

Ray Phillips Oral History Interview

CHARLIE SIMMONS: This is Charlie Simmons, today is the 25th of October 2012. I'm interviewing Mr. Ray Phillips. This interview is taking place in San Antonio, Texas; this interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information related to this site. Ray, if you would please state your name, your place of birth, and your date of birth.

RAY PHILLIPS: Ray Phillips, I was born October the 12th, 1922 in Whitesboro, Texas, at the edge of Whitesboro, in the farm.

CS: Good, and what sort of family, did you have brothers?

RP: I had one brother and, really, three sisters, but one I never knew. She died at a very early age so I never knew her, but I had two sisters that I grew up with.

CS: OK, and what sort of life did you have growing up, were you, was your father a (inaudible)?

RP: My father was a farmer; I remember during the Depression he came in from town one day very excited, cotton had gone up to five cents a pound and I don't know what it had been for the low but he was so excited that it was up that much.

CS: OK, and so did you grow up working on the farm, I'm sure, and in your spare time did you start in school at the normal age?

RP: Yes, I started school at six years of age and went to a country school, two teachers, eight grades. Later on before I finished there they eliminated the eighth grade and we went through seven, and I started into town at school in the eighth grade, which was high school then.

CS: Yeah, well what sort of a life did you have as a young boy?

RP: A working life but a very pleasant life. My mother and dad both worked, I don't know how they did it, come to think about it today but they worked very hard and the kids all worked hard, too. My dad died when I was only 13 so my mother was left with four children; she was not an educated person, she went to Indian school in Oklahoma. We used to kid her and say, "But how far did you go in school?" And she'd say, "Until I was 16, they wouldn't let me go anymore after that." But my brother and older sister, when they were in high school they could not do math, and she worked their math problems, algebra, geometry, and how she did it I still don't know.

CS: Well, she went to Indian school, was she a member of one of the tribes?

RP: Oh no, she would not admit this, she did have some Indian blood, we never knew what tribe it was because she was ashamed of it.

CS: Boy, that's too bad.

RP: It was too bad, and she would never tell us, but she had the high cheeks and all the Indian features, but she would not admit it at all.

CS: Well, I'm part Choctaw and I'm very proud of it, but there was a time when people didn't want to admit that, yeah.

RP: Oh yes, yes, it's a shame.

CS: So, you finished high school?

RP: I finished high school there at Whitesboro, and I started college at Denton in North Texas University. I went there two years before I was offered a job with the Interior Department in Washington, DC, and I went there and when I was a sophomore in college, just finished my sophomore year, and I was there about nine months I guess before I went into the service in the Navy.

CS: How did you come to be offered -- or get a job in the Interior Department?

RP: Because of my shorthand, I'd taken shorthand in high school and when I started college, you know, jobs were not too plentiful, and a man in that school anyway -- it was a teachers college, really -- and I didn't know whether I

wanted to be a teacher or not, so I took courses where I could work outside as well as teach if I needed to. And I enrolled in shorthand; well, having had it in high school the teacher wouldn't even let me come to class for about six weeks, she said it was unfair to me and unfair to the other students who had not had shorthand before, so the course was a breeze for me because I'd had it before. I don't remember now whether I had two years of shorthand in college before I went into service or not, I know I had the one year but I don't remember the second. The Department of Interior was needing help and I don't know how I got on the register but I did, probably through the school, because that was my first job, was through the college. I went to the Department of Interior and I was a stenographer, there about nine months before I enlisted in the Navy.

CS: OK, and how old were you on December the 7th, 1941?

RP: I was working, I was in school in college and I was working at a restaurant, and I remember very well being in the kitchen of this restaurant when we got the news of Pearl Harbor, and I was 17 years old at that time. And, the boss' wife happened to be back there and being a smart aleck little kid I said, well, I didn't have to worry about the war, I was 17 and at that time the draft age was 21, by

the time I'm 21 I'll have a family of full kids, and it didn't work that way.

CS: OK, so then you -- in the Interior Department then time is moving on because you've got a couple of years of college behind you, and you're getting close to draft age, huh?

RP: Yes I was, in fact I got a notice to appear before the draft board and that's when I went ahead and enlisted.

CS: OK, and what did you -- how did you go about enlisting?

RP: I enlisted as a third class petty officer; I did not go to training camp or anything.

CS: You didn't go through any kind of boot camp?

RP: Well, later on I did, but initially I went from working in the Interior Department next door to the Navy Department. And I was in Naval Intelligence for I'd say six months; I don't recall exact amount of time. We worked with four or five countries: Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Yugoslavia. And, we had a Yugoslavian in the office so all of the mail from -- that was in that Croatian language came over to our office because they had no one else to censor it, and this fellow didn't speak Croatian fluently but he did know some, being of that nationality, so he got to read all the letters that came through that were in that language. And, he became a very, very close friend of mine, and he was I guess a lieutenant in the Navy; I used to go to his home on

weekends, he had a family and lived out of DC. In fact, we'd go to lunch together every day and finally the top brass got word of this or sight of this and they ordered him not to be associating with the enlisted men, that was not to be done. So, we got around that. I would go to lunch and I'd go to the men's room and I'd wait and he'd wait a few minutes and then he'd go to lunch and he'd come to the men's room and then we'd go to lunch.

CS: Well, so when he was reading these letters in Croatian you were -- he would dictate to you --

RP: No, he just -- I didn't really have anything to do with that.

CS: So, you didn't have any short-- you weren't using your shorthand?

RP: No, no not at that -- not with him, in that day -- deal. I was trans-- well, there were three of us I believe in this particular office, and the word came down that there were too many fellows in the offices there in Washington, so some were going to go to the field. Well, of the three of us I was the only single one, so I volunteered to leave the job there and wherever they sent me. So, they sent me to Bainbridge, Maryland for training, I had been in the Navy several months but lived at a private home and all this. I went to Bainbridge, Maryland and had my boot training as I

said, all of my company were rated personnel, there was not an apprentice seamen in the bunch.

CS: They were in sort of the basic situation you were in, they'd already --

RP: That's right, they went in with ratings of some sort. When we finished our training there I was sent to California to Port Hueneme and left there on an LST for Honolulu. It took us 19 days to go from San Diego to Honolulu, a flat-bottomed boat mustering of a morning, we had to hold on on the top deck, we had to hold on because the boat was flipping, flopping (inaudible), just going this way and we had to hold on, you couldn't stand up out there.

CS: Did you ever wonder why you joined the Navy during that voyage?

RP: Yeah, more than once, more than once. But, I found out later that living quarters on the LST was so much better than some of the big ships, I was later on the battleship Washington, and my living quarters were about five decks down, hot, it was just like being in the furnace. So, I got permission to -- there was an LST tied up alongside, not the one I'd gone to Honolulu on, but this was in the Marshall Islands where this happened -- I got permission to sleep on the LST, I had my meals and worked on the Washington but ate over there. One evening, and the

battleship Washington I might add I've never been on anything so enormous in size in my life and every time I went to the dining hall down below I'd get lost going back. Just couldn't find my way around. So, one evening when I was leaving the Washington to go back to my LST quarters fro the night, I went to the wrong side not knowing I was just turned around. There was a destroyer tied up on the other side of the Washington; I got on it rather than the LST and I saw all this crew just a-scurrying like everything and I asked one of them what's going on, he said "We're fixing to cast off." So, I had to get off that thing and I barely made it before they took off, otherwise I'd have been a misplaced passenger on the LST -- on the --

CS: You'd have been AWOL, too.

RP: Right.

CS: So, went back to your LST getting to Pearl Harbor, or, your 19 days at sea there, then what happened to you when you got to Pearl Harbor?

RP: I was at Barbers -- no, that was later I was at Barbers Point.

CS: And what was the time period that this would have happened?

RP: Well, about somewhere in 1943.

CS: OK, this is '43 so, OK.

RP: Yeah, I tell you, it was before the invasion of in the Gilbert Islands because that's the first overseas place I went, and I landed on Tarawa the second day after the Marines had taken over, and it was a sight.

CS: Yeah, I can imagine. But, when -- back up a little bit though, before you get there, when you got to Pearl Harbor do you remember the impact, the sight of the damage in the harbor (inaudible)?

RP: I did not, I could not detect anything.

CS: Really.

RP: Yeah, I guess our station was too far away from it, I don't know, I don't know why I didn't. I was only there a few days until we cast off again.

CS: OK, so are you still on the LST when you move out of Pearl?

RP: No, and to tell you the truth I do not know what my carrier was going -- I do --

CS: But you had orders to report to a ship, or?

RP: No, my orders were with ACORN-14 they called it, that was a land-based grouping, there were several of those ACORN units and mine happened to be 14. We were to maintain the bases after they had been taken over by our forces. So, these were -- the Gilbert Islands were belonged to the British, but the British had not done anything so we took them over and immediately they sent Colonel Fox-Strangways

there to oversee it, but he had nothing to say he was just there. Real nice fellow, but since they were under British rule supposedly he was in charge, and --

CS: You had a British officer that was in charge of all these Americans?

RP: He didn't have anything to say about the operation but he supposedly was in charge of the Islands because they were British owned.

CS: OK, so after you left out of Pearl Harbor you -- were you attached -- did you meet up with the other members of this ACORN-14 when you were in Hawaii, then?

RP: Yes, well I met up with them in California before we left.

CS: OK, so you're all together during this time, OK so you transferred to another ship and you move out and then what, they just took you to --

RP: Tarawa.

CS: To Tarawa, OK.

RP: The thing that was so impressive, and of course I didn't know what the island was going to look like in the -- in so far as what the damage had been done, but on the ship before we got there, just looking around and here came a K-ration, and it was I'm sure a Marine's hand was just in this position, it looked like he was reaching for that K-ration; it tore me up and it still does.

CS: Well, you were there on the second day, they were still fighting.

RP: No, the fighting was over, but the dead were still there. It was --

CS: Did you go to shore immediately?

RP: Oh yeah. Then they moved us from Tarawa to an adjoining island which had hardly been touched.

CS: How long were you on Tarawa?

RP: Just a couple of days then, I went back later and that's where our offices were, but initially I went to an adjoining island and it had been hardly touched by the fighting. Our office was in a thatched building that was built by the natives for their meeting places and what have you, and I lived in a thatched hut. I never forget, one of the officers who wrote his family one day and he said the roof of his hut leaked, but he said when it's raining I can't repair it and when it's not raining I don't need to repair it.

CS: Well, I guess living in a thatched hut was not something you ever envisioned when you were growing up as a boy in Texas.

RP: Gosh no, sleeping on the ground maybe, but not in a thatched hut.

CS: OK, well what were your duties at this time?

RP: I worked for Captain Tate who was the island and area commander, and head of ACORN-14, of course. He was a rough, rough customer and you'll be familiar with this, Captain Tate married a -- was later an Admiral Tate, assigned to the embassy in Russia -- he married a Russian, well he didn't marry her, he impregnated a Russian actress, very, very popular. She was jailed for a time and he was ordered out of the country. A few years ago, by that 10 or 15 years ago, the daughter that was born to this couple started looking for her father, and so she located him in the States, he had retired from service and she went through the process of trying to get a visa to visit him, and she finally -- the Russians finally allowed her to come over. It was temporary of course, but she never went back, she stayed over here, and before her mother died she came over and saw her daughter over here.

CS: So what would you do on a daily basis, what sort of work?

RP: Well, just regular routine office work. In the evenings though we were -- we had an air raid every night, in fact the day we landed in -- you know we talked, they said the first thing you do is dig you a fox hole -- so when we went to this adjoining island the same thing, dig you a fox hole. Well, we weren't particularly interested in that, so there were about three of us partnering and we dug a little

hole about a foot deep, and that's as far as we went. That night we had an air raid. The other two went to a fox hole that was deep and I stayed in that one and I tell you all the time those planes, ours and the Japanese, flying around I could see my stomach above the top of the ground. The next day I got busy and I dug. But there were two of us in the office, just a fellow from Houston and I and so he and I made the agreement that we would alternate nights because after each air raid one of us had to go make a report on damages or whatever had happened. So, we alternated; well, Captain Tate was always there drunker than a skunk. He would call me [Elsick?], that was the other fellow's name, he thought I was Elsick, so he would say, "Elsick, we're going to do so and so." Well, I could hardly wait until I got off duty to run back to Elsick's tent and tell him because you know the next day the captain might say something to him about it and he wouldn't know what was going on. But he was a -- Captain Tate was a rough individual. He almost every day he would strap on pistols on either side, he'd get him a driver for the Jeep and he'd take off, because in low tide you could drive from one island to another, and he'd go down the island chain, I don't know what he was looking for but he made this daily

excursion. He was a rough-talking and rough-acting and rough-drinking man.

CS: So you were in the Gilberts, you mentioned Eniwetok.

RP: OK, later; I was transferred from the Gilberts to the Marshall Islands.

CS: So how long were you in the Gilberts all together?

RP: I would say at least a year, yeah at least a year.

CS: OK, and what all was going on in the islands there, what was the --

RP: Really there wasn't much of anything, we at first of course we -- as I said we had the air raids every night and we didn't know when they might come back. I remember one night they found this, I think he turned out to be Korean rather than Japanese, who had been under the pier ever since the invasion, he'd get out at night and go to the food supply dump and get something to eat, then he'd go back and in the daytime would be under the pier. He was there for two or three weeks; they found him one night and that alerted us, we thought we were being invaded, but they -- we all had our rifles and we were ready to go.

CS: Was this just like a supply base then that you were at, or transfer?

RP: No, it was just a holding base is all.

CS: OK, did they bring troops in or other ships come in or?

RP: No, well only the hospital ships came by but that was it. No, no other, I don't recall any other ships coming close to us. When I first enlisted I had through -- I think this has nothing to do with your program, but we had to go through the health checks, you know, and I went to the dentist's office. And the dentist called his corpsman, he said, "You've always wanted to see perfect teeth, here they are." Well, of course I was just beaming all over.

Overseas the hospital ship came by and they said anyone need, wants to go to the dentist may go so, do so. I signed up and went out to the ship to the dentist, had eight fillings, and this was over a period of less than 18 months, it had gone that badly because I didn't get to brush, I didn't get to do anything on a regular basis there for a time and it just tore me up. That first filling just killed me, now if I had just one I'd be happy.

CS: OK, so after you left the Gilbert's, you went to Eniwetok, then.

RP: Well, I went to Kwajalein, yeah, that was one of the other islands.

CS: And there was a lot more going on there, I would suspect.

RP: Yeah, and at the same time there I went on Admiral Jones' staff, he was in command of the islands and the area. He had I think there were just maybe three of us enlisted

personnel in the office, but there were a bunch of officers, a civil affairs man who looked after the natives and I worked a lot with him. In fact he had about three jobs, so he could not get his work done at night, I mean at daytime. So he would ask me to come to his tent at night and help him; I did. One night I was over there, worked all day and then at night I went over there and worked, he said, "Oh, won't you be happy tomorrow you'll be a so and so," meaning a promotion. And I said, "Yeah, you know what I wish I was?" "What?" And I said, "Apprentice Seaman." "Why would you do that?" And I said, "So I wouldn't have to go through all this stuff," you know, I was tired that's what it amounted to. Well the next day I went to work and of course I'd rested a while and I was fit and fiddle. I was in the admiral's office when he came in, and he said, "Sit down, there," so I sat down, he said, "How are you feeling?" "Oh, fine." He said, "Are you getting plenty of rest?" "Oh yes, sir." Well, come to find out this fellow that had reported me was the Civil Affairs Officer Lieutenant Commander, and he was his secretary. He'd gone and told him something, I never did know what, but about my being out of sorts, I guess, but at that same interval to show you how busy I was, I had -- we lived in tents and we had three tent mates, they did my laundry because I never

had time to do it, and they volunteered, I didn't ask them to, they did my laundry and they'd put it away when it was dried and all. One weekend some of the officers were going fishing, so they asked me to go with them; well I went. It was on a Sunday afternoon and I came in, all of my belongings were out in the yard, they'd been moved out of the tent, the three fellows said, "We no longer want to associate with you." They were being funny, you know? Of course they'd moved it all back in for me later but they got their point across.

CS: Yeah, well it was pretty privileged company there, so...

RP: Yeah they were great kids. Actually, they were all younger than I by a year or so, and they sort of looked up to me as their leader, and I tried to fulfill the spot they put me in, I don't know how good job I did.

CS: So how long were you on Eniwetok, was it pretty much the same routine, the whole time?

RP: Oh yeah.

CS: Or I mean, I'm sorry, you were on Kwajalein, that's what -- yeah OK.

RP: Yeah, the admiral, I'd go with him everywhere he went, if he went out here (inaudible), he asked me to go along, and I took my notebook because he would stop out there and I'd put my notebook on a fallen tree trunk and he would

dictate. So one day we were out doing something, I don't know what he was doing, but anyway he'd given me this letter and he said, "We're going to be moving pretty soon from one island to another in the chain, could you take over the office when we go?" We had a chief yeoman and a warrant officer that was there and both of them, I didn't know this, but both of them were being moved and without my knowledge, he said, "Could you take over?" And I said, "Well, I never have, but I guess I would sure try." So when we moved just to locations, the chief and the warrant officer were gone. Well, come to find out I don't know about the warrant officer, whether -- what his situation was, but the chief for some reason they did not like him and they thought he was -- the admiral didn't -- and his Chief of Staff Captain Thomas didn't like him. So they had talked to another island commander and said, "We want to send this man to you, we don't want him and he does this and he doesn't do that." Well, I didn't know anything about this, what the deal was, but he was gone one day and here I was in charge, so the same civil affairs officer got me aside and he said, "Now, you be careful about him, he's going to call you wanting information, you be careful what you say because the admiral and his chief of staff are going to be watching you to see what you say." Come to

find out after all the bad things that they had told his adjoining commander when he got his transfer record he was perfect all the way through. So, he called the admiral and said, "What goes here? You told me all these bad things and yet you gave him a perfect rating when he left." The admiral says, "I didn't do that." Come to find out he had done it for himself, and that was the final blow. The next month his name came out in a publication, he had been promoted from chief to ensign, but of course he didn't get it because he fouled up.

CS: So, what happened to him?

RP: I don't know, he went to this other island and he called me a jillion times and I would talk to him, but I just didn't know anything, I was the dumbest person that ever lived.

CS: Sure, well you had to be, couldn't afford to start talking telling tales.

RP: And really I didn't know what had gone on, I had nothing to tell him.

CS: So you were in charge of the office, how many men were in the office?

RP: Well, we only -- I think there were three besides me, four of us.

CS: And so you're staying there -- the admiral was still there?

RP: Oh yes. One day we were, before they moved the chief, even, the Seabees came in carrying this desk they had made, said where do we put this? Well, none of us working there knew anything about it, so we were trying to tell the Seabees we didn't know what the deal was, and the captain who was the chief of staff came in and he said, "That goes back in my office." So, they took it back there. He came back then to where we were and said, "Phillips, you come with me, this is your desk, in there with the captain." He said, "You are not to do anything for anybody unless I ask you to." He said, "If some other officer wants you to do something he's to come to me and ask for you." Well, he left me with nothing to do, nothing. I sat there at the desk and I taught the captain shorthand, that was about all I did. But, there again it was because they disliked the chief and I didn't feel that I was overworked, but they thought I was doing his work as well as my own and they didn't like that.

CS: Well it sounds like you didn't have any spare time for yourself, so.

RP: I didn't.

CS: OK, so how long were you there, then, in that position?

RP: I was there until I was discharged, came back to the States, I wasn't discharged but I came back to the States.

But, in the meantime when I landed in Kwajalein the civil affairs officer that I had worked with in the Gilberts and briefly in the Marshalls had been transferred to Guam, they had just gone in there and they wanted someone with experience to take care of the natives, so they sent him there. Well, he wired or requested my transfer up there with him, because I'd worked for him so long, and they wouldn't allow it, [where I came to?] they didn't know anything about me because I just got there, but they wouldn't let me go because they thought he was out of his place by requesting a transfer for me, so they refused to let me go. Which was just as well with me, at the time I sort of regretted it but later it was probably better for me.

CS: So you eventually got back to the States, then, an eventful --

RP: Yes, I had -- they had this point system for discharge and -- oh I might say this, that my mother being a widow, when I signed up in the Navy, enlisted, I claimed her as a dependent, and I sent money home out of my paycheck every wee-- every month, so that was additional points for me, just like I was married, you know. I was nearing enough points for discharge and so I came back to the States. Had a brief liberty and then reported back to an airbase in

Oakland, California, and I hadn't been there a week until I looked on the bulletin board and here were the orders, and I was on there to go on a ship's crew, and I was departing it was just in a few days.

CS: Now, you went on leave, you said when you came back to the States.

RP: Yes.

CS: OK and how did you get back to the States, then?

RP: On a battle-- not a battleship, a troop ship, the USS Polk.

CS: And so where did you dock when you came back, do you remember?

RP: I presume Oakland.

CS: OK, and so you had leave, you had home leave.

RP: Yes, I had home leave for 30 days.

CS: For 30 days, OK, so you got back home, got to see your mom, and girlfriend.

RP: Yeah, and then I went back to the base, and I was there just a matter of two or three days when these orders were posted that I was to be assigned to this ship, well the Navy rules were that you had to be -- if you had overseas assignment you had to be back in the States I think it's' six months before you were qualified to go back overseas. Well, I'd only been home 30 days, so I went and complained, I said, "Well, I can't go," because if I'd have gone I'd

have been gone for two or three years, you know, I got my way that time.

CS: It's a good thing you spoke out.

RP: That's right. And then they had the -- I had enlisted in Washington, DC and the Navy policy was for your discharge you could be discharged at your place of enlistment, at your hometown, or out there if you had transportation or some other reason, I've forgotten what it was now, to qualify for a discharge in California. One of my friends, who I think he was a chief petty officer, had an old Hudson automobile and he put the title in my name as well as his, so I got my discharge in California, and then got paid for mileage back to Texas. In other words I was cheating a bit.

CS: OK, so did you stay in California a while after you got discharged, or you headed --

RP: No, no I got out of there. I liked it but it was a play place and not a place where I wanted to live.

CS: You were in Oakland?

RP: Yes.

CS: OK, yeah. Well, it's still not a place you want to probably hang around.

RP: No, I was too countrified I guess, that was too fast of life for me. I enjoyed my time there but I wouldn't want

to be permanent at all. Came back and started back to school and finished my degree and the, I guess, well I had registered for -- enrolled for summer school to work on my master's and Humboldt Owl called, the placement service there at school and they needed someone who could do shorthand; and so the placement office got in touch with me and I went to Humboldt for an interview, was hired, and that's where I started out. But this was after of course I'd finished school.

CS: So, you didn't have any desire to stay in the Navy, you were pretty much --

RP: No, no I did not, my intent the whole time I was there was to go back to school. In fact, I guess I was pretty strong about that because one of the career Navy men who worked next door to where I was there in Kwajalein, he came to me one day, we talked a lot, but he came to me one day and he said, I have decided I'm leaving the Navy, I'm going back to school.

CS: Yeah well it's not for everybody, the service. Well, it sounds like you've had a pretty full time while you were in, though.

RP: I did, and really I look back on it and most of it was enjoyable.

CS: Well, you saw a lot of country.

RP: I saw a lot of country and I learned a lot. When I went back to college I got credits for the work a lot of the work I had done while I was in the service. So, I graduated a lot quicker than I thought I would.

CS: Yeah, so well Ray I think you've covered it sounds like most of the bases here I'm running out of questions.

RP: As I said, I'm known as the winner of the war, my ink and pen.

CS: Well, they all served and so, OK, I'll close this down I just want to say thank you very much and regardless of your -- the way you feel about it I -- we all appreciate what you did in the war because that was equally important with what a lot of other people did.

RP: Thank you, thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE