

Aaron Mendoza Oral History Interview

MARK CUNNINGHAM: This is Mark Cunningham. Today is September 7, 2012, and I am interviewing Mr. Aaron Mendoza. This interview is taking place at his home in Houston, Texas. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education Research Center, Activities [sic] for the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Texas Historical Mission for the preservation of historical information related to this site. So first off, Mr. Mendoza, I want to thank you for doing the interview with us. And we're going to be delighted to hear your story.

AARON MENDOZA: Well, it's my pleasure.

MC: Okay. I want to start right at the beginning. When and where were you born?

AM: I was born in Houston, Texas, on September 13, 1924.

MC: And your parents were...?

AM: My parents were Aaron Mendoza Sr., and my mother is Antonia [Anajoza?] -- Mendoza, of course. And they lived here in Houston.

MC: Where were you when you first heard about Pearl Harbor?

AM: From Houston, we moved to Premont. And I was in high school. And I heard [on?] Pearl Harbor that same day on

the radio, that the Japanese had attacked, you know, Pearl Harbor.

MC: Okay. You would have been what, about a junior? Sophomore, junior?

AM: Yes, because I graduated from high school in '42. So I was a senior, I think.

MC: Okay. When did you go into the service?

AM: I went when I was 19 years old.

MC: So that would have been in 1943. You entered in 1943, right?

AM: Yes.

MC: Did -- what made you go the Navy route?

AM: At first, I wanted to go in the Air Force, and that was my primary interest. And I was given a pretty comprehensive test to identify aircraft silhouettes, and I didn't do so well, so then I got inducted. And I told them I wanted to go in the Air Force, and they said, you're going to go in the Navy. (laughs) And that's how I entered the Navy.

MC: Yes. So you really didn't have a choice.

AM: I didn't.

MC: All right. And where did you do your boot camp?

AM: My boot camp was San Diego, California.

MC: Okay. Anything stand out about that in your memory?

AM: Yes. The main thing that stood out in my memory is that I didn't qualify as a swimmer. So right immediately after I reported there, I was put as a non-swimmer, and every evening, I had to go and swim. But the first thing is, they put me on a 14-foot tower with a bunch of lifejackets that had been soaked in water, you know, because people had been using them. And I had to drop from a 14-foot tower. That was pretty scary, but I learned how to swim, you know. The Navy requirements -- you know, meet the Navy requirements within a week after that. (laughs) I learned the hard way.

MC: But you basically couldn't swim at all?

AM: No.

MC: Okay. So in a week? That's pretty good, isn't it?

AM: Yeah. (laughs)

MC: That's pretty good. All right. And then how did you get -  
- now, you went into torpedo school at some point, but how -- what was the process there?

AM: The process -- right after boot camp, I was sent to this school, you know, the torpedo school, right out of boot camp. After completing boot camp.

MC: And that was -- I think you said in your write-up that was due to your grades, your strong --

AM: My strong grades, you know, from high school. Because I had had -- well, I had one of the highest grades in high school. I was, like, number one, you know.

MC: So tell me about the training for the torpedoes.

AM: The training about the torpedoes was all in classroom type of training. You know, we had the manuals, and we had discussions. And it was primarily all book work. No hands-on on anything, until I got into Hawaii.

MC: All right. And how long were you in this school?

AM: Eight weeks.

MC: And that was, again, where?

AM: It was at the US Naval Repair Base in San Diego.

MC: Okay. All right. And so when you actually got -- and how long did that take?

AM: That took eight weeks, yeah.

MC: Eight weeks?

AM: Yeah. Right after that, then, we got sent to a center, you know, to deportation.

MC: Okay. And you went to Hawaii.

AM: Then I went to Hawaii.

MC: Pearl Harbor?

AM: Pearl Harbor. Aiea is right there in Pearl Harbor.

MC: Okay. When you got to Pearl, was there any remnants left over from the raid?

AM: Oh, definitely. Definitely. Well, just to give you an idea is, we were going on a transport to Hawaii. It took eight days to get there, because we were zig-zagging, you know. The people were concerned, you know, that there might be submarines between San Francisco and Hawaii. And after we got there, there were still -- we had, for example, for breakfast, we had to walk through a field of sugarcane -- a sugarcane field. And there were still snipers. There were some people that got shot at, you know, when we were there.

MC: How long did it take you on the -- eight days? Is that what you said? Eight days on the boat?

AM: Yes.

MC: And what was it? An old --

AM: Transport. An old transport loaded with --

MC: Sailors?

AM: Yeah.

MC: What were the accommodations like?

AM: (laughs) Pretty rough. And every day, we constantly had general quarters. And my assignment was to be right underneath a huge gun, you know, that when -- and then of course, you know, we were shooting at decoys they had on airplanes. They would have decoys, and we would shoot at the decoy. And the guns were pretty huge. And they would

almost hurt your ears, you know, because I was right underneath one of those big batteries.

MC: So you get into Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and then what do you do?

AM: Well, so I get into Pearl Harbor, and I was at this Aiea Naval Air Station. Primarily, that is like a holding area, waiting to get assigned. And from there, after it seemed like weeks -- but it wasn't, you know, maybe a week or two -- then we had a host of ships that had to be manned with the sailors that were there. And they lined us up, and there was like a mile long of sailors, alphabetically, starting with last name with A down to Z. And my name being Mendoza, I was sort of --

MC: Right in the middle.

AM: -- right in the middle. And they were taking like 40 and 50 sailors from both sides, from the start and also the ending of the line. And when they got right down to the middle, there was only about seven or eight of us left. Since all the ships had been manned, we were sent to Kaneohe Naval Air Station, which is across from Pearl Harbor to the other side of the island of Oahu. And there, I got assigned to this torpedo operation. It's aircraft torpedoes. We were only handling aircraft, not submarine. There was two distinct type of torpedoes, you know,

aircraft and submarine, and we were in the aircraft part of it. And so my job started kind of, you know, applying what I had learned in school, to --

MC: But you'd not had any hands-on experience.

AM: No, I had no hands-on. And everything was extremely dangerous, because we would have to fill this air, you know, the front of the torpedo with air.

MC: No, I'm not familiar with that, so why don't you describe it?

AM: And what it is, is it's like a steel -- a body of steel that is screwed onto a torpedo, and it has nothing but air in it. Then you --

MC: Okay, so that's what propels the torpedo?

AM: No. No, no. This is -- you fill this air head with so many pounds of air, and you have to be very careful, you know, that you don't exceed that, because that thing could blow up, you know. But then the torpedo -- then the rest of the -- it's like an engine. You've got an engine, and you've got a propeller at the end. And I started working on this -- flasks, that I call, you know, filling the air to the torpedoes. After about six or eight months, then I got promoted to work in the lab with the detonators, which were pretty special, and also the -- the [jars was?] what I called them, the jars.

MC: How big were these torpedoes?

AM: God, (laughs) I forgot, but they were not as long as the submarine ones. But they were still pretty long. I would say -- my guess now is probably about 10 or 15 feet.

MC: Now, were these the ones that were dropped from, like, the Avengers?

AM: They were dropped from the airplanes, yeah.

MC: And did a certain group of torpedoes go with a certain airplane, or would they --

AM: No, no. They were all -- these were all the same, same size, you know. These torpedoes we were working on were all the same size. And as I indicated in the write-up, after we'd have the torpedoes all prepared, we would take them to the ocean, in the Pearl Harbor area, and shoot them.

MC: From what? From shore?

AM: Yeah, from shore. And we would make sure that they did what was intended. And then we'd go retrieve them.

MC: Okay. You'd shoot them without --

AM: Well, the airplane -- we'd have an airplane, you know, to drop them and shoot them, and we'd be in the boats and go retrieve them.

MC: But they weren't live.

AM: No, no, no. They were air. They were buoyant. In other words, that's why we had the air on the head of the torpedo, we called them, so that it --

MC: It stayed up.

AM: So they stayed up. You know, after they run.

MC: Now, when you were testing them, you weren't testing them with a warhead in there, right?

AM: Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no, no.

MC: No, okay. You were testing them, and then you'd let them -- bring them back and set them up with warheads for the bombing.

AM: Then we'd put the warhead, you know. The head, instead of having air, now we got -- it's full of explosive, you know. And then we had, also, places where we'd load them on trailers, and take them into these places underground. We had these, like, silos where we stored them.

MC: Now, in the early days of the war, didn't we have trouble with a lot of the torpedoes? Did I read that somewhere?

AM: We probably did. At my place, we had a pretty good record, you know.

MC: Right. So this was in, what, roughly 1944, when you were in Hawaii?

AM: Yes, '44.

MC: And how long were you there?

AM: I was there for about 14 months.

MC: Okay. And this is what you were doing the whole time?

AM: That's what I did there.

MC: Okay. Then what did you do?

AM: Well, then --

MC: Well, first off, let's back up a minute. Tell me a little bit about duty in Hawaii. That's got to be pretty nice.

AM: Well, you know, it was pretty rough. I'll tell you why. Our payroll -- my monthly pay was \$54 a month, [about?] like that. And I had my mother -- supporting my mother, because we had a large family. So I didn't have -- I wasn't (laughs) --

MC: You weren't overwhelmed with dollars, right?

AM: Overwhelmed with dollars to go take advantage of Waikiki Beach. But what I would do, you know, is while we were there, we would see movies at night, outdoor movies. And that's how they kept us entertained. And then every now and then, like once a month or so, we'd have a luau, you know, and go, like on a Sunday, go to the beach, and they'd provide hot dogs and chips. (laughs) But I got to see -- the other thing that I really loved about it is, on -- at that time, they had some major league baseball players in the area, in Hickam Field, which was kind of close, and they would come over and play in Kaneohe Field, where I

was. And I got to see a lot of the people like Joe DiMaggio, Johnny Mize, you know, Phil Rizzuto. All those guys were stationed in Hickam Field. And we would get to see baseball in the afternoons sometimes.

MC: How were your accommodations there?

AM: They were pretty --

MC: Barracks?

AM: Barracks. And also, you know, I was on one bunk, and people on top.

MC: Right. How about the food?

AM: The food was good.

MC: The Navy's pretty goo-- aren't they kind of known for having the best food (inaudible) that's what I've heard?

AM: (laughs) You know, I never complained. But it was a good tour, because, you know, when I would go to Pearl Harbor and see these ships coming back, I saw a lot of some of my friends that had gone in the same time I did, coming back, you know, in pretty bad shape.

MC: I guess you made some close friends.

AM: Oh, yes. Definitely. We were very close there.

MC: Now, was this group together the whole time you were in Pearl Harbor?

AM: This was the whole time that I was in Pearl Harbor. But then we got dispersed.

MC: Right. Did you stay in touch with these guys [over the years?]?

AM: For a while, you know. And then, of course, that's been quite a few years ago, you know. (inaudible) lost touch over the years. But after Pearl Harbor, I volunteered to come -- I was pretty homesick, you know, and came home for 30 days.

MC: That was after 14 months?

AM: Yeah. I'd never been away from home. And then I reported to the Great Lakes, in the Chicago area.

MC: From the beaches of Hawaii to the winters of Chicago is a pretty good transition.

AM: Well, not only that, but what happened is when I got transferred -- you know how you have your sea bag, you know, all your clothes and [pea coats?] and everything. Going there, they got lost. And so then I -- it was pretty cold when I was in --

MC: (laughter) I bet it was.

AM: But I would go and check with a lieutenant there at the base, and he says, "We're still looking for your bag," you know. And finally, I went to the commander, and this is something that I really joke about. The commander says, "You don't have it?" And I said no, I've been so many days. He said, "We'll take care of that immediately." So

he calls this lieutenant, and he says, "Lieutenant, I've got Aaron Mendoza" -- first, he says, "How are you?" And he says, the lieutenant says, "It's not important how I am, sir, as how you are." (laughter) He says, "I want Aaron to be issued clothes, everything." And the lieutenant says, "I'll take care of it right now, sir." So I got my pea coat, got (laughs) blankets and everything. So that was -- but it was pretty cold when I was there.

MC: What time of year?

AM: It was in November, December area.

MC: Yeah. That's (laughs) when it starts going down. So, now, what were you doing there?

AM: I was transitory.

MC: I'm sorry?

AM: You know, in transit.

MC: Oh, okay.

AM: You know, awaiting for orders. And that's when I received the orders to report to the *Philippine Sea* in Rhode Island. And I was scheduled to go there when the war ended.

MC: All right. So you were at Great Lakes when the war --

AM: Great Lakes when -- so then they sent me -- they canceled those orders, and they sent me to Memphis Naval Air Station.

MC: Back up just a minute. When you guys heard that the war ended, and you were in Chicago, what was the reaction?

AM: Oh, it was tremendous. (laughs) You know. Yeah. We were extremely happy that it had ended in the Pacific.

MC: All right. Okay. And then you were sent to Memphis.

AM: Then I was sent to Memphis, and had to go to school there. And they taught me the Bill of Rights, the GI Bill of Rights.

MC: Okay.

AM: And then I became an interviewer, interviewing (inaudible), because right after that, they started releasing the older men, the ones that were, you know, had families. And at that time, I was still pretty young, so I didn't have enough -- you know, I wasn't old enough to get released until the very end in '45. I got released on December '45, right before Christmas.

MC: Okay. In Chicago? And then what did you do after you got out? You came home?

AM: Oh, I came home, and I had worked at Kelly Air Force Base before I went. So I had my job back, not the old job that I had, but the grade that I had left. But everybody, in the meantime, (laughs) --

MC: Had moved up.

AM: -- had moved up, and I'm here, you know, a veteran, way down here. But then I had a terrific career at Kelly Air Force Base, because I got in -- the first year, it was pretty rough, but right after that, I got promoted into management. And then I went on the fast track in management. I got promoted two grades every year until I got to GS-12.

MC: Now, Kelly is in San Antonio, right?

AM: Yes.

MC: Yeah. Okay. How long did you work for them?

AM: I worked for them until '60-- '69, somewhere around there.

MC: Oh, wow. You were there a long time.

AM: I had one of the highest grades there as a civilian. And from there, I left, and went to work for General Precision, and that's how I got transferred to Los Angeles area, in Burbank, California. And I lived in Grenada Hills there for two years. And from there, I went to work for Control Data, and I worked for Control Data for 24-some years, selling large mainframe computers.

MC: All right, now, back up a minute now. How did you -- okay. You got out of the Navy, went to work for Kelly Air Force Base, and how did you get back into -- for the Korean War?

AM: Oh, well, while I was working at Kelly Air Force Base, I joined the Air Force reserves. And I was a weekend --

MC: Weekend warrior, plus you worked there (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

AM: Plus I worked -- well, you know, at that time, I'd gotten married, and I was trying to make -- you know, trying to improve my salary. And of course, right after World War II, I felt that there wouldn't be another war. (laughs) And lo and behold, the Korean conflict came along, and our unit got recalled.

MC: Now, this was in the Air Force.

AM: This was in the Air Force. In other words, they gave me -- I had the same rank that I had in the Navy when I left the Navy. I was a tech sergeant. And during the Korean War, I got promoted to a technical sergeant. And when I got discharged, I was a technical sergeant.

MC: How long were you in active duty in Korea?

AM: Oh, it was a couple of years, I think it was.

MC: Well, you've got quite a career. When did you finally retire?

AM: I retired in 1989, after 24 years with Control Data, selling large mainframe computers. I sold NASA, in Mission Control. I sold a database to the Skylab program. And then there was going to be a lull there, so I moved into petroleum, and then I sold Texaco a supercomputer, and Superior Oil I also sold computers, to do seismic

processing. And I retired from Control Data in 1989. At that time, my wife was becoming ill, so I had to take care of her.

MC: Yeah. Sorry to hear that. Well, that -- have you got any other stories you want to tell me, that you want recorded here?

AM: (laughs) No. The thing I'd like to say is that after retirement, I was able to help my wife, because she was on dialysis, unfortunately, and I took good care of her. And I moved here two years ago, and this has been a real good place, you know, for retirees. And the thing that I would tell anybody is to stay active. As you retire, you need to socialize. You need to get involved. I'm involved here playing [Wii?] bowling. In fact, I'm number one playing nationally right now. And I just bowled two days ago a 299, which a perfect score is 300, and this was in a national competition. And I play bridge, like, four times a week. (laughs) And I also co-teach Spanish. We have a Spanish class here.

MC: You're busy.

AM: I stay active. And I've been blessed with good health. I'll be 88 years old the 13th of this month.

MC: Well, congratulations.

AM: Well, thank you. (laughs)

MC: Happy birthday.

AM: Thank you. (laughs)

MC: And you've got your kids close by, too. That's the other good thing.

AM: Yes. I'm blessed with a very wonderful family.

MC: Well, Mr. Mendoza, I want to thank you again for doing the interview with us.

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