

George Fuller Oral History Interview

EDDIE GRAHAM: This interview is in support of the Center of 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. I'm going to be interviewing Mr. Fuller, first --

GEORGE FULLER: George, George [Kenny?].

EG: -- George Fuller, and he's a third class petty officer, and he was a photographer. So Mr. Fuller, start out. Tell us where were you born.

GF: I was born in San Antonio, Texas.

EG: OK.

GF: And on May the 2nd, 1926.

EG: All right. And what were the names of your parents?

GF: My mother was [Carrie B.?]. Her maiden name was Johnston. My father was George Franklin Fuller.

EG: OK. And where did you go to school?

GF: I went to high school at Brackenridge High School and graduated in 1944.

EG: In San Antonio?

GF: In San Antonio, mm-hmm.

EG: Well, let me ask you one question here. Where were you and what were you doing December 7th, 1941?

GF: December 7th, 1941, I was in high school.

EG: What were you doing? That was on a Sunday.

GF: Oh, I'm sorry. I was in church first, and then we went home, and I don't remember -- you know, everybody was in shock, and we watched -- I saw we "watched" -- we heard over the -- you would listen to the radio. We didn't have TVs back then, but we kept our eyes glued to the radio, and we were all interested in trying to figure out what was going on.

EG: Why not, then, just tell us some history about how did you end up getting in the Navy?

GF: Well, I was so teed off at the Japanese people that I wanted to join right away, but I joined on my 18th birthday, and I joined the Navy because I didn't like to march. My 18th birthday was May the 2nd, 1943 -- no, '42, '43 -- '44, I guess. Yeah, it was -- that was a year -- about a year after Pearl Harbor.

EG: OK. And tell us about -- how did you join? Did you go down to the...

GF: Yes, I went down to the recruiting office -- it was on Broadway at the time -- and told them I wanted to join the Navy, and he said -- he asked me how old I was. I said, "I'm 17. I'll be 18 tomorrow." And he says, "Well, we can sign you up, but you won't be able to go in until next

month," and so, on June 3rd, I was on the train heading for San Diego.

EG: San Diego?

GF: Mm-hmm.

EG: OK. And after San Diego, what was your first duty assignment?

GF: First duty assignment -- it wasn't a duty assignment as such because it was the USS...*Windham Bay*, I'm sorry. I got on the *Windham Bay* about July the 25th, something along in there.

EG: OK. And what were your basic duties?

GF: I was just another swabbie along with several hundred others. They were taking us to the Pacific to join with the other people that were already there. They beat us there.

EG: What do you mean, "the other people?" What do you mean?

GF: The other GIs. We went direct -- past the equator and two degrees below it, and we landed at the Admiralty Islands. And when we got to the Admiralties, they unloaded part of the ship, probably 60 or 80 of us, at Pityilu, and we -- I spent most of my Navy career at Pityilu.

EG: OK. And what were your -- when you got there, what were your duties then?

GF: They assigned me to -- because I had photographic experience, they assigned me to the photo section, and I had never -- I had flown before, of course, but I had never done any photographic experience from the air. Most of my photographic experience was with my brother. We had our own lab, and I was assigned to the photographic division and started out that way as a striker.

EG: OK. And how did you -- did you start flying and doing photographic work?

GF: I trained for quite a few months, I guess, probably eight or 10 months before I made any flights. And then, I got -- I had flight skins for three months, and, by that time, the war was winding down, and we didn't do too much aerial work because I had flown several -- I guess you'd call them -- missions to photograph islands that the Navy or whoever the chief was that gave the orders to photograph the islands and bring them back, develop them. We had huge cameras, Fairchild F56, and we brought them back, developed them, and printed them and made eight-foot by ten-foot or so wide photographs, mosaics.

EG: Was this, now, before this island was invaded or after?

GF: No, no. The island was -- it had just been taken by the Marines and the Seabees, and the Seabees were still working, setting it up for us. They had already set up the

tents for our housing. We had four-man tents, probably 50 of them. They already had the beds and tents set up, and, when we got there, they said, "OK, you've got -- there's your new home. You all divide them up. There's four to a tent." So that's what we did. The Seabees were still working building Quonset huts for the various programs that we had. We had Quonset huts for the carpenters. We had Quonset huts for the yeomen. We had Quonset huts for the airplane mechanics. We had Quonset huts for the vehicle mechanics. They didn't have that much to do, but I don't know. I can't remember all of the different Quonset huts that we had.

EG: OK. Let's go back again, now, and talk about when you took these photographs, and you said, then, you made up a big paper matrix or whatever it was. What was the purpose of these photographs? What were the -- how did they use this information?

GF: You've got me. (laughs) They told us to do it, and we did it. I don't know. I think there were Japs around. There were a lot of islands over there then -- well, they still are over there -- but the -- we had Japs on the island next to us, but they were out of ammunition, and they were out of food, and we knew it, and we didn't fool with them. The island next to us was a much bigger island, Manus Island,

and it was 30 miles long and three miles wide. And so, we -- but as far as taking the pictures, making maps, I really believe that they wanted to know -- as a matter of fact, I don't even know what islands we photographed, but we had no other places. There were no -- like, New Guinea was real close to us, and there was much more activity on New Guinea than there was in the Admiralties, but we -- I think whoever wanted these pictures really wanted to see if they could see more Japs. But they -- everyone knew that there were over 100 Japanese on Manus, but nobody worried with them because they knew that they wouldn't, you know, have any problem. We had a lot of natives in the islands. There were 3,800 -- 3,800 or 38,000? I think there were -- either one of the two -- there were a lot of natives, and they hated the Japs. And every once in a while, they would bring in a dead one, and they would be thrilled to death that they could bring us a dead Jap, but they laughed about it.

EG: Let's kind of go in a little bit more detail on your taking photographs of these islands. What particular kind of airplane did you fly in? Did you change to different planes?

GF: We had quite a few planes to choose from. Of course, I had no say in which ones we took, but our JM-1s and JM-2s were

the planes that we mapped the islands with, and I think those were B-24s. I'm not positive on that, but it was a single-tail, and some of the other planes had the double-tail. But those were the only ones that we mapped with. We had TBFs, and we had the Ducks, and I forget their nomenclature. The Ducks they used to jockey messages back and forth between ships or islands or whatever when they didn't -- when they had something that was really serious that they didn't want the Japs to possibly get a hold of at all, you know? They -- somehow or another, the Japs knew what was going on. When we had the ammunition ship blow up in the harbor, it wasn't long until Tokyo Rose was on there saying, "We got -- we really got a good one now," you know. "We got one that blew up in the harbor." I don't know what she called it, but I guess she called it the Admiralty Islands. We were -- to the Navy, we were 52 old -- 55 -- I thought I'd never forget that. We were a number, and I think it was something oh-two, 5002, but, anyway, we -- of course, I didn't fly. I wasn't an aviator or anything, but I knew what was going on most of the time. But we used -- I don't know why we had so many planes. I guess they expected the war to last longer than it did, and they expected us to more mapping, but we didn't get to do too much mapping. We probably had, oh, six or eight that we

did while I was in the Admiralties. Then, a [BJ-2?] left, and we were transferred to BJ-7 in the Philippines, RPG-9 first. When I got back to the States, I was transferred to BJ-7.

EG: Well, now, you'd earlier, I think, made the comment that there was something that happened that some of the people don't want to tell people about, or what about this?

GF: The government, I think, didn't want -- they thought it would maybe demoralize the United States, the people in the United States. I think they do this quite often. They won't tell you how bad the situation was, and we did have a bad situation when the USS *Mount Hood* blew up. It had 4,000 tons of bombs on board, and, for some unknown reason, it blew up. And when it blew up, there were 278 ships in the harbor, and it sunk a bunch of them and damaged a bunch beyond repair.

EG: So this one that blew up, was it a transport?

GF: At one time, it was a transport, but they had -- it was making its maiden run as an ammunition ship.

EG: And where did this occur?

GF: This occurred in the Admiralty Islands in Seeadler Harbor in the islands. Oh, I don't even know where to start. It's such a tragic story.

EG: Let's go into kind of detail. All right, this ship, it blew up, so you feel like, then, in other words, they never let this information get out because they didn't think -- it might de--

GF: To the extent of what happened, they did not tell the people in the United States what happened. They didn't say -- I've got the paper that my mother sent me. It said the USS *Mount Hood* blew up in the harbor of a -- not a foreign but a -- in a harbor in the South Pacific.

EG: Do you remember offhand approximately how many people were killed?

GF: Yes. There were 287 killed and 268 wounded. The ships sunk or damaged was 45 big vessels and 57 smaller boats, you know, like the LSTs and all that kind of stuff.

EG: Did you -- did they ever find out what caused the fire or the explosion (inaudible)?

GF: No. Everybody has their own theory. They started out from the United States with 40,000 tons of 100-pound and 500-pound bombs. They stopped at someplace in New Guinea and left off 2,000 pounds. My theory on it is that, when they took the 2,000 pounds of bombs off that, somehow or another, one of the -- probably the smaller bombs was loose and just, more or less, floating around on top of the other

ones. And when it -- my understanding on bombs is that you have to have ship them without the...

EG: (inaudible) caps?

GF: Yeah, the cap to make it fire. But I don't know that -- if they shipped them with that firing pin on the front or not, but there were theories that maybe a Jap plane had come over or maybe -- somebody said they saw a United States airplane come over and at about the same time that the ship blew up, but they never could pin it down. It was just a tragedy that was -- there was nothing left to give them any inkling as to what caused it to blow.

EG: OK. Tell us now what else -- what are just some things that happened? You photographed these islands, and then, of course, this tragedy happens there at this island. So what are some other things that happened to you?

GF: We led a boring life over there. We worked every day at something, but there was nothing other than that that happened. There were lots of islands, and we had men on seven of them, and we all had our own duties to perform. But as far as anything -- as far as the war was concerned, that was my only touch of it.

EG: OK. Were you assigned where you're at now when the atomic bomb was dropped?

GF: When I was -- I was in the Philippines when it was -- when the first one was dropped at Hiroshima -- well, on both of them, Nagasaki too. I was a thousand miles away.

EG: What was the reaction to most of the guys when these bombs were dropped?

GF: They were thrilled.

EG: Thrilled, OK.

GF: It was something, yeah. We knew that the war was over even before the Japanese people, I guess, because they pretty quickly capitulated when that second one was dropped.

EG: OK. And what else has happened -- what else happened, I should say, that you'd like to tell us about?

GF: Well, when I -- the reason that I came home early was because my grandfather died, and my mother needed me at home, and she asked the Red Cross if they could get me back. I didn't want to come back, because the war was over, and, you know, I didn't want to leave my buddies. After you live with somebody for a couple years, well, you've --

EG: You're (inaudible).

GF: -- you know you're going to miss them when you go. But we had some great guys.

EG: Well, let's talk about it. What were some of the -- can you mention -- can you remember any particular characters that you still think about?

GF: Oh, I think about all of them. When she wanted me to come back, I said, "OK, I'll come." The commander said, "Do you want to fly back? I can get you on a plane in a day or two, or you can get on the *Bunker Hill* out here, and you'll be home in 30 days or so." And so I said, "I don't know where that next filling station is for that airplane, so I think I'm going to take the ship." And so I took the ship, and we never thought that I would be leaving. All of my buddies were out doing something when I had to leave. I didn't have time -- I never got to say goodbye to them. I never had their addresses or telephone numbers or anything back in the States, and I just -- I lost complete track of most of them.

EG: Did you come back to San Antonio?

GF: Yes.

EG: OK.

GF: I had a buddy named [Garl Forney?] and another one by the name of Jimmy [Greene?] and others that I lost track of, and I don't know whether they're still living or not. I don't know. Garl was with me when the ship blew up, and it knocked both of us down, knocked everybody down. It was in

its path, you know, the concussion of all of those bombs. Some of the people got hurt, but not many of the people on my island, because we were a couple of thousand yards away. But people on some of the other islands were hurt just as bad as some of the people on the other ships. You know, they -- it was a horrific explosion. You can't imagine.

EG: (inaudible) very massive explosion, yeah.

GF: It was huge. But anyway, I would love to -- at my age, I know that there's probably not many of them that -- and I tried from time to time, but Jimmy Greene, I -- there must be 200 Jimmy Greenes in the United States, James Greenes, and I never could find that rascal. I wish that I had. If he's still alive, I'd like to talk to him. I'd like to talk to anybody that was there. I have this book that one of my yeoman wrote, and, if they don't have a copy of the book, they really should get it if they knew -- I don't know if they would know how to get it, but, if they could get in touch with me, I would be glad to give them one.

EG: OK.

GF: Yeah.

EG: Well, is there anything else you'd like to share with us then?

GF: Well, I want to -- a couple of days ago, thinking through all of these different things and everything, my mind is

kind of blank right now, but I guess we pretty well covered most of it.

EG: Well, OK. Then, on behalf of the Nimitz Center of the Pacific War Studies, we certainly appreciate you sharing with us your experiences.

GF: You're sure welcome.

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