

Max C. Duncan Oral History Interview

FLOYD COX: Today is September 19th, 2009. I am interviewing Captain Max Duncan, USN, retired. The interview is taking place in the Fredericksburg High School interview rooms, and the interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War Center for Pacific War Studies for the preservation of historical information related to World War II. To start out with, Captain, I'd like to take this time to tell you thank you for allowing us to interview you.

MAX DUNCAN: You're quite welcome.

FC: I'd like to start out by asking you when and where you were born and a little bit about your family background, and then we'll get into your naval history.

MD: All right. I was born in a small town called Avondale, North Carolina, on the 17th of June, 1921. Avondale, by the way, is no longer there; they changed the post office. But when I was about one year old I moved to a family -- my father was a doctor, and he had a clinic there, and he moved to Forest City, North Carolina, which is a town of, at that time, about 3,000 people, and he was the physician there until he died quite early in 1940. I went through the grade schools and high school in Forest City. My mother is from Richmond, Virginia, and she met my father

when he was in the Medical College of Virginia in the teens, 1900s -- 1913 to '17 or something like that. They had four children, and I was number two. I had an older sister, two years older. I had a younger sister, four years younger, and I do have a living younger brother, six years younger. A family of four. After high school, in those days -- why, the kids don't realize it -- they encouraged you to skip grades in school, and we skipped a grade, my wife and I both. We met in nursery school, by the way, and she has a ring that I gave her, still has it, when we were five years old, and we've been married 65 years now.

FC: Congratulations.

MD: After high school graduated, I was quite young, only 15 I guess, and I wanted to go to the Naval Academy, but I was too young, and therefore I went to the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, for a year, and then I went to the Naval Academy, and I ended up with two plebe years. A plebe year in the 1930s was a little more rigorous than it is today, for a freshman in college in military schools. At any rate, why, I was in a class that was accelerated, because I graduated - I was in the class of 1942, but they graduated us early in December of 1941, twelve days after Pearl Harbor. At that time, why, your initial assignment

for a ship was determined by lot. You drew numbers, and whatever number you drew, why, you then chose what ship you went over, what was left. Now you got to remember that in those days everyone had to go to a ship for two years to qualify as an underway officer of the deck, to qualify as a division officer, and to complete your ensign's notebook. And by the way, you couldn't get married for two years. The old saying, if we wanted you to need a wife, they'd issue you one, an army saying or something. At any rate, why, after the two years, then you could go become an aviator, you could go into submarines, you could go into the engineering corps, you could become a naval constructor, if you're qualified in those particular categories. But the point being that every naval officer, every newly-commissioned officer, had to go sea in a ship to qualify before he could specialize. That, of course, went out the window in early 1942, including the ban on getting married went out in April of 1942. I have an awful lot of classmates married between April and June of '42. Unfortunately, I was at sea, and [wasn't able?] to get married until 1943, late in '43.

FC: Let me ask you, I understand you were in the submarine service.

MD: Yes, yes.

FC: Why did you pick the submarine service?

MD: OK. I was probably one of the first in the class to really want to go into submarines. It started when I completed my first year at the Naval Academy, plebe year, and at the end of that time, they had June week, they called it then, now they call it Commissioning Week because it occurs in May usually. At that time, as a matter of fact, my current wife came up to celebrate the June Week festivities, including the Farewell Ball and all those things, and one of the things that there was an old submarine park there, and I went down aboard. They had a big pot of navy bean soup, and I love navy bean soup, and I think they gave us a sample. It's probably my stomach that -- anyway, I enjoyed the small crew of a submarine, and the confinedness didn't bother me. It doesn't most people, and certainly not the current boats. See, the current submarines are 10 times as large as the submarine I was on in World War II.

FC: Let me ask you a little bit about your training. You elected to go into the submarine service, and they shipped you right from the Naval Academy to your submarine?

MD: No, no, no, no, no. Remember I said I couldn't go to submarines until two years, and that was in effect when I graduated. They changed those rules in April of 1942, but I couldn't get off this cruiser I went to, because the

cruiser I went to, as I said, you drew by lot, and I picked -- I thought the war was going to be in the Atlantic, and I picked a new light cruiser East Coast, and they gave me a new light cruiser East Coast so new that it hadn't even been built. Therefore they sent me temporary duty to an old cruiser. I went to the *Milwaukee*, CL-5. Well, I got on the *Milwaukee*, and I got in the gunnery department, and then I became a division officer and so forth, and I couldn't get off. They would forward my request for submarine duty with such limitations on it that they wouldn't send me. But I was fortunate because we got a new executive officer of the cruiser who had been a submarine commander earlier, and unfortunately not one of the successful submarine commanders at the beginning of the war, one of those that got fired, if you heard some of the stories. At any rate, he found that a classmate of mine, Gene Barnhart, and myself wanted to go into submarines, and he took us under his wing and made sure we got qualified officer of the deck at and all those things to allow us to go to submarines, which didn't apply anymore, but to him it did, and then made arrangements for us to go to the submarine school. Then in route to submarine school in late 1943, why, I got leave and got married, married my wife, my fiancé, that we had been engaged since nursery

school, OK. So then we went to New London, and the submarine school was three months, and from there, why, at that stage of the game, two things. One, it's because I was late coming into submarines and had been at sea for two years as a qualified officer of the deck and division officer, when I went to a submarine I was much more senior than you normally go to a submarine, except through wartime. Therefore there are eight officers on a submarine, and I ended up as the fourth officer, as brand new on the boat. But at any rate, why, at that stage of the game we were getting pretty filled up with officers and crew for our submarines. They had a good training program and a good training pipeline, and we were able to kind of fill up the boats with people that had reasonable training. Now that's different than the Germans, because one of the big problems the Germans had, they built so many boats, and they [sank?] so many of them that they ran out of qualified crews. That didn't happen to us. So I went from there, from New London, and dropped my wife off in our home in North Carolina, and flew out to the West Coast, and then flew to Hawaii, and then flew to Midway. I spent about two months on Midway Island as part of a refit crew. A refit crew in submarines is one that, between patrols, why, the crew comes in and writes a list of the things that need

fixing, and the routines that need doing, and they have a refit crew that comes and does that while the regular crew goes and has R&R in a Quonset hut on Midway Island.

(laughter)

FC: Now at this point you had not yet been assigned to a submarine?

MD: That's correct. Therefore that's when the *Barb* came in, and it just so happens that a classmate of mine who avoided this delay and went directly to submarines, why -- we didn't go directly, but after six months -- he had made five war patrols, and he left the ship and went to new construction. Normally four or five war patrols, you have that. Now, there are exceptions to that, but generally speaking, why, they would rotate off, and I relieved then, numerical relief, a classmate of mine in the *Barb*. The new skipper, Admiral Gene Fluckey, or Lieutenant Commander Gene Fluckey at that time, had just finished his first patrol as skipper, a very successful patrol for which he received the Navy Cross. Therefore, fortunately, I got aboard in Midway, and the boat was going to be refitted in Pearl, therefore I rode back to Pearl on the boat, and we went to the Royal Hawaiian for R&R. I'd never been to sea, but on the boat, but OK, I went to R&R. (laughter) Then after the refresher training period, why, the *Barb* was in a wolf pack

of three boats, and we went on the *Barb's* ninth patrol to the South China Sea. That was my first patrol, and the captain's second patrol as skipper, and the exec's fifth patrol I guess. But at any rate, why, the ninth patrol was quite successful on two occasions. One is a ship, Japanese transport, hauling POWs, British and Australian POWs from Singapore to Japan, was sunk by a US submarine. Three days later, why, the US forces found out that there were POWs aboard, and they were scattered out over the ocean on rafts and whatever. So he immediately told all the boats anywhere near there to crank it up and get over there and pick up as many as you can. We were in the eastern part of the South China Sea, and this happened in the western part of the South China Sea, so we went over at flank speed. Now in route to flank speed, that high-speed transit, we ran across a naval task force coming north.

FC: Japanese.

MD: A Japanese task force coming north. Really without much delay, we went in and fired a spread of six torpedoes from the bow and sank both a carrier and a large tanker, probably the only two ships of significant size sunk by the same salvo. At any rate --

FC: The same salvo?

MD: One salvo of six torpedoes.

FC: One spread?

MD: One spread, which is all the bow tubes, six bow tubes, and we got that. At any rate, why, right after that the weather was getting worse, getting bad, so we took off hopefully to be able to pick up some POWs. Now they had been in the water then for five days, and where do they drift in five days? I emphasize that because one of the fabulous stories is our executive officer and navigator had picked up an article written by a coast guard guy that told what the set and drift was in the open ocean in various parts and so forth. So he plotted where they would be, and we took off for that particular spot, and by golly we found them. Now at that stage of the game there weren't that many around, but we were able to pick up 14. These people had been in the water with fuel oil and everything for five days, and they were in pretty tough shape. At any rate, we were able to pick them up, cleaned them up, put them in the bunks, fed them good, and then took off for Guam to offload them. It was the end of the patrol anyway though. An interesting story there is that the night before we got into Guam the POWs stayed up all night eating. And you ask them why they did that, and they said, "We don't know whether the next people will feed us or not." Now the background on that would be that in the period of time that

they were POWs, their mindset was so changed that they didn't trust anybody that they didn't see looking at them. Therefore even though they had been rescued, they felt, they really weren't sure what the next people could do. They knew that we had treated them well, but they didn't know about the next one. And they actually said this, and that was one of the surprises you get. Postscript to that, my skipper, Gene Fluckey died in June of 2007, and I arranged for part of his ashes to be scattered in the location where we picked up the POWs. He wanted that, yeah. So we finished the ninth patrol. We went to Majuro for a refit. They had a tender there in the Marshall Islands, and we had our refit and our refresher training, and the executive officer left and the third officer fledged up to be executive officer, Jim Lanier. Now I'll get to that significance later. But then from there, we went in another wolf pack, and we went up to the East China Sea, which is north of the South China Sea. That makes sense. We were also in a wolf pack with two other boats, the *Queenfish* and the -- oops, a senior moment -- one other boat. I'll get it later. The weather was quite rough for that patrol, but we were able to sink an auxiliary cruiser, a good-sized ship, that was going into Nagasaki. We kind of knew something was up because they turned on the

lighthouse outside of Nagasaki to mark the early channel, and therefore something would be coming in. At any rate, why, we did sink that, and we sank some other ships and that, and we also got maybe a hit on a carrier. I say maybe a hit on a carrier, because we picked up a big blip on radar, and he was traveling awful fast, about 27 knots, which we couldn't match. We tried to close in on him, and we finally got into 3,000 yards or so and fired a spread of torpedoes at him. We think one hit him because he slowed down for about 10 minutes and then took off, and we were never able to get him after that. At any rate, that was the tenth patrol. From that, we came back to -- to where -- to Midway I guess, yeah, for overhaul, for a refit.

FC: I'd like to ask you a question about your patrols like that. Now when you went out in a wolf pack of three, did you have a lead submarine?

MD: Oh, usually the policy was in those days to have a separate wolf pack commander embarked in one of the boats. Now they didn't do that later on, because of the numbers of boats that we had. But at that time they did. We had a captain, Captain Ed Swinburne, who had been a division commander, why, he was the wolf pack commander, and he rode the *Barb*. As a matter of fact, he slept right under me in the officers' stateroom.

FC: Now when you went in to attack ships like this, about what depth would you go into, Captain? How deep would you go?

MD: Well, it depends on -- if you're doing a submerge attack, you do it at periscope depth. Pre-war they thought in terms of you ought to go deep and fire on sonar bearings. Well, one, it turned out sonar bearings weren't nearly good enough, and two, what in the world would you want to go deep for when you can look at him. So you made submerge attacks at periscope depth, which is 67 feet from the keel, and that means that you have about four feet of scope sticking up, which you want to minimize the amount of scope that you have sticking up during an attack.

FC: Now on any of your patrols, did you have problems with the torpedoes like they had earlier?

MD: No, not the -- the Mark-14 torpedo, fortunately, by my skipper -- I never fired a Mark 14 in anchor, always Mark 18s, the electric torpedo. Slower, however, the big advantage is they didn't have exploder problems, and they didn't leave a wake. See, a steam torpedo leaves a bubble trail, and that's real good. The [ESW?] ship just gets on the bubble trail and comes down. He must be there.
(laughter) So the big advantage of an electric torpedo is no wake.

FC: I did not know that.

MD: Yeah. That was a big advantage with them, plus the fact the exploders would work, and the depth was reasonably good depth control. But that's the end of the tenth patrol. Then we went to -- where did we go for a refit? I guess we went to Pearl for a refit. Of course, it's a long way to go from Pearl to the South China Seas. One of the problems you have is you have to travel at the most economical speed. See, you have 108,000 gallons of fuel, and you can go about 15,000 miles. But you can't go that distance at full speed, four engines, so you try to go to one engine, most economical setting, and therefore that's about 11 knots. So that's where you've made the transit to the patrol areas. At any rate, we joined up -- the third boat, by the way, in that wolf pack is the *Picuda*. She was with us on the tenth patrol in the wolf pack and on the eleventh patrol in the wolf pack. By then they did not have individual wolf pack commanders aboard one of the boats. The senior skipper was the wolf pack commander. In this case that was the *Queenfish*, with Elliott Loughlin as the skipper. He was three years senior to the other two sippers. He was the class of '32, and both the skipper of the *Picuda* and the *Barb* were class of '35, three years junior. So that patrol started. We went by Guam to pick up fuel, and that patrol started about three days before

New Year's. We ran across a picket boat on the way up, and the picket boats were the ones out to watch traffic, Japanese fishing picket boat, to watch traffic and the ships, and so we sank that. Then we went in through the straits up there. That particular one we didn't think were mined, so we were able to get through there, and we started the eleventh patrol.

FC: Let me ask you a question before we get into your eleventh patrol. During any of your patrols were you under attack by Japanese destroyers?

MD: Oh, yeah. We had a lot of depth charges. But I don't know whether you heard this morning. Mike [Renskoff?] talked a little bit about depth charging and the Japanese. They weren't very persistent in their depth charge attacks. They dropped a hell of a lot of depth charges. I know on one patrol I think the *Barb* set the record for the number of depth charges set on them, 85 or so, I don't know what. In any case, yes, we got depth charged on every patrol that I made, yeah, nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

FC: Can you describe how it felt to be under depth charge attack?

MD: Well, they go off, and they're loud, and they rattle the boat around, depending on how close they are, and they pop light bulbs and cause the boat to maybe take a tilt one way

or the other. I guess, you know, they can be close enough to rupture systems and so forth. We never experienced quite that. We had some very, very minor damage, but nothing to impinge the watertight integrity of the boat or anything. The eleventh patrol, why, yes, we're in the wolf pack, and that was the time that they were trying to resupply their effort to hold onto the Philippines, because the Philippines had been reinvaded, and therefore they had ships running down to run supplies to the Japanese forces in the Philippines. We got into a good-sized convoy. I think it was the 8th of January or something like that, and we remember that because one of the ships that we hit, a surface attack at night, by the way, was an ammunition ship, and the damn thing blew up, and we were less than a thousand yards away, and it sucked the air right out of the conning tower, you know, with the explosion. The exec was looking over the screen for the radar, the PPI scope, they call it, you know, just a regular radar scope, and he didn't have his shirt tucked in, and it pulled his shirt up over his head. He didn't know what the hell was going on. (laughter) Of course, I was right on the other side, because I was by the computer data computer. My job as torpedo gunnery officer was to run the torpedo data computer, solving the problem of where to shoot the

torpedoes and when we're in the right range and so forth. That's part of the torpedo gunnery officer's job I guess. But at any rate, then we had one convoy that was supposed to go through that we heard about I guess as an [ULTRA?] that didn't show up, and that really got the skipper to thinking where in the heck could they be? So he did a lot of thinking and had a lot of us look at the charts and everything and said, "What could have happened?" The only thing they can think of was that there was the Hainan Strait there. If that had been dredged on the edge between -- on the south coast of China, if that had been dredged they could go up inside. So we sent a message to the coast watchers over in China. We had a US force of coast watchers over there, Admiral [Mari?] Miles was the head of the coast waters in China. I think he was a commodore at that time. Anyway, he came back and said yes, it had been dredged, so therefore Gene says, "Hey, they got to be going inside." So we went up the coast to try to find them, and finally in the afternoon, why, we found some ship smoke, and they were coming south. So we go down here to the bottom of an island chain and catch them when they come out. The only thing of it is it didn't come out, and when they didn't come out, then they had to have stopped somewhere, so we went slowly in the middle of the night up

the Island Chain and rounded one island called Incog Island, and we were out maybe 10 miles away or something like that. Maybe not quite that much. But we rounded that island and the radar came up with three lines of ships, a total of 30 ships anchored. But this is in unchartered waters, and rather shallow waters, and all that stuff, and there were a bunch of fishing boats around. That was good, because we knew there'd be no mines if the fishing boats were there. They knew where all the mines were. So we did go in and make the attack, fired all the torpedoes we had [forward?] and four tubes aft. We had four more torpedoes, but we didn't stay around to shoot those, and got eight hits on something or other, and then got the hell out of there because they were chasing us and shooting at us and all that stuff. The problem was, of course, inside the harbor. The water was only 30 or 40 feet deep. We couldn't even cover the [sheers?] in diving, so we bolted out of there and went out to where we could dive, and we did. That was the eleventh patrol, and we came back. For that particular operation the skipper was awarded the Medal of Honor. We came back to the navy yard in Mare Island for a two-month overhaul, and the skipper went back to Washington and got the Medal of Honor. After the overhaul, at which time we had our four-inch gun changed for a five-

inch gun and some other stuff, why, we came back to Pearl, and the skipper was supposed to be relieved, but he talked them into what he called a graduation route patrol, a [fit?] patrol, because he'd been wanting to try out some things, because ships were getting hard to find, and he wanted to do some other things, including firing missiles. He had said there's got to be a way for submarines to attack land targets. The start of that would be using these five-inch, spin-stabilized rockets that you've seen prior to the amphibious landings, these -- we got one of those launchers that held twelve rockets, and installed it in the forward gun platform and got 72 rockets. We tried out four of them on the way, because we had to jury rig a firing system, electrical, because the rockets are fired by gravity, because there's a pin that hits a copper ring, and that sets off the rocket, and that goes, and the next one falls down on top of it. We fired 12 rockets in about 7 seconds. You've seen the pictures of those I think, those type of things. At any rate, why, we went in there in the town of Shari on the northern coast of Hokkaido, the northern island, the 21st of June, why, we fired the first ballistic missiles ever fired from a submarine. Of course, at the end of the patrol, the skipper wrote that up as the future of submarines is missiles. In this particular case,

why, there's not many ships left for us to go after, but we can attack land targets, and that he did. And that was the end of the twelfth patrol, and then we came back to Midway, and Gene was relieved of command by Pat Callahan, but the war ended. I was on Midway Island when the war ended, and the boat came back then to New London, all the way, and the boat went into a reserve fleet -- mothballs.

FC: I'd like to ask you a question, and we're about out of time here. What would Captain Fluckey, Admiral Fluckey I guess, what would you attribute to his success? If it came right down to it, why was he so successful?

MD: Well, I think, one, that his ingenuity -- he was very curious about everything. He was a very decisive leader. He was a compassionate leader. I don't know. I've delivered a couple of speeches on that, and I can't remember them all now.

FC: I assume he was a good friend of yours.

MD: Oh, yeah, for 50-some years he was, yeah, yeah. We lived in Annapolis, Maryland, with him for the last 20 years or so forth, and I was privileged to arrange all of his funeral and everything. Well, after the war, I later went on to be exec of two different submarines, one of which went down to the Antarctic, the first trip down there after World War II, as exec on another. Then I re-commissioned a

submarine as captain in 1951, and then I left her when she was going to be re-fitted or something, and was captain of the *Torsk*. By the way, the *Cavalla*, which I had command of, is in Galveston today.

FC: It is, yes.

MD: And the *Torsk* is also still around, and she's in Baltimore. After that, why, those commands, I went to the Naval War College, and then I went to the Atlantic Fleet staff in operational readiness. After two years there I went to Key West, Florida, where I was the exec of a tender for a year and commanded a submarine division for a year. After that, why, I went to three years at the Naval Academy teaching physics, and after that I had made captain, and as a junior captain I went to Submarine Force Atlantic Fleet staff as assistant chief of staff of personnel and training. That was in the *Polaris* build up when we were expanding like mad. From there I went as commanding officer of the tender *Fulton* at a state pier in New London, and then Gene Fluckey became ComSubPac and asked me to come out and be the commanding officer of the submarine base, and so I went out to be commanding officer of the submarine base at Pearl Harbor for two years. By the way, that's when the *Barb* that Chuck Grojean had command of showed up out there, and naturally since he had the *Barb*, why, he immediately became

the force flagship. (laughter) But from there, why, I went to Charleston and had command of the submarine squadron, and from there I went to Vietnam, and I spent a year in Vietnam as commander of naval support activities in Saigon. I had all the navy support in the II, III, IV Corps, a huge, huge operation. After my year in Vietnam, why, I came to Washington and was in the Joint Staff for a while, and did my last tour of duty in the Naval Ships Systems Command trying to get the ships and the ordinance people together on how to introduce new weapons into submarines. I retired there in 1972, after a little over 30 years, which is a strange thing, why I got more than 30 years. But at any rate, I did. I built a house, moved to Annapolis, and got a call and joined a consulting engineering company to start a new division of the company, and I did that for 10 years, and they made me a vice president, so I retired again. That happened in 1983, and we've done a lot of world travel ever since. We're both -- we have our health problems, but we have a daughter and son-in-law in Savannah, and two granddaughters, and two great-grandchildren there. That's my life story, and I'm late.

FC: Well, thanks very much for taking the time.

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