

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

Albert K. Donaldson

Wright City, MO

April 14, 2009

Played horseshoes with Admiral Nimitz

My name is Richard Misenhimer and today is April 14, 2009. I am interviewing Albert K. Donaldson by telephone. His telephone number is 636-745-8311. His address is 580 Indian Lake Dr, Wright City, MO 63390.

Mr. Misenhimer

Albert, I want to thank you for taking time today to do this interview today.

Mr. Donaldson

Oh you are quite welcome; I was just doing my job.

Mr. Misenhimer

And I want to thank you for service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Donaldson

Well, you know how it was back then, the mind set of every young guy in high school was to be in the Navy, the Army, the Army Air Corps, Marine Corps or something to get in that war, you know. We all couldn't wait. I couldn't wait myself, I dropped out of school to go, you know.

Mr. Misenhimer

What is your birth date?

Mr. Donaldson

9th day of October, 1927.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where were you born?

Mr. Donaldson

Birmingham, Alabama.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Donaldson

I have 3 sisters and 2 brothers; there were six of us in total.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were any of your brothers in World War II?

Mr. Donaldson

No, none of them were in World War II. I'm the oldest and I just barely got in.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did the depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Donaldson

Depression did affect our family very much, we didn't know it because we always had plenty to eat and a place to live, you know. But, my dad wanted to get in the Navy, too, but he wasn't able to because he was 4-F because he only had one eye. He had gotten it put out, his eye put out at the building of Veterans Hospital in 1932.

He was making \$1 a day, once a week at the only job he could get. He was a carpenter and he went to Texas to build derricks. Point Arthur, Texas, where my sister was born, then we moved on and deeper into Texas to a northern part, a place called Minco, Oklahoma and daddy worked there for about, I guess, six months getting a job a day like they were down below on the coast there near Port Arthur. But we got a letter from Birmingham that Grandmother Donaldson was doing poorly and when we got the second letter they said we better come home. So, dad loaded up the car and we went home and while we were there grandmother recovered quite a bit and got better and better and then

my dad picked up the newspaper one morning and there had been a tornado in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and it tore up the little town across the river from Tuscaloosa called North Port. And, dad figured that they'd need a lot of carpenters down there so he jumped the car and went to Tuscaloosa with his tool box. And sure enough he got a full time job there and he kind of liked. Tuscaloosa so that's where we stayed. That's how come we were living in Tuscaloosa because of a tornado that hit the place.

I went to school, the public school there, all those years up til junior high school and of course the war was looming on horizon and we moved to Tampa, Florida because dad wanted to do war work. This is right after Pearl Harbor. We had come home from church one Sunday and dad had all us kids come inside and sit around the radio and listen to the reports coming in. We heard the speech by President Roosevelt on the radio to congress. So dad had us all listen to that, too, and we heard the Day of Infamy speech by President Roosevelt.

We moved on to Tampa right away cause dad figured that everything was going to be frozen like it was in World War I, and that we may not be able to travel and so forth and then we moved down to Tampa, Florida and had trouble finding a place to live so we had to move several times trying to find a place and finally dad bought a place which became for sale and it was on North Orleans Avenue in Tampa, just north of Tampa. We lived there during the war years. I milked cows as a job, extra job and then I worked as a, well I wanted to do war work so I got a job at Tampa Electric Company in the evening by arranging my high school classes in the morning and then I could work 4 hours in the afternoon winding armatures at Tampa Electric Company. I wound armatures there for, I guess, about 6 months or something like that, and I told dad that I wanted to get in the

Navy or the Army Air Corps; I was going to be a pilot. He said "well, lets go try it." So, we went down there and they wouldn't take me because I didn't have a two years of college. This was in 1944 and when they wouldn't take me, he said "Well, let's try the Navy." And sure enough the Navy took me.

So, I was in the Navy for about 6 months before I was called to active duty. Well, lets see, from June, it was May or June I don't know which, around May or June and I worked in the shipyards building ships. I was a painter's helper, an electrician helper, welder's helper whatever I needed to help and I was the one who drug their tables around and their hoses and brought paint; the general gofer job, you know. And cleaned barnacles off the bottom of ships and stuff like that.

When October came I was able to go on active duty and I went from there to Jacksonville, Florida and took my exam and I passed it. And then I was sent to Great Lakes Naval Training Center, north of Chicago, up near Milwaukee and so I went to boot camp up there. Wow, was that something! It was the first time I had been away from home like that, and it's like a million other guys, you know. But, it was really, uh, uh, I enjoyed every bit of that boot camp. I realized I could do as much as any other man, you know, a boy I guess, my age. And I learned what I could and couldn't do. Some of our training included running through gas attacks, you know, and putting on our masks and so forth. We had to experience mustard gas, phosgene and other nausea gas, tear gas. There was about 4 gasses we had to learn to identify by smell and then we went to the gunnery range where we learned to fire the grease gun, the Springfield Rifle, the grease gun 45, and a 45 pistol and we learned to shoot the 50 caliber deck gun. Then we shot the 40 millimeter pom-poms, we called them in those days, and a 5 inch 38 canon. So, we got a wide

variety of guns to fire, you know. Then, we learned to row the boat with paddles and the whole bit and rowing we learned all the knots, we learned air craft identification, fire fighting. We learned, well it was a very disciplined boot camp and it lasted about, well it was suppose to be 90 days but it wasn't quite that long.

And, then we got sent home for nine days vacation, they called it terminal leave, (laughing), they could have given it another name. But, they called it terminal leave before you go overseas, you know. So, I spent my 9 days in travel back to Chicago, caught a train for Camp Shoemaker, California and that was a 4 day trip day and night on the train. We called it a cattle car because.... (laughing)....it had these ole white Pullman cars only they were stripped out and just square boxes and it had a coal-fired stove back in the aft part of it and we had to keep that stoked and fired up all that time for heat back there. Anyway, these box cars had bunks built in, you know, and you had to walk up about 5 or 6 cars to get to a dining car. The line would be long. We had metal trays and you had your coffee cup and you would sit on benches and eat off the tray. The town was crowded, everyone dumped on the town at one time, you know. And after that, later on, they had us to go downtown in San Francisco. Then one night they woke me up and said "pack your gear, fall out on the tarmac in thirty minutes, your shipping out". It was kind of weird because they did it all very quietly without any hustle and bustle. So, I guess no one on the outside could see that anything special was going on. I loaded aboard a bus and I understand that two buses had left just ahead of me and we rode to Treasure Island and off loaded the bus on the dock down there. But you know, when we left we put this sea bag over our shoulder and was walking down the aisles and it was dark, just flashlights is going and all, and all the guys were waiting like and they

would say, you know, everybody was wishing you good luck. They say “good luck buddy”, you know, “good luck”. And one of the things that we said among ourselves is “this is it”, you know, “guess were leaving.” We went down to the docks and there was heavy fog down there and then a whale boat came along the side and it was a powered whale boat and about 15 of us got aboard on that whale boat and they started blowing the foghorn. It was making chills run up and down your neck. (laughing)

As we went out to sea we couldn't tell anything, went out across into the bay and we got out there and they were sounding, they had sounds going back and forth, and that is what they went by to locate themselves where the ship was and we loaded aboard that ship and it was called the *USS Buckingham Jr.* It was a liberty ship and transport and about 5 minutes after we got aboard we heard the Bos'un's whistle sound off and they said “all special sea and anchor detail, man your stations”. That means that we are shoving off, you know. We heard them raising the anchor and washing it down with the hoses and all that. To see it and to watch them, then the ship started moving forward and it moved very slowly. This is like 1:30 or 2:00 o'clock in the morning when we moved out.

Somebody said “there's Alcatraz” and the ship was totally blacked out. And they said “there is off our port side is Alcatraz Island” and I had heard about Alcatraz all my life but I never saw it, you know, at that time because of the fog. We cruised on out and they said “we're under the Golden Gate” and I didn't see that either. Anyway, when it got daylight we could see once in awhile breaks in the fog. When we get out to sea then we begin to pick up the ground swells in the water and we were often going, everybody kind of looked back at the fantail so that they could see San Francisco and the US disappear.

But, it was already too foggy to see back there and short time later it was clear as a bell.

But, we still couldn't see the shore or anything. So, we were on our way overseas.

The rumor had it that we were to go to the Philippines and train for the invasion in Japan.

So, everybody was going to the Philippines to train for the invasion and they called it Market Garden. We were training for Market Garden and Market Garden was the code name for the invasion in Japan apparently. (Editors note: "Market Garden" was the parachute drop into Holland. The code name for the invasion of Japan was "Olympic".)

Then, we changed course at sea after seven days and they said we were to stop at Honolulu first, at Pearl Harbor. Sure enough we put in at Pearl Harbor and we were sent up to, a whole bunch of us, sent up to Aiea Heights processing center. In the daytime you could see the *USS Arizona*, the towers of the *USS Arizona* leaning over, way over on the other side of Pearl Harbor. You could see Ford Island and all those places like that.

So, out of there, all we did was chores, I mean work parties everyday. We would go, for example, we'd be unloading a ship one day and the next day reloading that same ship or another one. And that went on for about a week to ten days and one time I was on a work party that was on a, for 2 days, a work party going up to the Punch Bowl and we had a Navy gun, 8 inch Navy gun revetment up there. We took all of the ammo out of that revetment, came there and put that onboard the ship and put new ammo in there.

Apparently, they said when the ammo got two years old they changed it and they used it for practice and put fresh ammo in the pill boxes. So, I was doing that for a couple days and then, uh, I kept asking writing a letter to the lieutenant there, asking him for a transfer aboard an aircraft carrier, I mean battleship, not an aircraft carrier, but a battleship; The *USS Alabama*. When you are 17 years old you think "we'll I'm from Alabama so I

should be on the *USS Alabama*.”; since it’s our ship and our state name on it. (laughing)

Well, I kept asking and one day that lieutenant called me up to his office and he said “Donaldson, you quit writing these letters! You know how much it cost the Navy to process one of these letters?” Well, I didn’t think it cost anything but he said “I can’t one through until you got another one up here!” I told him “I’m from Alabama and I want to be on the *USS Alabama*.” They had OSCU, ‘Kingfishers’ airplanes on it. I want to work around airplanes I figured that if I get on a ship I could get a job around airplanes. He called me 2 or 3 days later and he said “I got you a job working near airplanes about 5 miles from here at the Naval Air Station, right here on Hawaii. I said “I am?” and he said “yeah” and of course that is where I went; John Rogers NAS Everybody had to do three months cooking duty from when there got there, three months of mess cook duty and when I was on my day off, when we were on our own, I would work on the sea docks where the seaplanes were. There was a big seaplane, too big to land on land, is basically what we had and by the end of the war they had those giant Mars ships coming in and I’m proud to say that I got to work on all 5 of them. It was the Marshall Mars, the Marianas Mars, the Martin Mars and the Hawaiian Mars, I think that is the 5 names, one of them slipped my mind. (Philippine Mars) Anyway, I worked on those and I also flew them, test hops on the Coronado, and test stops on C-54’s. They called them R5D’s in the Navy. They said observe it, looking for oil leaks and stuff like that, just observing. It was mostly just to get to fly in an airplane, you know. In 1946, April 1946, I think it was, I was on the trolley going around to the other side of the base back to the main side I noticed a J-3 Piper Cub, bright yellow, sitting out there in the middle of the field by a little shack. This shack was an operations shed and had been there before World War II

began, before they changed this place into a big base. And it was just a little grass field there. Well, I got off that trolley and walked out to the center of the field there where that shack was and they had one man there and he said "I'm not an instructor but I'm with the business here that takes these flying service". So, I had a little money saved up so I signed up to get some flying lessons and 2 or 3 days later they had an instructor that came by the mess hall and he was a Navy lieutenant and I was his first student that he had ever had. He got his license back in the states, but then the war broke out so he joined the Navy to be a flyer and in the meantime he had his own instructor's rating. So, it was still good so we started, I started my flying lessons right there. We had to fly all the way across the island to get to an airport where we could shoot touch and goes and landings and things like that. We got over there and it was called Hialeah Field and I learned to fly off that little Hialeah Field. Hialeah was also, had been used as an auxiliary field prior to the war and during the war and its Colonel Taylor, or in those days Lieutenant Taylor, and George Welch, two p-40 pilots got airborne to fight the Japanese on the second wave coming over. And I was fortunate to learn to fly off that same little field. Anyway, I went on and spent my whole doggone Navy career there in Hawaii and wound up coming home in August of 1946. I made storekeeper 3rd class while I was over there. I came home on the 9th, I got discharged from active duty, released from active duty into the reserves on the 9th of August 1946 and then I went to, I was headed home to Tuscaloosa, Alabama where I grew up and that is where I wanted to go to school. I had taken the GED Test when I was in the Navy in Hawaii and got my high school diploma. A little side story to that, in 1986, I think, yeah 1986, I was down in Tampa, Florida and I went to visit my old high school, at Hillsboro High school in Tampa, which I quit in the

11th grade to go into the Navy. And I went in and I met the then principal and I showed him pictures, he had a picture up there on the wall of the past principals, and I showed him the gentleman that I had stood out there on the steps in front of the school get my picture taken with two other guys; we're all going into the Navy, Army and Air Force, Marine Corps or whatever. By the way, when we came home we came home with another transport ship and it took us 22 days to come home from Hawaii down to the canal zone, you know the Panama Canal and they let us off the ship one evening for four hours shore-time at Cristóbal, Panama, in the city of Cristóbal. And then we got back aboard and came home to Norfolk, Virginia where I was discharged into the reserves and I caught a bus from there and rode to Birmingham, then Tuscaloosa, Alabama and surprised the folks when I got there, of course. I worked with my dad as a carpenter for that summer and then enrolled in, that winter, no let's see, I started school in the winter of 1947 and I was going to drop out but one of my school buddies refused to let me drop out. I didn't do so good the whole semester, but he got me straightened out and helped me with another advisor and this advisor was able to get me started right. So, I went on and when I finished school there I finished in the 1950's and I got, I was commissioned in the Air Force, so that effectively ended my career in the Navy. From there I can tell you what I did after World War II.

While I was in the Navy reserves there in Tuscaloosa, I applied in 1948 for a cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. They sent us out on the reserve cruises, so for 2 weeks, this cruise that I took the first time was on the USS Weeks, DD-701, John Weeks, that's a destroyer. The second cruise that I went on was aboard the John Olsen, a destroyer escort. When I was working at the shipyards with my father in 1944 we were building three destroyer escorts,

one was for the US Navy, one was for the British, and one was for the Russians, and I worked on all three of these ships. I remember their work orders, work numbers, they were work numbers 87, 88 and 89. And, we were putting in, like I said I was a painter's helper, a welder's helper and any other kind of help they need and during the process I only worked there for about three months or maybe four, until I was called to active duty in the Navy. Well, in 1948 in the reserves, I went down to get something for the chief, (I was on the D.E. Olson) and I found it real quick. He wanted to know how I found it so quick and I told him I helped build the D.E.

So, we went up there, and the executive officer pulled the log book out for us to see and sure enough it was work number 87 that I had worked on in the shipyard. When the skipper came into the room, they exec told him that petty officer 3rd class Donaldson here has a distinction of having to work on this ship in the shipyards. And, ahh, he wanted to know all about it, you know, as much as I could tell him and I told him the different things and I remembered about it. So the chief petty officer and I left to go on back to duty station, well the bosun whistle sounded off and said "Now hear this, now hear this the skipper is going to speak. The captain is going to speak." And the captain said "we have a unique assignment aboard this ship that has a special distinction, at Tasco Ship building company he helped build this ship. If we have any problems, we know who to call!"

How come I did this, and how come I did this and everything that they figured was out of place or did wrong, they had to tell me about it, you know. That was one thing that was interesting that happened.

And the other interesting thing that happened to me was in Hawaii, me and my buddy were going out downtown to see a movie or something, but we decided to go swimming instead and we had been trying to learn how to surf. We got ourselves a couple of knots on our head in the process. Then these two gentleman came out from the Royal Hawaiian Hotel there and they had another gentleman with them who was carrying a box, a pasteboard box and he had horseshoes in it. They set up out there in front of us, well we were just sitting there wondering what to do next and they invited us to play horseshoes and even offered to buy us a beer. Oh man, that was a treat because we were 17 years old and too young to buy a beer. They were asking us about our base and we figured it was ok to talk about the base anyway since the war was over. And we told them all the things we did and how important it was that we get everything done right. So, we get the supplies flown down to the South Pacific where they need them and all that sort of things. And then out comes this officer in white uniform and come up and saluted one of the guys we were playing horseshoes with. Oh my gosh, the guy is a Navy officer! We thought they were just millionaires from the U.S. and it turned out to be Admiral Nimitz and I think Admiral King as I recalled. He was taller than Admiral Nimitz. So me and Nimitz kind of joined up together against the other two guys that were taller than us. We were ahead of them when they had to leave, but I got to play horseshoes with Admiral Nimitz.

Then when I was at the University of Alabama, this is probably around 1948 also, in the wintertime, Admiral Nimitz came to the University to make a speech and after he made his speech and everything we went up the Navy contingency was there, about 12 or 14 of us, went up to shake hands with the Admiral and meet him. I asked the admiral how his

horseshoe game was and he remembered me. And he asked about my friend from Bristol, Tennessee. So, that was my claim to fame on meeting an Admiral in the Navy, by getting to play horseshoes with him.

Well, anyway, after graduation I got my commission, I applied for flying school. I went on to become fighter pilot and served a tour in Korea as a fighter pilot. And then stayed in the Air Force and flew the F-86, F-100, the F-101 Voodoo. I flew the T-38 Talon, I got a chance to fly the B-17 a little bit, the B-25 a little bit, and the C-119 and the Gooney Bird and T-33 and F-80's; birds like that. I did the career that way. I retired in 1967 as a captain. I had 8 years in the Navy and the rest of it in the Air Force. My main jobs in the Air Force was fighter pilot and maintenance officer, air craft bases. That's about my career sir. I am residing in Wright City, Missouri at the present time. My wife and I were married for 56 years, she was a very good wife and I loved her dearly and still do and we had 4 children, we had 10 grandchildren and at the present time I have 3 great-grandchildren. I'm still active, I'm flying my airplanes, I'm 82 years old almost, I will be here shortly and I am flying my airplane out at the airport and working on it and I built it. It's a home built, low wing single plane and it's got a 85 horsepower engine in it. I'm building another one in the basement and I'll get it going here within a year and hopefully I'll fly it for a few years. I welcome and feel honored to have been asked to tell about my experiences. No big war stories, just doing my job that I had to do. I am really proud of my Navy and proud of my Air Force time in the service.

Mr. Misenhimer

What all did you do in Korea?

Mr. Donaldson

What did I fly in Korea?

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes.

Mr. Donaldson

I flew the vulnerable T-6. I was a forward air controller and primary ground support. Air security and ground support. I flew out of Chu-un-ch~~an~~, Korea as a mosquito pilot and I did my year there in Korea.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you fly a fighter plane in Korea?

Mr. Donaldson

I flew the T-6, it's a trainer version of the, it's a trainer actually that had been converted to what they called a LTA-6. It had about a 750 horse engine in it because of the change in the carburetor and the change in the floor that it had. And we used it in ground support by putting in strikes against ground forces of the Chinese and the North Koreans. That was my job there and later on I flew the F-86 Sabre in the states and then I flew the F-100 as I said. And I flew the F-101 Voodoo and I flew the T-38 Talon, I flew 119's, C-47's. Well, counting all the civilian airplanes and all the military airplanes I flew in, I have flown myself; I have flown 64 different airplanes. That is at the present time.

Mr. Misenhimer

That's a lot of planes. Go back and tell me, what was it like to go through the Panama Canal?

Mr. Donaldson

Oh that was beautiful. In fact I would like to take another cruise and go through there. I always wanted to take my wife but never did get to, to take her to the canal. It took 8 hours as I believe to go through the canal. And all day long and they had these little trains that they called mules and they would hook on to each side of the ship and pull you up through the canal and pull you into a canal lift and then they would pump the water into it, lift you up a level and then pull you forward with these little mules; which is train type mule, and then they would pump the water in the next level and take you up another level and then you would go forward and when we got to the middle there we were in a lake, a big lake and we sailed across that lake into another level. The Atlantic Ocean is higher than the Pacific, so when I went through we were always raising up, going from Pacific to the Atlantic. As we were going through the Caribbean's going to Norfolk, Virginia, the skipper pointed out an island and said "that is where Christopher Columbus landed."

Mr. Misenhimer

When you got the time in Cristóbal, what was it like in that town?

Mr. Donaldson

Then thing is, when we were on that ship, there weren't many guys that had any money. Some were selling their souvenirs. I sold a Japanese sword for \$10 to have money to go ashore. It's worth about \$2,000 today. I can't believe I did that. (laughing) But, I did.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you do?

Mr. Donaldson

We went ashore and I don't know what, bought trinkets and whistled at the girls (laughing) and everything else and drank some beer. Only, we didn't have to pay for the beer. Everybody, everywhere you go for beer why they'd buy it for you. They set you up, it was a lot of fun, and they had a square down there that was a lit up, a fountain type of a square down in the center of town, and they were all dancing around in circles around that square area where the fountain was. We joined in dancing with whoever or just marching sort of in a circle, anything to hold the hand of a girl. (laughing) After all that time overseas, you know. We had a delightful time.

I lost my hat and my tie to my whites, they got pulled off of me and stolen by girls I think. (laughing) I had to get aboard and I thought I was going to be in all kind of trouble because I didn't have the uniform on right but I was ok and so was my buddy, he had lost his too. Everybody was getting a souvenir off of everybody, hats and neckerchiefs were loose items that they could steal from you and get by with it pretty easy.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you get home with any souvenirs from World War II?

Mr. Donaldson

Well, from World War II, I made it back with a Nambu Japanese pistol which a buddy gave me from the Phillipines, he didn't want it and I kept that. And I have a German Luger from World War II, I bought that in a pawn shop for \$35 and it is a parabellum in a 7 milimeter and turns out that it's probably worth about \$800. And that's on today's market and I am kind of proud of that. From Korea, I have a British 303 rifle which I had

sporterized and I have a German Mauser 8MM that has not been sporterized that is in original condition and I love it, it's a good gun, good for deer hunting. In Vietnam, I have a Ring that I had made with a black sapphire set in it and I have a little violin like thing made out of a gourd that was given to me. And from Laos, I have a hat that was given to me by a lieutenant in the Laotian rangers and I spent most of my time in Laos during the Vietnam War. And we had TF-28 fighter versions of the T-28. It was the D model. Tom Moore, the project manager for Air America. But we worked a lot with Air America. You've heard of them.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross?

Mr. Donaldson

The Red Cross at Pearl Harbor when we got there they always had doughnuts and coffee and cookies of some kind. In Korea the Norweigan Red Cross had the shower points in Korea. Serve coffee and doughnuts to us and would write leeters or things for everybody like the Red Cross.

And the, lets see I remember the Norweigans were there and I got doughnuts through the Red Cross. But they were pretty busy at Panunjon up in the prison camps up there. There were 22 of our guys missing in action and known to be living in prison camps. We know where are, no, yeah we know what happened to 13, but the rest of them are still missing and the North Koreans have never told us anything about them. But we knew their suppose to be dead by now. Have been probably for a few years, but they are listed as missing. We had a couple of our guys that we shot down and parachuted out and didn't make it back even after having been known in prison camps.

Mr. Misenhimer

Anything else?

Mr. Donaldson

That is all I can remember.

Mr. Misenhimer

Since he was having so much trouble hearing me, I hung up and called him back on my cell phone and read the agreement to him and he agrees that the agreement is satisfactory to him. End of tape.

Transcribed by

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