

Al D'Agostino Oral History Interview

PETE JENSEN: This is Pete Jensen. Today is April 19, 2012. I am interviewing Mr. Al D'Agostino. This interview is taking place at the Nimitz Hotel in Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education of Research Center Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to this site. Al, if you can start off by giving us a little information about your family, and where you were born, when?

AL D'AGOSTINO: I was born in Rochester, New York on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1927. I went to elementary school and high school in Rochester. They were both parochial schools, Catholic schools. And World War II was on so that my class was going to graduate while the draft was still on, which meant we'd be going into service. So they allowed us to take a short course in the fourth year, so that we'd have our diploma, and then we'd have time off to where we were called up for service or something. So in January of 1945, I received my diploma for my four years of high school. It was a Catholic boy's school in Rochester, New York. The

teachers were all Canadian priests from over in Ontario; most of them that they were very good teachers, and as I said, it was exclusively a boys school, no girls. So that meant that in January, I had a couple of months before I was called up for the draft. And I went to a government-sponsored electronics course, a radio operator's course that was given in a school in Rochester where they got you your license, your theory license. And you had to have a code speed, a certain level of code speed to be eligible. And my thoughts were going into the Merchant Marine as a radio operator. I could never get my code speed up so that when I was ready for the draft, I enlisted in the Maritime Service, and I was sent to Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn where they had a huge training facility. And I thought that I could go to one of their radio schools, and pick up my code, and go out as a radio operator. But I was in a class with 20 or 30 other fellows, and we went through the whole training together. When it came time to go out and get a ship, I figured it would be more fun to go with the groups that I had trained with. They were from all parts of the East Coast, and so I shipped out, and...

PJ: What was the ship? Do you know?

AD: The ship was the Matson Line, The Monterey. They had three ships, Monterey, The Mariposa, and the Lurline, which in peacetime made the trip to Australia. And the Australians used to call them the Yankee mail boats, and there was obviously no flying. So in wartime, they were all converted to troop carriers, pretty large ships. I would estimate over 5,000 troops carried at a time, and so the ship left from San Francisco. We were put on a training ship, and went through the Panama Canal, and then went up to San Francisco. And that was the first ship available for us young recruits, and I sailed as a scullery man.

PJ: What is a scullery man?

AD: A scullery is the guy that does clean-up in the kitchen --

PJ: Oh, man.

AD: -- and a very lowly job. After about two days out to sea, they realized they were short a third butcher. Now, this ship had magnificent kitchen facilities because it was a liner in peacetime, and it was as good as any shore kitchen in a restaurant. And so I went over and started as the third butcher, unpacked the meat. In those days, the meat was all packed for the military, certain cuts, and then had to be broken down into what they were making in the kitchen. So it was preparing the meat for the cooks in the

kitchen based on the menu, and so it was pretty active with the number of meals we served each day.

PJ: You ate pretty well, huh?

AD: I ate pretty well. I didn't miss a meal. So I sailed as a third butcher on the Monterey, and I made two trips. My first trip was to Manila, and we carried soldiers who had been in the war in Europe. The war in Europe was over, and these fellows were given a leave, sent home, given a leave, and asked to report to the port of embarkation in the Pacific, which meant they were getting ready for the Invasion of Japan. And they're pretty bitter guys having been through all of Europe and then going to be set up for the Invasion of Japan. So between San Francisco and Manila, the war ended, Japan.

PJ: So after they dropped the bombs?

AD: Yes, so that meant that we unloaded the troops and that they didn't have to go to like where their staging area was for Japan. I'm sure they were happy. But we brought a bunch of GIs back to the States, and they were going home. The war was over, and it was a pretty happy group as you can understand. As a matter of fact, the ship in San Francisco came in, and happened to stop at Matson Line docks, and these guys jumped ship. They didn't care about

any regulations. The soldiers left, got on the phone, called their girlfriends, or family, and everything. It was a very happy situation. We then went on to Camp Stoneman, which was where they were supposed to go, and the rest got off there, and I guess they were discharged. So in the meantime, the Monterey, the ship went to Hunters Point Shipyard to be retrofitted from a troop ship to a passenger ship, and guess what it was for? It was to go to Australia to pick up the war brides of all the GIs in the Pacific who did R&R in Sydney, and married a girl, and married Australian wives, or New Zealand wives. And we were going to Sydney, Australia to pick up not only Sydney; we went to Honolulu, Suva, Fiji, Auckland, New Zealand, Sydney, Australia, American Samoa. We picked up wives --

PJ: All through there?

AD: -- all through the Pacific and brought them back to the United States. So needless to say, there was a happy meeting in San Francisco when the ship pulled in and all the wives, and the babies, and etc., were discharged. And I sailed a couple of short trips. I was trying to get on a ship that was going back to the East Coast, and I got on a Victory ship, a Victory ship called the Central Victory, which was going through the canal to Bush Terminal in

Brooklyn. So I went back through the canal and went up to Bush Terminal, and Bush Terminal was in Brooklyn. And at the time, the longshoremen were having a strike, and they weren't going to let us off the ship. And longshoremen were still carrying hooks to handle the bales they pulled out of the hold, and they could be a very mean group. So we looked off the ship, and saw them, and they had picketed the dock we were on. So finally, I guess they realized that we didn't have anything to do with what they were striking for. They let us off the dock, and I registered for another ship out of New York. This is a very interesting trip. The war was over, and the State Department had chartered a ship. The ship is called a C-4, which is the largest wartime ship they built, to go to Central, and South America, and Southern Europe to pick up Germans who had infiltrated into South America to get out of being indicted as criminals, war criminals, so the ship carried a big crew. We had a full medical crew. We had cells, a brig, down below where the criminals were kept. We had all kinds of State Department employees on there doing -- and I sailed as a crew pantry man, which means I had to worry about feeding the crew, and the crew has to eat 24 hours a day. When they come off a watch, they come

down, and had something to eat. And we always had to have food and be ready to feed them. It was a nice job. I enjoyed it. And we went to -- I'm not going to give you the order of the ports, but we went to La Guaira, Venezuela, [Chichiriviche?], Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, Trinidad, Montevideo, Uruguay, Buenos Aires. And we come back up to Rio, and we came to Veracruz, Mexico, and then, we went across the Atlantic to Spain, Bilboa, Spain, on the Bay of Biscay. We were picking up people all the time. The State Department was picking up these people, and Southampton, England. That's a lot of ports. And we went on in to Bremerhaven, Bremerhaven, and the authorities took the people off.

PJ: So you picked up German...

AD: German infiltrators.

PJ: Right, people left...

AD: Yeah, yeah, and there were some that 20, 30 years later, they...

PJ: Still looking for them.

AD: Yeah. On a trip back to New York, I would say 75 percent of the passengers were people who had been in concentration camps, the German concentration camps, and a few war brides (inaudible), and we took them to New York. So it was heart

wrenching to see what these people had been through during the war, and we were taking them to a new world, a new life. The ship went into New York. I got off of it, and I signed on a Liberty ship. A Liberty ship was the workhorse of the World War II fleet. They could build one in six days, and they wanted to build them as fast as they got sunk, so they always had ships.

PJ: They sank quite a few of them, too?

AD: Yes, yes, yes. I brought you a book (inaudible), which shows the ships that were sunk in World War II.

PJ: I was just looking here, and they showed like an average of 33 a week getting sunk at the height of the war.

AD: Yeah, yeah.

PJ: Wow!

AD: So as you know, the people in Europe, the war had devastated their countries. The people had no food to eat. The GIs had to come home, and so the Merchant Marine was just as busy after the war; as a matter of fact, a little bit busier. I got on a Liberty ship, which was taking grain, wheat, to the countries in Northern Europe who were starving. And when we took the food over, the ports had been all demolished. There were no docks you could go up to, so they had to unload into barges. They used a suction



to get the wheat, the grain out of the hold and into the barges (inaudible). That was winter in the North Atlantic, and it was a very bad winter. And you came back, what we called [lipe?], with just sea ballast on the ships, and the ocean was treacherous. We had skippers who just wanted to go through the storms. They went, "Damn the storms." They went through, and there were many, many, many times with a ship where the seas were coming over the boat deck. They would come over, right over; couldn't keep a pot on a stove, couldn't cook a meal. Everything had to be cold, lunches and things like that. And that was probably the scariest natural thing I was in because you've got to believe you've got a ship that's light, and the storm where the seas are extremely fierce. So we came back to New York. We went up to Albany, and got another load of grain, and took that to Rotterdam on the Maas River, and then put it on barges to take -- the same thing. Rotterdam was flattened. The port was completely flattened, so we unloaded and again, we came back in the winter crossing the North Atlantic. The ship on that trip came back into Galveston, Texas, and I paid off in Galveston, and took a train up, and I went by way of Washington to get my certificate of service so I wouldn't be drafted, right from

the feed box in the office in Washington War Shipping Administration. And it says, "You earned these ribbons, and you had enough time to be exempt from the draft."

PJ: How much time did you need then?

AD: You need 21 months of sea time. They didn't count your training time in the Maritime Service, and when you got off the ship, you were considered -- they didn't count that. And all you got was your discharge on the ship from the day you sailed to the day you returned. And that covered about well over 24 months of -- so I went home. And before I went into the Merchant Marine, my shore job was I was a signal tower operator for the New York Central Railroad. You know they used to move all the switches and get trains. So I went back to my job, and I figured well, I'll decide what I'm going to do, and they took me back. I went on a couple of tower jobs. In those days, you didn't have electric switches. The switches were all moved by pipes, cables. You pulled a switch up on the tower on the switch you wanted to set the train on, so you're on your feet, and you were working. And I found out that -- well, I'm a little ahead of myself. I went to school after I got out of the Merchant Marine, came back from Galveston. I (inaudible) to school. And I went to the University of

Rochester to take some courses, college courses, and then I was called up for Army service as an Army draftee in 1949, January 1949. And...

PJ: How could they do that? I thought you were exempt?

AD: No, I wasn't exempt. They didn't honor the exemption from World War II. That piece of paper was worth nothing because Congress said Merchant seamen are not exempt. You'd be surprised in basic training how many merchant seamen were in the barracks with me in the Army. That's another story. So I went into the Army. I went in to Camp Pickett, Virginia, took basic training, and then they sent us out to Fort Bliss, Texas, and they were activating some automatic weapons companies. These are battalions that carried Quad .50 caliber machine gun in the back, 450s, and 20-mm guns, and they could be used for aircraft and for ground support. And when I got to Fort Bliss, they knew that I had some radio training, and they were starting a (inaudible) from scratch. And these are all mobile vehicles, and they all had radios, so the communications man had to keep them operational on the radio. So they sent me to Fort Sill, Oklahoma to field radio repairman. Come back to Fort Bliss, Texas, and they told me the government hadn't budgeted to keep the draftees in the

Army, so they had to send us home. They sent us home the end of 1949. In June 25, 1950, the Korean War broke out. All the guys that went home, because they couldn't afford us, they suddenly could afford us, called us all up. It was such a mix-up because they're calling guys up. They weren't ready for a war in Korea. They was telling them to report to Fort Hood, Texas. They had so many in Fort Hood that they couldn't handle anymore, so they canceled your orders. They canceled them twice on me, and the third set of orders, they said, "Report to Fort Dix, New Jersey," so I reported to Fort Dix, New Jersey. And the guy saw my MOS was the signal MOS. Incidentally, they were flying ground troops over from Fort Hood, Texas, flying them to Korea. They were so short of everything in Korea. Nobody realizes how ill equipped the Army was to carry on the war in Korea and by any measure. So at Fort Dix, they sent me down to the communications sector, Camp Gordon, Georgia, and they gave me a refresher in signal, and then it was about December. I went home for Christmas leave, and I was to report to Fort Loudoun, Washington to go over to Korea. So I got on a converted Victory ship. Oh, I had the name. Anyway, it was a converted Victory ship, which was a freighter that they converted to a troop carrier. And we

went over to Yokohama, Japan, put us on the train, went up to Camp Drake to process us. Now, we were replacements. We weren't with an outfit. Nobody owned us. It was your military specialists usually or what you did in the Army before decided where you'd go. I'll tell you an interesting story. There was a young man, a kid from Brooklyn, whose name was [Sal Ladotts?]. He was the only son in the family of six kids, five girls and one boy. He was a very quiet and nice guy, very. He was in the repo depo in Pusan. I'm jumping around here, but we got in the repo depo in Pusan, and his outfit came and got him. It was an artillery outfit. I don't know what it was attached to or anything, but anyway, they drove him off. Mine came the next morning to get me. I heard the scuttlebutt; that they took him forward as a forward observer in an artillery outfit and a short round killed him. So he has less than 24 hours in Korea, but anyway, I don't know where to -- oh, Yokohama, so they took us by train up to Camp Drake. They checked all your records, gave you an issue of new clothes, not winter clothes, by the way, and they...

JP: What time of the year was this? This was...

AD: This was in January 1951, and you signed your GI insurance. They gave you a rifle, and three rounds, sent you out to

the range to zero it in, and then sent you down to get back on the ship to go to Pusan, Korea to the repo depo there. When I got to Korea, like I said, a radio relay, a signal radio relay came and got me, and then I had always been in divisional arterial or (inaudible). And there were two radio relay companies in all of Korea. The war was so fluid, and the movement so great that they couldn't keep wire down to maintain communication. So what they did was took high frequency radios up on top of the mountain, a group of six or eight soldiers. They took the generators, the radios, and the antennas up to the top of the mountain, set up the radios, picked up the signal that was coming in from a point, strengthened that signal, and then sent it on to the next relay point. That was their communications, high frequency radio. People had no idea that something like this existed. The first night I got there to my base camp, I got a shovel. We had to dig trenches around the camp because we had been alerted that the Koreans was to attack. Two days later, they put me with two other guys in the weapons carrier with radio equipment to send us up north to a relay. The relay was a mountain called Cheonggyesan. It was north of Daejeon and Daegu, which were the next cities. General Dean was killed in Daejeon,

and Daegu was the next big city up from Pusan, Korea. So Cheonggyesan was 977 meters tall. That's about 3,200 feet. That's a pretty high mountain, and we couldn't get up with a vehicle. There was no roads; where they dropped us off, a trail that was 2½ or 3 hours to get up to the installation, and winter, winter, and everybody knows that they didn't have enough winter gear for the soldiers. I mean you got what you wore, and that was it. So it was a very, very difficult winter, and in addition, you always had to have several people with you on the trail in case you were attacked by guerillas or something. Some relays were completely wiped out. Everybody up there was killed. We weren't, fortunately; just the lieutenant who became our post-commander was shot up there. Anyway, I worked on the radio relay team until November of 1951 when the draftees or the reservists were released and were going home. So that means they called me back to our main camp. I didn't even remember the first sergeant's name. They moved me through there so fast. But he said, "If you wouldn't mind going to Vietnam, I'll get you another stripe."

JL: Vietnam?

AD: Yeah, Vietnam. They had an advisory group in Vietnam that they were trying to fill out, and they were looking for people. That was a joke. I said...

JL: You turned that down, I assume?

AD: Yes, I did, so then I returned home, and I still had reserve time to do, two years of active reserve in the 98<sup>th</sup> Division, New York Active Reserve Division. I went to camp on two summers, and I'll tell you an interesting story. When you get out of the Army, active duty, they send you to a vocational advisor on what you can do with your life.

JL: Civilian life?

AD: Yeah, and they sent me to an advisor. And he told me that with all my food background, being a butcher, and working in kitchens, and things, it would be very great if I could go to the hotel school of Cornell University. But he said, "You'd never make it. You couldn't get in there." So when the enlistment officer came and said did I want to stay in the reserve outfit or I want to get out, I said, "I'm really thinking of going to school full-time." And I said, "I don't think I have time for the Reserves." He said, "Where are you going to school? Where are you going to school?" I said, "I'm going to the hotel school at Cornell." That's what the counselor had told me. Well,



what I didn't know is the battalion commander, Thomas Johnson, was a graduate of Cornell. When the captain told him of my reason for not re-enlisting in the Reserves was I was going to Cornell, he called me up. He's a lawyer in town. He said, "This is Tom Johnson, your battalion commander. And I wanted to let you know that I graduated with Bill [Sterant?], who's the director of admissions at Cornell. I took the liberty of making an appointment for you," he says, and he gave me (inaudible), and I went down there. And lo behold, I talked to Mr. Sterant. I talked to people at the school. They gave me a little test, and about three days later, I was accepted at Cornell University. I think that was the greatest...

JL: Amazing.

AD: Yeah, and I graduated from there. And my civilian life has always been in the food service industry, not the radio or the high frequency stuff.

JL: What did you do after you got out of the service? What did you do in the food industry?

AD: Well, I was assistant manager of the public restaurants in the Astro Hotel in New York, the Astro. I went to work for John R. Thompson who had in Chicago Henrici's Restaurants and steakhouses. And they had all the feeding operators

and the merchandise (inaudible), and then I went over to airline food service. I was the director of food service for Trans World Airlines for quite a few years, and then I had done some work for American Airlines before I took the job at TWA. And they called me to come back to their food service subsidiary, and I was the senior vice president of operations. There's about 6,000 people that ran about 40 kitchens around the world, and I retired from there.

JL: So like the airline food, it's all cooked in these restaurants and delivered to the airline planes, right?

AD: It's partially cooked.

JL: Or partially, yeah.

AD: And the pre-jet aircraft used warming ovens. We cooked the food, and kept it warm, and served it to people, warm food. So four to six hours after it was prepared, it had to be consumed. The jets came along, and they had automatic coffee makers, and high heat ovens. So you partially cooked the food, and the flight attendants brought it up to serving temperature, and delivered it to the passengers. And we had kitchens in Egypt, Cairo, Paris, Rome, Madrid, and we had kitchens in New York, and all the big cities in the U.S. We're the only airlines that ran our own kitchens. American Airlines used -- Sky Chefs was their

subsidiary, but they took all customers on. And now, they don't serve food on the airlines anymore, but that was a period when we had a choice of seven entrees in first class going across the North Atlantic on TWA. And we used to fillet a beef, put it on the cart, and the flight attendant served it at your seat. And for breakfast, they would actually cook eggs to order, and it was a very elegant food service on the airlines. Now, this would have been in the early 70s. The jets came in the 60s staggered by airlines. American and United got the first couple 707s and then the other airlines. I think TWA's delivery position was two years off. Howard Hughes, do you remember Howard Hughes?

JL: Yeah.

AD: He owned TWA. So I ended up with Sky Chefs, a subsidiary of American, and I was senior vice president. I ran all the kitchens.

JL: Kept you traveling?

AD: Yes, yes. I used to make Europe and Middle East about every three or four weeks, and it was a good job. It was a glamorous job. Everybody says, "Ooh, ah," but as the competition in the cabins grew, you had to get more innovative in your food service, and they wanted to advertise the service in that, which they did. They did.

They did a good job, and I retired from there, from Sky Chefs. And after that, I did some consulting work in marketing and people who wanted to learn how to sell airlines passenger products. And I did it from my home, and as my contacts in the airlines fell off, my consulting job fell off, but it was I didn't do it for the money. I did it to stay in touch with people. You understand?

JL: Yeah.

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