense of guilt because we don't need wars. Well, there.

Mr. Zambrano: Let's go back just a little bit.

Dr. Conklin: Okay.

Mr. Zambrano: Something I forgot to ask you was if you remember where you were on December 7th when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and what you were doing?

Dr. Conklin: You told me you were going to ask me that question the other day and I've been thinking about that and I do remember. I was at my girlfriends, we were, it was a day away from school, and we were buying tickets at the movie theater when that happened. As we were buying the tickets there was all this excitement there. People were saying ... and we were talking about the fact that Pearl Harbor, and we didn't know what Pearl Harbor was about ... excuse me just a minute, Mike.

[Interruption]

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Dr. Conklin: My cell phones going off there. They were talking about Pearl Harbor and none of us knew what Pearl Harbor meant. We weren't even aware of that and the rest of the day was consumed learning about Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Zambrano: Now did Pearl Harbor, did that encourage you, of course, to go into the service?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, well you see my plans for going into the service ... yeah, I guess it would. I guess it would. It sort of solidified my plans. I was planning to become a naval aviator anyway. That's where I was going to go and so I was ready for that sort of thing. It didn't detract from my idea of going at any rate.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you recall when you were inducted?

Dr. Conklin: It was in Kansas City, Missouri and my friend Louis Sheppard and Tom Knicklin and I ... yeah, there were only four of us, we went to Kansas City on the train from Chanute and went to the naval offices. I don't remember where they were anything about that now and we were all scared to death that we wouldn't pass the physical.

Mr. Zambrano: Really? Why?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, sure. Well we all three, those three of us were really hot to be naval aviators. It would have been a great disappointment if we had not passed the physical and the mental. The navy was paying attention to the mental aspects too. I think that's one of the reasons that their selection system was good. So we went to that and then we returned and I guess I recall before we returned to Chanute on the train, they had told us that we passed and we were all excited.

Mr. Zambrano: I'm curious, your friends, how did they fair? Did they make it through the training?

Dr. Conklin: Yes they did. Yeah they did. We got separated as things went on. Shep became a dive bomber pilot and flew off the Guadalcanal. He didn't fly off the carriers, he flew off the islands in the Guadalcanal area, and Tom Knicklin became a carrier pilot and flew fighters off a carrier and his career ended when he had a landing aboard the ship accident and sustained a head injury, but didn't die he survived the war and went back to Chanute.

Mr. Zambrano: Can you tell me a little bit what is it like to land on a carrier? I mean I know you have those restraining wires, what's it like?

Dr. Conklin: Well, it's exciting. It was four plus exciting particularly at night. At night was unbelievably exciting but, uh ... you're going to change tapes?

Mr. Zambrano: Looks like I have a little bit more, but I think we can keep going for another minute or two.

Dr. Conklin: Okay. I had trouble landing aboard ship one time. The first time I tried it when I first went out to the fleet. The first time I went out I was nineteen years old and I was excited and worked up and made my first carrier approach to landing very badly. It was not a good time and I had a depth bomb on my airplane and the depth bomb was there because I was on a combat air patrol, anti-submarine patrol. We would go and then come back and go out and then come back, and we were doing that and the weather was bad and so the ship directed that we should land and the rules were that you always jettisoned the depth bomb before you attempted to land on the ship because landing on the ship with a depth bomb would not be a good thing.

Mr. Zambrano: No, I would imagine it wouldn't.

Dr. Conklin: No. So what I did was get excited about the whole thing and forgot to jettison the depth bomb so I made a pass at the ship and the signal officer waved me off knowing that I was not going to be able to land with that thing on there and he could see it and I couldn't see it. So I waved off and that got me more upset then I was already upset and I made another pass and missed it too and now the carriers, the ship, the entire US Navy's force in the Pacific, was on a straight course because when you land on a ship, the ship has to go straight into the wind. And the admiral was losing patience with me very greatly, I'm sure. So I made another pass and missed it and the last pass I got aboard. I sort of fell aboard more than I landed and my mentor, my flight leader was standing on the edge of the airplane, as I parked the airplane he was standing there and he said to me, 'The captain's going to want to talk to you' and he said, 'Just don't talk more than you have too.' So I did. I had an interview with the captain and he would determine that if I ever did that again I was not going to stay aboard the ship. I was going to go home.

Mr. Zambrano: My goodness.

Dr. Conklin: So I had gone out and dropped the bomb. That I did find out. My rear seat man ... there goes your tape.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, let me flip it over here really quick.

Dr. Conklin: Uh-huh.

Mr. Zambrano: So I'm going to stop the recording for a second.

Dr. Conklin: Alright.

[Interruption]

Mr. Zambrano: Okay, so we're back on.

Dr. Conklin: Well, I can't remember where I was.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, we were talking about the depth bomb.

Dr. Conklin: Oh, yes. Well, my rear seat man ... the rear seat men were radio trained. They were trained to be radiomen and I counted on him to be able to interpret the signals from the ship. The ship would send Morse code signals by a light flashing on the deck, on the island of the carrier. So when I went by and took that wave off and went around, the ship began to send messages with the lights and I saw that and I said to my rear seat man, whose last name was Sample, I said, 'Sample, read the light signal.' Well, it turned out that he couldn't read it and so I made the next pass around ... I had been taught Morse code, all naval aviators were taught Morse code. Nobody ever expected us to use it, but we were taught it, so the next pass around I was able to read three letters: B-O-M. And, by God, I woke up at once and I remembered, 'My gosh, I still have that damn bomb on.' So I went out away from the ships and dropped the bomb and then came back and started terrible trying to get back aboard the ship again. And that time I got a little wet.

Mr. Zambrano: Gosh! How many landings did you make in all?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, I don't remember, but a lot. We flew a lot and I have a logbook somewhere. I should have got my logbook out and looked at it. I didn't do

that but I made quite a few carrier landings because you see I went to sea twice. The first time I went out as a dive bomber and the next time as a photographer.

Mr. Zambrano: Did your first crew ... did you stay with them the majority of the time?

Dr. Conklin: Yes, I did. We stayed together. I didn't stay as a member of the dive bombing crew. I had now transferred into the fighter bomber group because the fighter bombers were those who flew the photography airplanes.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Dr. Conklin: So that I was still flying in the same air group and yes, the relationship that we had with each other has continued to this day yet. I hear from them still. Not uncommonly I get an email from one of them and usually its one of us has died. But our relationship together was unique. We counted on each other for everything. In combat you do that. I'm reminded of the recent movie *Flags of Our Fathers*, those boys, those Marines on Iwo Jima were counting on each other and we did that. I understood that feeling, in that movie, I could understand that feeling because that's the same attitude, the same behavior that we experienced in our air group together. We counted on each other totally.

Mr. Zambrano: The radioman, Sample, whatever happened to him?

Dr. Conklin: I don't know. He never came to any of our reunions and I've always been disappointed about that. I never heard from him again.

Mr. Zambrano: Did you have other radiomen?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, excuse me a second ... I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Mr. Zambrano: Did you have other radiomen?

Dr. Conklin: Uh, no. He was the only one.

Mr. Zambrano: Really.

Dr. Conklin: Well, you see on my second cruise out, I didn't have a radioman. That was just with the camera plane, the single engine, single cockpit. It was a fighter.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. Do you remember any other friends from Air Group 16?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, sure I do. I remember many of them. Sure, yeah, lots. They were really quite a successful bunch of people in private life afterwards. There were a number of people who, uh ... there were three or four doctors, lots of lawyers, lots of people who were in aviation. They were a successful group of businessmen and community leaders.

Mr. Zambrano: Can you tell me a little bit about some of the targets that the Lexington would hit? But first, before you comment on it, you got onboard the Lexington in ... was it 1943?

Dr. Conklin: No. It was 1942.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay, '42. So you actually became a crewmember while it was in ... Pearl Harbor you said?

Dr. Conklin: Yes. We weren't really a crewmember. Members of the air group were not really termed a crewmember of the carrier.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Dr. Conklin: That carrier was operated by a full blown crew of carrier operators. There was the admiral's staff, then there was the captain's staff, and then there

was the people who maintained the ship, there were those who maintained the flight deck. There was a great hero bunch; those that worked on that flight deck were heroes. They took immeasurably dangerous jobs and I've always admired that group of people and the situation is not much less then it is right now. I think aboard the carriers that our navy is operating right now, that the flight deck crew is a high risk group and they are to be admired.

Mr. Zambrano: You're right, you're right. It takes a lot of precision; you've got to keep your eyes open. I hear that those are very dangerous jobs.

Dr. Conklin: Yeah, yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: Did you take part in raids on Tarawa and Wake Island?

Dr. Conklin: No, Wake was before us.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Dr. Conklin: Tarawa was more, uh ... no, we weren't there. One of the main ones that's fixed in my memory was Truk.

Mr. Zambrano: Truk. Okay.

Dr. Conklin: We did Truk and we also did Saipan and Guam. We were supporting the landings at Saipan and Guam therefore we were on hand during that activity.

Mr. Zambrano: Now when you say supporting, can you give me an example of what you would do?

Dr. Conklin: We would go in and strafe. We would strafe and dive bomb. We would dive bomb and glide bomb, which is another term for when you can't dive bomb

because of low ceilings, you glide bomb. The glide is a less steep approach to the target. Dive bombers come down straight down about seventy degrees.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Dr. Conklin: The glide bomb is less vertical. When we attacked Truk the weather was bad and we had to glide bomb rather than dive bomb. That's one of the reasons that caused me to get hit. We were attacking Truk and we couldn't dive bomb and I had a photographer in my rear seat, a navy cameraman, not one of our group, but it was a navy cameraman to record the attack on Truk and he was in my rear seat and he didn't do that regularly, that was not his job and I had never met him before. Well, he was riding with me in the back seat and we were attacking Truk and I made glide bomb on a gun emplacement and my airplane was hit. A piece of fragment from the shell went through the cockpit and hit me on the head.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow!

Dr. Conklin: And it didn't do me any harm, it was spent, you know because it had gone through the air and then it gone through the canopy and then it fell off my head. Didn't even cut my helmet, but it scared me and I jumped when I did that and when I did it sort of through the airplane into a little bit of an erratic move and the fellows camera flew out of his hand and went up and hit the tail of my airplane and made a great dent in the tail. When we landed aboard ship ...and then we went on and we took a lot of hits that day. On my airplane I had quite a few bullet holes in it and when we got back

aboard the ship I said, 'Wow' as he and I both exited the airplane, I said, 'Wow. That was a wild day!' And he said, 'Dag gum you!' Oh, man, he was so mad at me, he was just really upset. And he said, 'You see that big hole in the tail up there?' and I hadn't seen it and now I could see it, 'Oh, yeah!' and he said, 'That was my camera!' It was like he'd lost his mother or something.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh my God.

Dr. Conklin: He was so mad at me we didn't talk about that after that.

Mr. Zambrano: Gosh. I'm curious, now that was the Dauntless, right?

Dr. Conklin: Yes.

Mr. Zambrano: Sounds like it was a pretty hardy airplane?

Dr. Conklin: I'm sorry, my wife was talking.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, that's okay. I was just saying that the Dauntless sounds like it was a very hardy airplane.

Dr. Conklin: It was! It was an immensely hardy airplane! Yes indeed. We used to say you could fly a Douglass through a brick wall. It was a very well, heavily built airplane and it took a lot of punishment to knock it down. That was one of the advantages that the navy provided. One of the important tactical things about naval aviation and it this was probably true of the air force too, our airplanes were well built. They were really, really well built and they were built with armor plating. Our gas tanks had armor plate around them and rubberized inside of the tank so that they didn't leak if they were perforated and the feet where the pilot sat was armor plated and this made a

huge difference because the Japanese did not do that. The Japanese Zero was an unarmored airplane. It was a faster airplane and it was a more maneuverable airplane than our fighter was but it was not well protected and if our fighters, with six .50 caliber machine guns, were to hit a Zero, it was likely that it was going to go down because they were not equipped to withstand that sort of damage.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. When you were flying Hellcats, did you shoot down any Zeros?

Dr. Conklin: No. No I did not. First of all our cameras were heavy and so in order to equip our airplane with cameras it was necessary for us to unload some weight and what they did is they took out, we only had four guns, we didn't have six guns we had four, and in order to do that we weren't really equipped to be fighter planes, we were photographers. At one time I did encounter a Japanese fighter as we were returning from a photography assignment. A Japanese fighter came along and attempted to attack me but he kind of lost his stomach for it for some reason or another. He made one pass at me and I turned inside and we tried to go at it but the camera also made my airplane heavy so my fighter wasn't really a very good fighter and I knew that I should not try to engage him but I should get away from him because he was going to attack and I had films that needed to get back to the ship so I didn't make any effort to try to combat or try to dogfight him. I tried to get back away from him safely.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. Can you tell me a little bit of what carrier life was like, just the day in and day out?

Dr. Conklin: Well, it was really kind of boring. We did a lot of sunbathing. You see, we had to go from place to place and we didn't sit in one area and have our war there, our war moved across the Pacific Ocean so that we were constantly on the move going towards where we thought we needed to be going to the islands that we were attacking and so when we were moving we didn't have any job. We just were passengers aboard the ship until it came time to take off and attempt to do damage to the enemy, we didn't have any jobs. So it was kind of boring. We slept a lot, lots of card games, lots of dice games, and a poker game that went for the whole war. It lasted as long as the war lasted. The food was good. We didn't really have a close relationship with the members of the regular crew. They had their job and we had our job and we didn't have a lot of personal relationships with the crew.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. You mentioned earlier about being hit by the torpedo in the aft. I had read that the Japanese had sent up some flares prior to that? Is that true?

Dr. Conklin: Probably. Well, you know, you got me there. I don't know. I kind of think that would be unlikely. You know, they'd give themselves away as much as they'd give the fleet away if that happened but that's something I don't know much about and I don't recall seeing any flares. The scene in the area of where the ships were ... excuse me just a minute, Mike. The area where the ships were, our ships were, and in the area around where the ships were was sort of lit up but lit up by planes from the guns that were shooting, you know, and the tracers and there were thousands of tracers going out because all those anti-aircraft guns, those forty millimeters, they had tracers in them

so they lit up the place in a big way and you could see what was coming. You could even see the airplanes attacking the ship. They were sort of like a silhouette but they were coming in at us but I don't recall that they sent up flares and I'm sure that we didn't. The torpedo hit the rear of the carrier in the very last, uh ... towards the end of the carrier and it damaged the rudder and it hit some oil reserves somehow because we left a huge, big smoke trail behind the ship and the ship started turning in a giant circle because the rudder was damaged and it went in this big, big circle, you know. And after that occurred we went below decks because the navy didn't want us up there. They needed to be able to do the damage control on the ship and they wanted us out of the way so we went below and found a place of security where we could be out of the way and I don't remember what happened after that. Afterwards, the next day really, we left the fleet, we were transferred to another carrier and the ship left for Bremerton, Washington where it was, oh, for a very long time under repair and then we got transferred from the fleet back to Maui and that's when we did this long period of training on the island of Maui.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. I guess then when the carrier went to Bremerton the air group also went and stayed with the carrier until it redeployed.

Dr. Conklin: No, we went to Maui.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, you went to Maui, okay.

Dr. Conklin: Yeah, the air group all went to Maui and we just lived there and practiced for a long time.

Mr. Zambrano: And what was that like being in Maui?

Dr. Conklin: Well, it was swell. That's one of the things that I kind of feel guilty about. We had a good time. We built a little sailboat and sailed it and we built an officers club and drank out of it and the honest truth is there was a fair amount of drinking went on in the navy. Naval aviators tend to do that. At least we did in those days. Now I doubt if it's any different now.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, let me go down a list of some of these different islands and you can tell me if you had any experience with them or not?

Dr. Conklin: Okay.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you recall Hollandia?

Dr. Conklin: Hollandia was a landing ... I have to tell you a funny story about Hollandia. Hollandia was a place where the army was doing the landing. The army was going in to ... that was a big island. Hollandia was part of the chain in the South Pacific and one of the generals of the army was conducting the attack on this place in Hollandia and the navy was assigned to support that. When I say support I mean to do what I told you about before. We dive bombed targets that the army thought needed to be targeted, we strafed, we did dive bombing, and so forth and we did that for so long as it took the army to make that move from the beach, from the ocean, into this site. Now I don't even remember what Hollandia was there for. I don't know why it was there, but that was what we were there to do was to support the army. Well, it was over the jungle. We had never done much over the jungle work ours had been over the sea or over these small atolls and always we were over

the ocean. But now we're asked to support over land and it was jungle and it was known for cannibalism and all kinds of grizzly ideas. And the intelligence officers decided that we should be armed if we were to be shot down and go down into the jungle, we should be prepared to defend ourselves. So they decided that we should carry guns and I carried a revolver in a shoulder holster and then they also thought that we needed more than just a revolver so we would carry a sub-machine gun like in the movies in the old days. It had a canister on it, it was a round canister that held that bullets and then you'd attached the canister to the gun and then you could shoot the gun. Without that canister attached to the gun the gun was useless. You didn't have any bullets.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Dr. Conklin: Well, I don't know where the fighter pilots carried their sub-machine guns but we had no room in our cockpits to carry sub-machine guns and the canister so that they struggled with that. I don't know how long before they decided that we would give the canister to the rear seat man because he had room for that and we'd give the gun to the pilot because they had room. So we thought on that for a very short time and thought if we get shot down the rear seat man is going to bail out and he's going to go wherever the wind carries him and I'm going to go another place wherever the wind carries me and when we land on the ground, he's going to have the bullets and I'm going to have the gun and we always thought that was the only really dumb

thing I ever knew the intelligence officers to do, but we got a big laugh out of that.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh my goodness. So was there anything else involved in Hollandia?

Dr. Conklin: No. Not really. We didn't see anybody on the ground. We didn't see any people. The fighters probably did when they were strafing and doing things like that but not with our job. And no I don't remember anything more than that kind of spooky arrangement that the intelligence officers came up with.

Mr. Zambrano: What about Saipan?

Dr. Conklin: Well, Saipan was a busy place. We did a lot of close support there. We lost a few planes at Saipan shot down by anti-aircraft. Saipan was heavily armed and greatly protected because the Japanese considered that to be a really, really valuable possession. They didn't want to lose Saipan because if we could get bombers on Saipan, if we could base bombers on Saipan, and this is what happened, of course, with B-29's and they could attack Japan from there. So they were hot to repel our recovery of Saipan and we went in and did a lot of damage there. We blew up everything that we could see that moved and did a lot of attacking and several of our airplanes got shot down and most of the people were picked up. We had occasions when, as we were exiting ... one day we were exiting the island to head back out to the ship and all at once one of our guys was talking on the radio and he says, 'I'm hit and going down!' And so he did and he landed in the surf off the edge of the beach and the Japanese gunboats began to go out there as if they were going to attempt to kill him. And so we began to circle him and we went

around him and around him to try to ward them off and as they got closer we would strafe them. Some of us fellows were fighter pilots and some of us were dive bombers, but we were all interested in saving our guys so we bunched up around there and went around and around and it all went pretty good except my bladder got really full. I was anxious to get him saved so I could get back aboard the ship. We had events like that, but we had a number of occasions when our people were picked up by floatplanes. The cruisers, our cruisers, a cruiser being a smaller vessel than a battleship, our cruisers had floatplanes on them, a two passenger floatplane that could land on the water. And they would go in on those beaches under the guns and land and pick up those pilots. That was a big job and that was an important thing to have that.

Mr. Zambrano: That's really putting yourself in harm's way to do a job like that. Wow! On most of these close support operations, other than Truk was the weather fairly good?

Dr. Conklin: Yes. Usually the weather in the Pacific is pretty good. When it's bad it's really bad, you know, like typhoons. We went through a typhoon and one of the British carriers that was accompanying us took terrible damage to their flight deck, I recall. By and large the weather in the Pacific is kind of nice. Puffy white clouds like here in Iowa.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you recall what task force or battle group number you were in?

Dr. Conklin: That was Task Force 58.

Mr. Zambrano: 58, okay. And there wasn't any name or description or designation above that, it was just Task Force 58?

Dr. Conklin: I think that's right. I don't recall that we ever ... I don't remember that. Have you encountered other groups where they did that?

Mr. Zambrano: No. I just asked because I interviewed a gentleman who was on the Iowa and there was something called Battleship Division 7 or some such thing.

Dr. Conklin: Oh, yeah. That's right. Battleships did do that, but they didn't give them coy names like sunshine or anything like that. It was just that navy's designation.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. Do you recall Eniwetok?

Dr. Conklin: Not very clearly, though we were there. We did attack Eniwetok, but I don't remember any particular event that surrounded that episode.

Mr. Zambrano: Is it true that it's basically kind of a barren island, there's nothing really there?

Dr. Conklin: Most of those islands were that. They didn't have a lot of vegetation on them and those that had been attacked had lost a lot of their vegetation. I remember one other place that you might have on your list and that's Palau.

Mr. Zambrano: Yes, I do.

Dr. Conklin: We were at Palau. Palau had a lot of shipping in it when we were there and we attacked the shipping in Palau. That's about all I remember of it, but I do remember that and that's the extent of my memory but we did do that. My memory for that is a little vague. Also, I can tell you another thing that we did was that we were off the coast of Japan when the war ended and the

Japanese and our government, I think mainly our navy, entered into some kinds of plans to terminate the hostilities and to allow Japan to continue to operate so that they could bring about the sort of political things that needed to be done as the war ended and in order to do that they needed to be able to move people by air within the confines of the Japanese islands so they told people to fix up some [unclear] airplanes and put the flags on the back of them, sort of tow a flag behind them, which would identify them as being peaceful airplanes moving people about and so we went in to sort of see that what they did was what they were told to do and nothing else. So we would fly, I had the cameras on at that time, and so my job was to take some pictures in the air and that reminds me of another thing I'll tell you about, but we did that and that was the end of the war. The Japanese were very curious. We would fly low over there with the air force to sort of police them and they would get out [unclear] and then wait to watch us fly by there. That must have been, for them, a really ... they must have had some very, very mixed feelings for what was going on at that time. I often thought what it would be like to be Japanese on that island when the war is ended and here are the victors to do what they do. I always thought that must have been some strange feeling. At one time before the war ended we were off the coast of Japan and there was a battleship tied up in Yokosuka Harbor and the battleship was alongside an anti-aircraft school. There was a training center for anti-aircraft gunners and this was a big naval base and so the fleet ... it was Admiral Halsey, at that time, was determined that that

battleship should be sunk. He wanted to sink that battleship so the air group's assignment was to sink that battleship. Well, that meant the dive bombers had to do a big part of it and it was also possible that the torpedo bombers could do it. The fighters would fly cover and try to protect from any anti-aircraft. Our job as photographers was to fly over that battleship and photograph it and stand off while the attack occurred and then to go back in and do it like I explained to you in the very beginning. So that's all we did. We went in there and took pictures of that battleship and then the attack occurred and then we went in and took some more pictures and the next day we went back and did the same thing because the intelligence officers couldn't determine whether it was sunk or not because it was kind of sticking out. The battleship really wouldn't disappear from view because it was too shallow, the waters too shallow. So we did it a third day and finally the third day the intelligence officers, by looking at our three dimensional films that we had taken were able to say to the Admiral, 'Admiral, the battleship is already sunk. It's sitting on the bottom.' And that was exactly what had happened. The dive bombers and the torpedo bombers had sunk the ship, but it really wasn't going to sink, it was just going to sit on the bottom. So we felt like we were ready to quit attacking and it took some convincing of the Admiral that the battleship really was sunk. Let's not waste anymore exposure in that anti-aircraft area because we were taking some big hits when we went across there with those cameras at that anti-aircraft school. That was an event.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you recall Ulithi?

Dr. Conklin: No, I don't.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. What about Yap?

Dr. Conklin: No ... my goodness, my telephone keeps ringing. No, I don't. That's not what I remember. I don't have any detail on that one.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. What about Formosa or Okinawa?

Dr. Conklin: Neither, neither one.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Dr. Conklin: See there was a gap where we went back between the time we finished the first tour out there and turned around went back to rebuild. We were gone a year so it was those things that we missed.

Mr. Zambrano: Now that was the time that you were in Maui?

Dr. Conklin: No. We came back to the United States and we went to Norfolk and we were in the region of Norfolk, Virginia. Our squadron was being rebuilt we took on some replacements and so forth and did some more training and then we were assigned to another carrier. We didn't go back aboard the Lexington; we went back aboard the Randolph and the Bonhomme Richard.

Mr. Zambrano: So it sounds like you weren't there for the battle Leyte Gulf?

Dr. Conklin: I don't think so. I think you're right about that.

Mr. Zambrano: I asked because that's the battle where the kamikaze hits the Lexington.

Dr. Conklin: Well, you know, I'm kind of fuzzy about that. We were there when there were kamikazes. We encountered kamikazes.

Mr. Zambrano: Really.

Dr. Conklin: As we were approaching the end of the war and we were back out, you see, and we had gone to America and had been rebuilt and had come out again, as a matter of fact we went through the Panama Canal and back out and then we were there for the end of the war. Some of these things are fuzzy in my memory. I apologize for that.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, that's okay. Which of the two carriers were you on first, the Bonhomme Richard or the Randolph?

Dr. Conklin: I don't know that. I've thought about that too since I talked to you the other night I thought I wish I had that clear in my head. I don't remember if it was the Randolph or the Bonhomme Richard, I think it was the Randolph first, but I'm not sure.

Mr. Zambrano: It doesn't sound like you spent much time on either one of them.

Dr. Conklin: No. I don't think we did. Well, the second time out we did. I think it was the Randolph though.

Mr. Zambrano: And did you stay with Sample, were you with him on the Randolph?

Dr. Conklin: Well, you see I was flying fighters then, I didn't have a rear seat man.

Mr. Zambrano: That's right. I'm sorry. So at this point we're talking 1945?

Dr. Conklin: Yeah.

Mr. Zambrano: How did you hear about the atomic bomb? Were you pretty surprised? What was going on about that time?

Dr. Conklin: Well, we were attacking Japan at that time and my memory of this is not really terribly clear but I seem to recall that I was exiting from Japan headed back out to the ships and I had a target of opportunity in my guns and I was

about to shoot and the announcement came over the radio, 'Stop shooting. Do not shoot.' And I don't know if that's a fantasy I had or whether that's a reality, but it seems to me ... I do recall that as we would exiting Japan we would leave kind of low down, we wouldn't be high altitude and there were gunboats in the water that the Japanese had and we'd strafe them as we went out. We considered them a target of opportunity and we had bullets but we didn't have bombs because we'd already dropped them, but actually all I had was cameras and bullets and I'd shoot at them as we came out. But I seem to recall that one time right towards the end of the war I was coming out and heard that announcement. You think that I would remember that better than I do, I don't know why though.

Mr. Zambrano: What rank were you at this point?

Dr. Conklin: I was a lieutenant junior grade.

Mr. Zambrano: So either way it sounds like the war just abruptly ends pretty much.

Dr. Conklin: Yes, for us it did. After those bombs had dropped that was it. We weren't doing anything more except looking for those prisoners of war, that we continued to do.

Mr. Zambrano: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Dr. Conklin: Well, the Japanese had been directed to put big PW's on the top of the houses in the Tokyo area where our prisoners were being held and our intent was to go in and find those places and then drop foodstuffs and medicines to the prisoners of war. And we discovered that the Japanese cities, Tokyo mainly, were naturally camouflages because of the way they

were built and the small houses next to each other and different colored roofs, it makes sort of a camouflage and we couldn't find them, we couldn't find those prisoner of war camps that were supposedly designated with a big sign that said PW.

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Dr. Conklin: And so we went in looking for them and couldn't find them so the intelligence officers said, 'Fly over and take pictures of Tokyo and do that so what we did was go in with our camera planes and those 3D cameras and we photographed the entire city of Tokyo and the intelligence officers were able to define the locations for the prisoner of war camps and then our people went in and dropped medicines and stuff to them. So that went on after the war was over.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. When the signing in Tokyo Bay occurred, where were you?

Dr. Conklin: I don't know. I thought about that often because we weren't there. I can't imagine that we were not there because we had these cameras. We should have been there and I've never understood why we didn't do that, but I don't think we did. I'm almost certain we didn't. I think I would have remembered that, you know. That was on the battleship and it would be an easy thing to identify and I think we did not go there.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Well ... I'll change the tape in just a second here, but now that the war was over did you have any contact with the Japanese at all?

Dr. Conklin: No.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. What pretty much happened? Were you redeployed? Were you sent back to Pearl? What?

Dr. Conklin: When the war was over?

Mr. Zambrano: Right.

Dr. Conklin: We were put on the Enterprise. There was a very old carrier called the Enterprise and it had survived the war, and when the war was over they had to get all these people who were out in the Pacific back to America so they put us aboard the Enterprise and had headed us for America and we went into, I think, San Diego and we were dismissed in San Diego.

Mr. Zambrano: In San Diego and by dismissed you mean you were discharged at that point?

Dr. Conklin: Yes, discharged out of the navy. I went into the navy reserve. I was thinking of staying in the navy as a regular navy officer. I was thinking of becoming a regular naval aviator. You see we were reserve naval aviators and I was thinking of becoming a regular naval aviator as a career and I had made a good friend while I was on the ship. His name was Neal Baxter and he was a physician and Neal and I were great friends. I used to fly with Neal. Flight surgeons were never supposed to fly alone and so Neal loved to fly and the skipper said that if I would fly with Neal he'd be fine with it. So I would fly with Neal and we became good friends doing that. This was before we were in combat; this is when we were in the states.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Dr. Conklin: And as I got ready to get out of the navy or rather to stay in the navy, Neal took me aside one day and said to me, 'Conk' he says, 'I don't think you

should do that. I don't think that would go well for you. I think you should get out of the navy and go to medical school.' Because we had talked about that possibility, so that's what I did. I decided not to be a naval aviator as a career. It might not have been a good place for me to be. Without a war the naval aviator is not the hero he was during the war and it would be kind of a boring job sometimes.

Mr. Zambrano: Right. Let me just stop here and change the tape real quick.

Dr. Conklin: Okay.

[Interruption]

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. We're back on.

Dr. Conklin: Okay.

Mr. Zambrano: So Dr. Baxter was an influence for you then?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, yes he was! And I kept in touch with him after the war when I finished medical school he kind of invited me to come and go into practice with him and he was a general practitioner and I was a specialist in pediatrics and I didn't think that's what I wanted to do so I went ahead with my pediatric practice.

Mr. Zambrano: About what year was that?

Dr. Conklin: Well, I graduated from medical school in 1952.

Mr. Zambrano: Just going back a little bit, you mentioned that you were in junior college when the war started?

Dr. Conklin: Yes. That was in Chanute.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay.

Dr. Conklin: And I went to junior college because I had not done well in high school. I had done poorly in high school and junior college was in the same building that the high school was in and some of the same teachers taught junior college and I knew those teachers and they knew me and they knew my problem of not being able to learn well and it was a good place for me to be if I was going to get any further education so I went to junior college.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you recall the name of it?

Dr. Conklin: Sure, Chanute Junior College.

Mr. Zambrano: Junior college, okay. So obviously before you went to medical school did you get your bachelors somewhere? What was your further education?

Dr. Conklin: Well, when you go to medical school ... junior college was two years so when I came back I had been in junior college. In the navy at the time of my entrance into this whole thing, the navy required two years of college. Well, junior college counted so that I had to get that junior college under my belt before I could apply to be a naval aviator so I did that. Then when I got back out of the navy, when the war was over, and I was going to go to college again, because if I was going to go to medical school, I had to have pre-med. So I got a degree in the Bachelor of Science at the University of Kansas and then went on into the medical school.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Can you tell me something about when you first went into practice? How was that?

Dr. Conklin: Well, it was a good place. It was a very old community here in Dubuque and in Riverton and the clinic that I joined was kind of like my navy

experience. The clinic was made up of doctor that I immediately admired. They were good doctors practicing the kind of medicine I wanted to practice and I felt at home here. At one time I was invited by a group of pediatricians in Kansas City to return to Kansas City because they had lost a member of their group and see if I wanted to join that group and we drove down to look at Kansas City and Kansas City looked great because we both had grown up down in that area and we almost went back to Kansas and practiced but when we finally made up our minds, why we stayed here and we've never been sorry. This is a good community. It's doing very big things nowadays. We've got a new River Center. It's really kind of an exciting place to live now.

Mr. Zambrano: Sounds like it's growing quite a bit?

Dr. Conklin: It is! It really is, yes.

Mr. Zambrano: You weren't married during the war, were you?

Dr. Conklin: No. No, we were married after I got out. I was out of medical school when we got married.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, I forgot to ask you, when you were telling me about our parents ... what were their names?

Dr. Conklin: My mothers name was Marie and my fathers name was Eugene, same as mine and they were in the jewelry business and I was there only child and my mother followed the war very intently. She had big scrap books and things. She actually came and visited our air group one time.

Mr. Zambrano: Really!

Dr. Conklin: Yeah, when we were back here in the states she came and visited us.

Mr. Zambrano: Did you get a lot of mail while you were overseas?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, yeah. I had a girl. Her name was Doris and she sent me lots of letters.

Mr. Zambrano: Do you remember any particular emotional experience during your time in the service?

Dr. Conklin: Not really except the loss of some of the members of our air group. That was emotional.

Mr. Zambrano: Were there quite a few?

Dr. Conklin: I honestly don't know. I never kept track of that. Not as many as you might think. We were the best trained group of people for the job that ever was and we did a good job of it.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. So when did you get married?

Dr. Conklin: We got married in 1952.

Mrs. Conklin: '50!

Dr. Conklin: '50, my wife says.

Mrs. Conklin: And my name isn't Doris!

Dr. Conklin: Oh, her name is not Doris. I didn't marry Doris. That's been sort of a little thorn in her side.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. Well, we won't go there anymore. Well, I assume you must have had children, right?

Dr. Conklin: Yes, we had three children and our oldest boy is a captain on the riverboats.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, really!

Dr. Conklin: Yeah, he pushes the big towboats and goes up and down the Mississippi and our daughter is in the real estate business in Washington, D.C., and our other son became an airline pilot, he was a pilot for American Airlines and a captain for American Airlines and he had an accident in a stunt plane and was killed seven years ago.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, I'm sorry. You mentioned at the beginning that you had retired about six or eight years ago, something like that?

Dr. Conklin: Yes.

Mr. Zambrano: I would imagine that you must have delivered a lot of children?

Dr. Conklin: No. I'm a baby doctor, not an obstetrician. I don't deliver children.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay. I'm sorry. I mixed those two up.

Dr. Conklin: Yeah. There's one thing that I didn't tell you about that I don't like to make much of, but I got a Navy Cross.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh!

Dr. Conklin: Everybody in our flight that made that attack on the Japanese fleet that I told you about, the *Mission Beyond Darkness* thing, was awarded the Navy Cross. I had prior to that time been awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross and I had two Air Medals.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow! That's very impressive. Other than the time you were grazed in the head with that piece of metal that you told me about earlier, were you ever wounded?

Dr. Conklin: No. No, that was it.

Mr. Zambrano: The reunions you mentioned earlier, when did they start?

Dr. Conklin: Oh, they started about ... oh; I think we'd been out of the navy perhaps seven years when that happened.

Mr. Zambrano: And would it move around from city to city pretty much?

Dr. Conklin: We'd go to desirable places like San Francisco and Pensacola and Corpus Christi; uh ... we tried to go to the navy places.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. When was the last one that you attended?

Dr. Conklin: The last one was ... well, that was a delight! The last reunion, I wanted to tell you about that because I'm glad you brought that up. The last reunion was in Washington, D.C. at the occasion of the dedication of the World War II Memorial.

Mr. Zambrano: Wow.

Dr. Conklin: And you asked me earlier if I had any emotional experiences during my career and I have to say that one of the most emotional experiences that I've ever had was the attendance at that War Memorial dedication. That was an event that I kind of get goose bumps when I think about it. It was something else to walk among those people who were there to honor the World War II veterans. It was a real emotional experience. It was also the occasion for a time when a great motorcycle group has an annual visit to Washington, D.C. and they were there and they behaved better than they ever had before. I was walking out of the place after we withdrew from the ceremonials and there are two men walking beside me who were obviously Washingtonians and they were people that were younger than I but in their fifties I thought. And one said to the other one he said, 'You know, I've been coming to

these events in this town for years and I had never, ever seen an event that was as well behaved as this one.' And people talked about that like ... people came up to me, I had on a hat that said 'USS Lexington.' People came up to me and said, 'Thanks.' And people came up, a lady came up to me and she said, 'What was it like to be a hero?' And that stumped me. The way the citizenry and the people who attended the memorial the way they behaved was just remarkable. Do you remember the book that Tom Brokaw wrote, 'The Greatest Generation'?

Mr. Zambrano: Yes.

Dr. Conklin: Well, I couldn't help but think of that when I was there and seeing those people who made up the greatest generation and that bunch of people who were there to honor the World War II veterans. It was a moving experience. I would recommend to anybody who hasn't done so that they go and see that.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. I'll have to keep that in mind that next time I go to Washington. I have a friend that's out there.

Dr. Conklin: Yeah, be sure and see that.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay, well, uh ...

Dr. Conklin: Now that you've done this with what you're doing it'll have a special meaning for you I'm sure.

Mr. Zambrano: It will. I've visited a number of places over the years and it's always a pretty moving experience. Is there anything else that you'd like to add? Any stories, any memories?

Dr. Conklin: I think not. I'm surprised at how I've gone on, really. I don't usually think about these things much and since I've been talking to you over the few days, I have been thinking about it more. When I cut loose and started with this, I didn't realize that I was going to go on for an hour and a half. I have.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, that's okay! That's okay!

Dr. Conklin: Well, I thank you for including me.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, you know, sir, I really thank you for taking the time to just sit and talk to me and I've really enjoyed just listening to your stories and your experiences. It's definitely a benefit to the Nimitz.

Dr. Conklin: What are you going to do with this?

Mr. Zambrano: Well, what I do is I interview, I transcribe it myself, I send it to the Nimitz and it's their job to send you a copy for you to edit.

Dr. Conklin: Oh!

Mr. Zambrano: And it's quite a process after that, but I'm not involved in that. My portion end's as soon as I send them the transcript.

Dr. Conklin: Then they're going to make some kind of a program out of it or what?

Mr. Zambrano: Well, they look it over and from there they'll produce some copies and they'll send you a copy and see what you'd like to edit on it.

Dr. Conklin: I should tell you that ... did you ever read *Mission Beyond Darkness*?

Mr. Zambrano: No. Actually you mentioned it earlier so I made a note here.

Dr. Conklin: It really would do well to read that. That is a war written, very small book by a fellow who is a professional writer and he was on the ship with us and he interviewed all of us after the Turkey Shoot and you would do really

well if could acquire a copy of that. Subsequently, at our last reunion there's an organization the name of which I don't know, but it is a group of photographers and reporters who came with us on our reunion in Washington, and interviewed people in our group and they're making a movie out of it.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, really!

Dr. Conklin: And I don't know the title or anything. I've got a copy. They sent me a DVD and I have a copy of it. Next Memorial Day, the one coming up, they plan to show that on Public Television.

Mr. Zambrano: Oh, okay.

Dr. Conklin: And it isn't finished yet, but it will be and that might be something that would tie in with what you're doing.

Mr. Zambrano: Okay. Well, it certainly sounds like something that I should see.

Dr. Conklin: Yeah. Well, thank you for including me.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, again I thank you for your time and, sir; I thank you for your service. I've interviewed quite a number of folks up to this point and, you know, it was a dangerous job and someone had to do it and a lot of American's should appreciate what you've done.

Dr. Conklin: Well, thank you.

Mr. Zambrano: Well, let me end the interview here, but let me keep you on the phone and I'll just end it with that, but just stay on the line.

Transcribed by:
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