

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

The Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview With
Eugene N. Fithian
Newburgh, IN
February 4, 2013
U.S.S. Farenholt DD491
Flagship Desron 12

My name is Richard Misenhimer: Today is February 4, 2013. I am interviewing Mr. Eugene N. Fithian by telephone. His phone number is 812-925-3788. His address is 6900 Rolling Lane, Newburgh, IN 47630. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Nimitz Education and Research Center for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Gene, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II. Now you received a copy of the agreement so you know what the agreement with the museum is.

Mr. Fithian:

Sure

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the next thing I'd like to do is get an alternative contact. We find out that sometimes several years down the road, we try to get back in contact with a veteran, he's moved or something. So how about one of your sons? Could we could get in contact with one of those?

Mr. Fithian:

I will do that and before this interview is over with I will give you his phone number. I don't have it in front of me but I will see that you get his. He knows this exercise is taking place.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Good. Now, what is your birth date?

Mr. Fithian:

My birth date is October 30, 1925.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where were you born?

Mr. Fithian:

In Cuba, Illinois.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Fithian:

I had three brothers and three sisters.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were any of your brothers in World War II?

Mr. Fithian:

All four of us were in World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Are any of your brothers still living?

Mr. Fithian:

Nobody is living but me.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were your sisters involved in any kind of war work?

Mr. Fithian:

No, they were in high school. My mother was. She was a nurse in a local hospital.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you grew up during the Depression. How did the Depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, the Depression, my father lost his automobile agency after he came home and started his family. He served in World War I, left high school and went to France, came back and finished school. His mother had passed away and his father was drinking up the farm and he asked a neighbor friend what was the best thing for him to do. He said, "Get with the biggest company in the world" which at that time was Ford Motor Company and went to Dearborn, Michigan and studied how to fix Model T's and Model A's. Came back and got into a dealership and lost it in 1931. We had to move and we moved back to a little town close to where I was born in Fulton County, Illinois.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did he do after that?

Mr. Fithian:

Well he eventually got work in the coal mines.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So how did you make it through the Depression? Pretty good or how?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, it was fifteen acres and a lot of spading forks and hoes and coal buckets and ash buckets and cottage cheese bags and churns and berry-picking.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So you had a garden, did you?

Mr. Fithian:

Oh, yeah, a truck patch.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Truck patch, OK, good. So you could sell some of that then, right?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes, that was in Lewistown, Illinois. Did all my school there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Fithian:

In 1943 in May.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Do you recall hearing about that?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where were you when you heard?

Mr. Fithian:

I was in a drugstore and I was tending a soda fountain when somebody came in and said "The Japs just bombed Pearl Harbor." He said, "Fithian, you ain't long, you'll be gone." He was single and worked for International Harvester and I said, "Larry, you'll go before I will" and I never saw him again.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Didn't come home?

Mr. Fithian:

Let me tell you a story about my brother that night. He got married on Saturday night. My brother got married on Saturday night. Pearl Harbor was on Sunday and on Monday he joined the Marine Corps. Two weeks later he was on his way to the Pacific. Stayed there until my

mother passed away and he came back for the funeral and I didn't know anything about and then he went back to San Diego and served out the duration. My oldest brother.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where all was he in the Pacific? Do you know?

Mr. Fithian:

How long was he there?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, sir. Where all, what places was he in?

Mr. Fithian:

He never got any further than the officers' club at Pearl Harbor. He was a bartender.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, OK, he had rough duty then.

Mr. Fithian:

Yeah. He told me somebody had to do it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah. When you heard about Pearl Harbor, how did you think that would affect you?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, I didn't know. I knew that I would not sign up for the draft but I would choose my choice of service. Shortly thereafter I got a job, still in school, in a restaurant fry-cooking and packing dinner buckets because they were building a prisoner of war camp in our area and a lot of the carpenters came down from northern Illinois and nested there in that county and ate breakfast in our restaurant and I packed dinner buckets starting at five o'clock in the morning, fixed their evening meals and that kind of affected me. I had a brother that couldn't get in the service

because he was working for the Corps of Engineers, building this prisoner of war camp and the name of that camp was Camp Ellis. It's located just on the outside of town.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Fithian:

Then when I graduated I spent the last year, my senior year, my folks had moved to southern Illinois, Duquesne. Dad was promoted and I stayed with the people that I worked with and then when I graduated I went to Duquesne and worked about three weeks on prospect drills, drilling for coal and I said, "It's time to go" and I went to Marion, Illinois, and signed up.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When did you finish high school?

Mr. Fithian:

In May of 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When did you join the service?

Mr. Fithian:

In July of 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You went into the Navy?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How did you choose the Navy?

Mr. Fithian:

I thought that would be the best place for a cook. There'd be more equipment and I talked to some guys that were already in the Navy and got their feelings and I wanted to cook and I liked it. My father cooked in France in World War I and that was just what I liked to do.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You had been cooking, is that right?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You all had a restaurant?

Mr. Fithian:

Well I worked for a family there in Lewistown that had a restaurant.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What day in July did you go in? Do you recall?

Mr. Fithian:

It was August 7th is what my discharge papers say.

Mr. Misenhimer:

August 7. You were how old when you went in, seventeen?

Mr. Fithian:

Seventeen, yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you sign up for the minority cruise or what?

Mr. Fithian:

I signed up for minority cruise and had documentation that I would be discharged on my 21st birthday if the war was over. Otherwise I would stay until it was over.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then where did you go for your boot camp?

Mr. Fithian:

I stopped on my way up to Great Lakes in Springfield and was sworn in from southern Illinois. A little humor here. They said bring your birth certificate with you. Well when I did I found out my name was wrong on the papers I'd signed that went to Washington my name was not Gene Norman Fithian, it was Norman Eugene. So whenever I signed for my pay aboard ship or anywhere else I had to sign it Norman Eugene but I went by the name of Gene. Then I went from there from Springfield on a train to Great Lakes. Got in there about one o'clock in the morning.

Mr. Misenhimer:

But you go by Eugene N. now, right?

Mr. Fithian:

No, I go by Gene.

Mr. Misenhimer:

But I mean you put the "N" in the middle.

Mr. Fithian:

Right.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What all did you do there in boot camp?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, I started running the place first thing. I was kind of a manager of the restaurant and always

took care of my own problems and always had a dollar in my pocket from shining shoes or carrying papers and when I walked in to take my first shower I made the comment that this was a crummy place. It was about three o'clock in the morning and the Chief that was there said, "OK, here's a brush. Start scrubbing." That taught me right off the bat, keep your mouth shut and do as you're told. Of course we were issued our clothes that night and it was late when we got to bed.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, we were assigned to a company and I think there was a little over a hundred of us and we were assigned to a barracks. I can't remember the number of that but we trained for six weeks. Then we were interviewed for school, to go to school out of boot camp. They asked me what I wanted to do and I told them I wanted to cook. They said, "You had any experience?" I told them I had been a fry cook in a local restaurant and they said "We don't fry things in the Navy." I said, "OK." So I went off and left boot camp for ten days boot leave and when I came back they shipped us out of Chicago at midnight, all blinds down on the train, and said we're going to the east coast. When we woke up the next morning and looked out the windows, we were in Kansas. I said, "This ain't the way to the east coast." So we wound up in Camp Park, California. That's about 12-15 miles or so west of Oakland.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was that train trip out there?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, the train trip was interesting. We got acquainted with one another temporarily. We did have a little excitement as we got into the valley of California. We hit a semi-load of tomatoes

that the Mexican boys had picked. We ruined that load of fresh tomatoes. Didn't do any damage to the train. Then we moved on to Oakland and wound up at Treasure Island.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Had you been that far from home before?

Mr. Fithian:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Back in those days, people didn't travel very far.

Mr. Fithian:

Just as far as they could hitchhike.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right. So then what happened?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, I was assigned from Treasure Island to an overflow station over in San Francisco on Market Street, the main street in Frisco, called the Navy Overflow from Treasure Island. It was an annex. The building was three stories in the second block on Market and it was the old Japanese longshoreman's building. It was very convenient for downtown San Francisco. We were about two blocks from the railroad that took you to Oakland or anywhere else. Then once I got processed there, they put me (by this time it's getting toward holidays), they put me in a group that was going to go over to the fleet post office that shipped all packages to the south Pacific for the Coast Guard, the Navy, the Marine Corps and I sorted mail twelve hours a day for about two months. Then they came to me one day, I made Third Class Mailman which is a rate that a regular Navy man cannot hold. They came to me and told me, "We're going to have to

take that chevron off your arm. Now what do you want to do?" I said, "I'll tell you for the third time. I want to cook." So I went back to my barracks and they serviced about four or five hundred there in this annex and they were people like in my status, going and coming. People coming back from the Pacific and going to school to be elevated and then going back. I struck for cook there and made rate Third Class in May. Then I got a letter saying my mother was ill with cancer. I went to the Chief who was a World War I cook and I asked him what I could do and he said "Go to the Red Cross and see if they'll buy you a ticket so you can pay it back monthly." I did and they refused me. Went back and told him. He said "Go to the Salvation Army." I did and they said they'll take care of me and they got me a ticket so I could go to St. Louis to see my mother in the hospital. I stood up all the way for three days from Oakland to St. Louis. I was gone for a week and I was with my father and left St. Louis and my mother, the last time I saw her, and went to the rail station early to make sure I had a seat. I did not get a seat because the ushers, bus boys, they were making money taking people to another gate and filling that train up and then filled it up and when I got out there I had to go to another car. When we got to Ogden, Utah, the train changed lines and the conductor says, "All civilians stand back and let these servicemen aboard." So out of the entire trip I rode sitting down from Ogden to Oakland. Well, the system at the place where I was living and cooking, they put out the transfer slips for people to be assigned on the tables for breakfast every morning. So it was a joke around the galley that somebody'd already seen that list of names and mine was on it to be assigned to Treasure Island for assignment. So they loaded me up and took me to Treasure Island. I was there two days and they assigned me to the Farenholt. It was over on the Frisco side of the Bay.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So what day did you join the Farenholt?

Mr. Fithian:

I joined the Farenholt on June 16 I believe. That was it because we pulled out on the 16th. I took my seabag and everything on board and I went down to see the Chief that I had cooked for, broke in under. I had asked him before leaving, what kind of ship should I apply for. He said, "Get on a carrier. You'll find it easier to cook on a carrier. There's more help and there's better freezers and everything." But that didn't work out that way. I got aboard a destroyer that was still under repair and next morning we sailed. Now a funny thing happens right here as we're sailing out of Frisco. I had been told they didn't fry cook. I was frying fish all the way underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. I was deathly seasick within two hours. An old salt was on the ship and he said to me, "Laddy, are you sick?" I said, "I am terribly sick." He said, "I'll tell you what to do." He said, "Go down to the galley and get you a piece of raw bacon, fry it for about a minute and chew it. Come back here and lay down on the deck on the fantail and watch the clouds. Now that will clean you out." I mean I vomited until... He had his fun.

Mr. Misenhimer:

He fixed you up, huh?

Mr. Fithian:

Yeah. Then we had the Honolulu experience with the Shore Patrol and that was my first five days at sea.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you had the experience with the Shore Patrol before you got on the Farenholt, right?

Mr. Fithian:

No, I had that after I got to Honolulu.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, I see. OK.

Mr. Fithian:

The other man was telling about the cat houses, the term that I had in the post office and striking for cook and going home to see my mother, who I saw for the last time, not knowing it. She was working in the hospital at home and taking care of a man and he raised up and hit her in the breast and cancer formed and that was it. Now I got the letter saying that she had passed away while we was out at sea, about two months later.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then you went to Honolulu. How was that trip over there?

Mr. Fithian:

It was an experience to be on the water and see the ocean and not be able to see the land. It was quite an experience for an eighteen year old boy and not knowing too many people but I made friends easy and of course when you're a cook you don't have any enemies. It was an experience.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Good, good. Then what happened?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, we were there for a few days and then we were assigned to a task force and I not knowing it, we moved out of Pearl and formed this task force of transports and some other warships and headed for Eniwetok. Not knowing it, but that's where it was. Then we were there in July for about ten days bombarding and then screening for the landing at Kwajalein and that was the first

action that I saw. My battle station, I was assigned as a loader on a 20mm anti-aircraft gun during general quarters, 20mm at this time. Then I was later on assigned as a loader on a 40mm.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Go ahead then with this story.

Mr. Fithian:

So that was in July and then along toward the latter part of July the same task force was hooked up to go in and take Guam back. That took place on the 21st of July 1944 and we were there for a little over a week to the invasion. Our itinerary, I know it was because it was the first place we hit after we left Pearl Harbor and probably if you would like to have it, I have several of them, is our entire itinerary of the entire history from the commissioning to the de-commissioning of the Farenholt and where it was, week by week.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Sure, if you don't mind, I'd like to have that. We'll put that in the files.

Mr. Fithian:

I'll put that in with the letter. You'll have it to refer to.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Good.

Mr. Fithian:

I will go over those and make sure I am right before I send them to you. We went from that operation to the Guam operation the 21st of July until the 29th of August we were involved in the Guam operation.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What all did you do there?

Mr. Fithian:

Same thing. Landing troops and taking the island back. Supporting landings.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Your battle station was on the 20mm at that point then?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's an anti-aircraft gun?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any planes to shoot at?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tell me about that.

Mr. Fithian:

A very few but I didn't know at the time but later on in the Pacific experience there was more planes as you well know.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Fithian:

Then we formed another task force, they did and we were assigned to it. You want to keep in

mind this destroyer was a high-speed destroyer, it was a sixteen fifty, the Benson class and we could travel as fast as some of the other destroyers, the 2100s and they put us with the carrier fleet. We screened for this carrier fleet in the Philippine Island area. Now that started in September and our Navy papers say that operation started on the 6th of September through the 26th. Then it was the same thing, enemy planes, screening, picking up pilots that were losing their planes as they were coming back, couldn't land on deck. They put down on the water and... I think at this time I need to let you know that the Farenholt was a squadron leader for Squadron 12. There was eight destroyers and we carried the flag, which was a full Captain.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You were the flagship for that then.

Mr. Fithian:

Yes. Then they needed another island and us not knowing this of course they were building up to make an invasion. We went to an island called Manus on the 28th of September until the 13th of October we were in that area. Then I was moved up to the 40mm, we had two 40mm nests and I was a loader on it, right in front of number three five-inch 38 anti-aircraft gun. Pretty close. We were there and then it was back to the Philippines. Then things began to get hot. I'm coming back to that. Back to the Philippines on 10/16 and we stayed this time only for about nine or ten days. While we were there, we were assigned, not the squadron, but the ship was assigned to go down to the bottom island of the Philippines, Mindinao and they had anti-aircraft guns, the Japanese did on a hill there and they were picking off our carrier planes that were flying to Manila and we had to knock out that gun nest that they had. So we went down there and we had a submarine to screen for us and we spent a couple of days down there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How many ships went down there?

Mr. Fithian:

There were two of us.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Two, OK. Did you succeed in knocking the guns out?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes, we did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Good. Go ahead.

Mr. Fithian:

We bombarded in the daylight and then retreat to the deeper water further out during the night.

Then we went to an anchorage called Ulithi. We got there on the 27th of October and stayed just briefly and it was for a refueling, more ammo and more food. That was more of an anchorage, shallow water out there and then it was back to screening for the carriers again when they decided to take Peleliu. You're familiar with that name?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, sir. Go ahead.

Mr. Fithian:

We were there from November 11th in that area until the 18th, about a week. Then it was back up to Ulithi. Now what happened for us to go back to Ulithi was, we lost a boiler on the ship. We went into the Admiralty Islands for repairs, temporary repairs, and then back to Ulithi in February 1945. We became SOPA there. Are you familiar with that term?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, but go ahead and tell me what it is.

Mr. Fithian:

Well, we were running the anchorage. We had the senior officer present afloat. He run the in and out. We did have two-man submarines in the anchorage and we had that to shoot at at times. As well as some swab handles. We stayed there for about three months. In early May we were called to go to the Okinawa area and at full steam. We went up there at full steam and when we got there, we never even got into the harbor or Buckner Bay. We were assigned by signal to take a station on the picket line. You're familiar with that?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, but go ahead and tell me about it.

Mr. Fithian:

We no more than got out there and a ship that was on the picket line with us, a destroyer escort, was hit right close to us and we got the planes that attacked it and then we took care of the recovery of the men and escorted that ship into a place that a lot of people haven't heard of and don't know where it is but had been in that area and this place is called Kerama Retto. It's off of the southwest coast of Okinawa and it's a little nest of islands and that's where they repaired an awful lot of ships that were attacked by suicide planes. Whether they were destroyers or cruisers or whatever and it was full of ships all the time. Then we went ahead and screened the beach there at Okinawa and then we went down and helped them finish up the Philippine invasion. We were delayed and rejoined Task Force 36 just in time to participate in landing on Mindinao

Mr. Misenhimer:

Sure.

Mr. Fithian:

We escorted them back up to Ulithi so they could have protection for repairs. We were there for a while and then back up to Okinawa and we changed Captains, changed Commodores and was put with a group of small carriers that were striking the southern end of the Kyushu. The B-29's were working over the major cities in Japan but they were leaving from Saipan. There was an awful lot of suicide planes at that time but being assigned to carriers you felt like you had protection and it was a kind of a feel good duty. It came to an end and it was just continuous aircraft work every day and sometimes into the night, picking up pilots and screening for those carriers and then we run into the big typhoon. They cleaned out Buckner Bay which was the main harbor for Okinawa and for some other operations and then we settled there in Buckner Bay and then the night came off of picket duty and we came in and this is getting into August now of 1945. There was rumors of peace. But a little side note here. Before there was any peace talks, there was a group of Japanese Generals and hotshots, big shots, headed for Manila. By this time Leyte was secure and they were flying down to Manila to have a conference with Douglas MacArthur on how the surrender terms would be worded. They stopped at Okinawa and fueled there at Naha Airfield and I had the privilege, I was off duty in the galley and I had the privilege of going ashore with the mailmen to get us a lot of mail, a lot of mail. While we were over there at the airport we got the chance to get pictures of those Japanese and one thing and another. Then they flew on down to Manila and got things lined up to go to Tokyo Bay and get on the Missouri. That was all a little bit premature I think. There were scattered air raids during those few days and I can remember the U.S.S. Pennsylvania in the harbor got torpedoed by a Japanese Betty that didn't know that there was any word of peace. That was along toward August 15th I think. It was then that we were chosen by MacArthur. He had a meeting on our ship it seems like and he

brought a General out of Burma and he sat and put on our ship and that's when they sent the Farenholt and an LST to the island of Sakishima. By this time we had knowledge, we knew it for a while, that that's where the Japanese had the five airfields that was the home for the suicide planes. So we went down there and I remember giving my bunk to a Sergeant that was on the staff of this General and I took my hammock and slept topside and then they started asking some of us rated men to go over on the island and be honor guards for the surrender out in the woods. Not knowing at the time that what we saw and experienced there on Sakashema would later on be put in book form and it's on the market now. We're in it. Shows the ship, shows us out in the field standing yard in our whites and we were there for about a week. I said to this Sergeant, I gave my bunk to, I said, "You know, I've been out here for about a year. I don't have any souvenirs to take home." He brought me back a bottle of saki. I took it down and put it in the cooler. Then the crew of the LST hauled all their weapons that were stacked in there and took them out to sea and dumped them. I saw some graves with fresh American flags on them and this, that and the other, the weather station and got an experience as to how those people lived and organized themselves and so when we were through with that, they brought out a bunch of rifles and swords, Samurai swords and pistols aboard our ship and they started giving them out to the officers and the men. The officers got the swords with the family history of them and then us rated men, I was First Class Cook by then, I got a pistol, a Luger that had never been fired and the seamen got rifles. I got pictures of all that of course. Then we went back to Okinawa and fueled and then we escorted a load of Navy men up to the inland part of the Japanese island to an area called Sasebo on the west side of the main Japanese island and then we went into an anchorage there, escorted this transport into an anchorage and my memory serves me, I saw a lot of sunken Japanese ships. This was kind of a Japanese Pearl Harbor. Our planes had worked it

over pretty good. We navigated into it and anchored and was there for a day. We got liberty so we transferred our money into Japanese money and went ashore. I didn't stay, I got the first motor whaleboat back. I couldn't stand the stink. Go by a grocery store or meat market and chickens would be hanging outside and the people that bought that stuff would just maybe buy one-quarter of a chicken and the rest of it would hang. Been around food all my life and I couldn't handle that so I went back. Then we went back to Buckner Bay and yes, the war was over and the hullabaloo over "are you eligible for discharge," you know, get out. Everybody started with their own formula and figures and one thing and another but we had a Captain on this ship at this time. I want you to follow this line now mostly because he was an Academy man. His name was Briar McLaughlin and he did not want any mail going off the ship because he was not releasing anybody for discharge. Every ship coming back brought somebody. You may have room for 25 if you were a carrier you had room for several hundred and we brought back a bunch of Seabees. I think there were 20 or 25. That's all we could handle. But he restricted mail from leaving the ship. Well, later on in the saga of our ship, that order didn't stand. Some way or other somebody got some mail off of the ship. So then we started back, started back on my birthday, October 30, 1945. We put in at Saipan for fuel of course and we put in at Pearl and then we headed from Pearl to San Diego. We got into San Diego on the, I think it was about the 21st of November into San Diego. I was in charge of the commissary at that time. We did not have a Chief Commissary Steward so we had radioed in orders for what we wanted in the way of food and when we got there it was delivered to the pier and we all put it away and then we had liberty. Some didn't come back. Hadn't been home for a long time. Then it was liberty and trips to Tijuana. We was only there a few days, maybe four or five days, and then we were supposed to go to Philadelphia Navy Yards for de-commissioning but that didn't happen.

We got orders changed once we left San Diego and headed for the Canal that Philadelphia was filled up and we had to go to Charleston. So then we put in at Charleston and got in there, spent two days in the Canal and then we was about four days on up to Charleston and we put in there for de-commissioning and of course more discharges. Let's go back to San Diego. When we come into San Diego there was a group of government officials waiting to have conversation with the Captain. Now a lot of the sailors aboard the Farenholt made up their own mind that that was their Congressman that they had written and they were meeting the Captain to see why he did not release them when they were fairly due to be discharged. That became kind of a conversation piece on the ship and then when we got around to Charleston there was another group waiting for the same gentleman. You got to follow the story now, cause it gets worse. I was one of the guys that got first leave. The Captain was very partial to regular Navy men and I was regular Navy. We got the first leave. I hadn't been home since 1944 to see my mother and I went home and he also gave us travel time where with the reserves, they got 27 days and no travel time. Not knowing at that time, I think he was building a case against himself but anyway I even wired for an extension of leave and got it and when I got back, why he called me up to the sea cabin. Of course being head of commissary, the question he had to ask me was fair. He said, "Gene, how much sugar do we have aboard?" I thought that was quite odd. I said, "I don't know. I've been gone but I'll see." So I went back down and checked the dry stores and went back up and told him. He said, "Could you pack me up about five pounds?" I thought, "My God almighty, here's a full Commander wanting five pounds of sugar." I took it up to him at his sea cabin and he informed me that he was going to go on leave himself and go to Minnesota and see his mother. I thought, "That's nice." So that was the end of the conversation. I didn't say any more but the next thing I know about this is about ten days later I'm in the galley oh, I'd say

about three thirty in the morning, getting coffee and breakfast started and ready and we're tied up to this pier. Everybody is working in their stations, getting ready for de-commissioning and the quarter deck watch comes in the galley. He didn't look well and he said, "I think the Captain just shot himself." I said, "He's on leave." He said, "No, he logged in on the quarter deck about two thirty." I said, "Well, I don't want to hear it. I'm busy." Being as there was so many people being discharged, the South African boys, the boys that took care of the officers, while they hadn't been discharged and the officers were eating general mess. They were eating out of our galley. About the time for me to shut the ranges down and start getting lunch, I told the one black boy that was left, Dixon, I came in the galley and said, "You better go up and see if the old man wants any breakfast because I understand he came aboard about two o'clock." He went up there and came back and said, "He ain't up there." Then I started thinking a little more deeply and I thought what the heck's going on. So then at eight o'clock they hold muster. Now there was fog in the harbor. The tide had come and gone. The Engineering Officer Mr. Swanson out of Lincoln, Nebraska, came walking back past the galley that way and he was carrying the old man's cap. I knew it was his because it had scrambled egg on it and it had a hole in it. I thought, "Oh my God." He shot himself off the end of the pier. Then his mother comes down to the ship a couple three days later and she comes in the galley to thank me for that sugar. I said to her, I said, "What happened?" She said, "His name was Briar McLaughlin. When he left home he was very, very distraught that he had to go by Washington, D.C. for a very rare important meeting before he came back to the ship and then he came back to the ship, logged in. I found out later he wrote a letter and called the quarterdeck to see where the crew's mailbox was. Well, the crew's mailbox was in the mess hall because that's where the guys wrote letters at night. We didn't know for a long, long time who he wrote it to. Maybe we still don't know but we never did know

what happened to him. He was single, had a brother in the Air Corps in the south Pacific, young man, good looking and very, very Navy and the tide had taken his body up underneath the pier and he was probably six foot four and he was wrapped around the piling so the divers said. We still didn't know or they didn't until they went down and found his personal 45 in the sand at the end of the pier in the silt. So that's that. But at the reunions we had every year after we started having reunions in 1982 or 1981 it was always a question that came up: What happened to the Captain? Why? I think back at the time that there were guys who evidently got letters off the ship in Okinawa and didn't get discharged and wrote their folks or wrote their congressman or something. I don't know but I don't know whether you want to put all that on tape or not.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, sure, yeah. I've got it, right.

Mr. Fithian:

It's a true story.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Nope, that's history. We want all the history we can get.

Mr. Fithian:

Yeah. That's history.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right. Then what?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, I got transferred after the ship was de-commissioned. We got a new Commodore aboard ship by the name of Taft. He came and inspected and I can remember him reaching back underneath the ovens in the galley. I was responsible for the de-commissioning of the galley and

he pulled something out from underneath there that looked like a dried up prune. It was a potato. I can remember him holding it in his hand and saying, "Get this damned place cleaned up." Well, there wasn't a whole lot more we could do. Of course the beer that they had for us for our ball parties on the beach whenever we got to a place where we could anchor and have a little recreation we kept down in the coolers and about every Saturday morning our recreation guy was assigned to recreation and one thing and another, he'd come by the galley and say, "We better go check the coolers to see if anybody has stolen any of our beer." Well, we'd go down there and sure enough, everything was OK but when I got ready to de-commission those coolers, I cleaned out behind those cooling coils down there and I found hundreds of empty beer cans. Somebody before me had been...probably even during the time I was there was having beer and throwing their cans behind the coolers. But there was an incident I guess if you want a little humor, when we were in Leyte Gulf and anchored, the fellows had come to me and they said, "Fithian, give me some sugar." I'd give them some sugar. Or "Give me some coffee." I'd get them some coffee. Well, anyway when we got anchored they had been saving life jackets that we would get from pilots that we had picked up at sea off of carriers, and they decided they would do that and lubricate their bodies with grease and load them life rafts up with sugar and coffee and sheets and pillowcases and they decided they was going to swim ashore and have a party. And they did. Anyway on this particular ship the galley was the place to be from about eight o'clock on because that was when the bakers were baking bread and you could get yourself half a loaf of warm bread or whatever amount you wanted and they would see somebody mixing a little bit of _____ alcohol with some grapefruit juice. These guys came back from the island about, I don't know, before midnight, but they had been to the houses of prostitution and sold their wares. That was the humorous part of it I guess. Anyway they all wound up going up the

Captain's mast the next morning and getting busted. That's one of the experiences at Leyte Gulf. There was a lot of incidences where we fought the Civil War again in the galley at night. The black boys would be in there and some boy from Louisiana, Southern boys. We had one guy I know was a gunner's mate, Chapman, and he was from some place down in lower Texas and I forget now but he got into it with the Chief Steward one night out of Macon, Georgia, and you could see a storm brewing in there. This Steward was leaned up against the meat block and I was over by the sink and I could hear them arguing. I seen this Steward reach for a knife that was hanging behind the meat block and I thought, "Oh, there's going to be trouble here." We got that cleaned up and what did we have to do? Play cards? We had our duties to do and we done it and we had a good crew. We still stay in touch.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Good.

Mr. Fithian:

In the late 70's we started organizing a Farenholt association and we formed a group of officers and we drew up a set of by-laws and one thing and another and started having reunions. I was one of them and we decided we'd have it on the West Coast the one year and the next year we'd have in the Midwest and then the East Coast and then back to the West Coast. That went on until a couple of years ago. Most of us are gone or not easy to travel, expensive. The next generation wanted it and they took it over and they had it for a couple three years and we met in Santa Clara. I guess when we came to San Antonio, the previous meeting was up in Albany, New York and they couldn't find anybody to be the president. I said I would but we were going to go to San Antonio, the home of Admiral Nimitz, and Admiral Farenholt was coming to the San Antonio area and it is a good reunion town. So I made a trip on my own and went down there and cut a

deal with the Menger Hotel across from the Alamo, got a room rate and went up to Fredericksburg and got with those people up there and I said, "Here's where our history belongs." So I went back and we had a meeting with a guy out of Tulsa and one out of Mountain Home, Arkansas. There was about six of us and we decided that's where we'd put it and we did. Then we bought a stone. Mrs. Kadery called me and wanted to know if she could send me the information on the perpetual memorial there, every Memorial Day, our stone is there. And it was enjoyable seeing the Japanese Peace Garden. I took as many of my family down as I could. I happened to be president that year as I told you and it was educational for them and that was about the story of that. But then you know when you go back and look at our history, that took place before I was aboard ship, the MacArthur and Nimitz both had recommended this ship for a citation and we never did get it. It came up at one of our reunions and I thought, "Well, let's do something about it." I started out with...I chose a man from about eight or nine states to contact their U.S. Senators and I wrote to the Secretary of the Navy and the office that gives the awards and citations and sent them our history and sent them our clip out of our book about Nimitz and Halsey and MacArthur's recommendation and it was funny. One not know what the other wrote, the words were almost identical. The words were, "Thanks for serving your country and if there is ever anything I can do to help you, let me know." So nothing ever took place until a local boy here who had been an Engineering Officer on a tugboat on the Ohio River and I who had served aboard ship decided we'd go down and talk to our U.S. House of Representatives candidate, gentleman by the name of Brad Ellsworth. He's not in there now and he listened to us for a couple of hours and we had all the documents and he said, "I'll see what I can do." So he went back and he stayed in real close touch with us but he was never able to crack the ice that MacArthur and Nimitz wanted cracked. So he took it to the floor of the House and he got our

recognition for us I think in 2006 and we were getting ready for a reunion out in Santa Clara. I was staying in touch with our secretary up in California and he knew what was going on. I was doing the communicating with the Congressman's office and he let me know a day prior to him taking it to the floor and said, "Let your people know this will be on the news." He got it to the floor. He got recognition for what we done on the ship. We weren't doing it for ourselves, we was doing it for the widows of those that had already passed on. So I never told a shipmate about it except the secretary and he brought himself from Washington back to his hometown of Evansville a document for each one of our men. He was about ten copies short and I went to a friend of mine who owned a printing office here in Evansville and he printed the rest of them for me at no charge. I packed those and took them to Santa Clara with me unbeknownst to any of the other men and then after dinner I broke the news to them and I had a widow there that had lost her husband pass them out to them. They all had one to take home. I was never turned down whenever I asked for assistance on something like that from a civilian or some widow or another shipmate. Several of us still stay in touch. In fact I'm going to go see a couple of the guys that went to the Congressman's office with me at the VA home here some time this month. That's kind of the way it's been. You know I've got to say that all of us boys enlisted. I had one brother that enlisted in the Army and he was with Patton all the way across North Africa and he got hit off the coast of Italy and the other brother worked with the Corps of Engineers I told you, helped them build the prisoner of war camp and then I went in the Navy. My mother served in the local hospital. I think we got a lot of our inspiration from our father who was a World War I veteran.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, earlier you told me about an experience you had with the Shore Patrol. Tell me about that.

Mr. Fithian:

Well, he just stopped me and asked me what Navy I was in. I was in my cook's whites, same thing I cooked in. Had a white jumper on but didn't have any seaman's stripes on the sleeves or... I was out of uniform was what it was.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right. So what did he do?

Mr. Fithian:

He wrote me up a ticket, like a police officer would. He said, "Here, give this to the Captain." Well I didn't give it to the Captain. I said, "Why bring on trouble if I don't have to." So anyway the Captain had a copy of it that the Shore Patrol was sending through the mail. We was out at sea and he called me up to the Captain's office and threw it out on the desk there and asked, "Did you ever see anything like that?" I read it and I said, "Yes, sir, I sure did." He give me a little dressing down and said, "You're quarantined to the ship." We're two days out at sea.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When did that happen?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, that would have happened as we was leaving Pearl to go to Kwaialein and Eniwetok.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, OK, when you first went over there. In late 1944 there.

Mr. Fithian:

Yeah, well yeah. I went aboard ship in June. It would have been in July, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What would you consider your most frightening time?

Mr. Fithian:

I think when the kamikazes attacked the fleet in strong force and hit a U.S.S. carrier, the Randolph, right off of our port bow and I think that and I have to say, I just have to say looking back as far as personal danger, taking what little food I could from the galley to the sleeping quarters during a typhoon. The only thing I had was a lifeline to hold on, carrying a pot of coffee and a bag of oranges, that was all. Water was washing across the deck, from side to side, and seeing the waves break over the bridge, pounding into... that bothered me probably more than anything.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What typhoon was that?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, that's the one, the big one, where the water, the ocean, got brown. The National Archives Library, I don't know whether that was ever named or not.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was that the one that Halsey took them into and they lost three destroyers?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes, that's the one. All the other ships out of Buckner Bay there in Okinawa and got some bad communications on it, etc., etc. That's the one. We was east of Japan.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, lost three destroyers I think in that. That was December 17th of 1944 that I have.

Mr. Fithian:

Yeah, I'll send our itinerary to you when I mail that agreement.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever see many kamikazes hit ships?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, let's see the Randolph and the _____ that was a D.E. Yeah, I saw dozens or so of them, yeah. Then I seen some that tried and missed. You know the strategy was, "We're going to bomb Japan onto their knees but we're not going to be able to do it if we don't get rid of those kamikazes" and they were attacking our carriers and we destroyers were trying to keep the torpedoes from going into the carriers so that's the reason we was also on picket duty. I've seen as high as 15 or 20 destroyers surround a carrier group that you couldn't see from one side to the other except just ship, ship, ship. Now taking fuel off of an aircraft carrier, you're getting black oil with a hose and what you think is calm water can be done successfully but if a ship passes in front of you which happened to us once, the U.S.S. Houston going the opposite direction, sent a wake down between us and the carrier and it pushed us apart and the fueling hose was like a rubber band. It just stretched and broke. Those are not healthy incidents.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the morale on your ship?

Mr. Fithian:

I think when I hear stories after it was all over with, and you know you hear these stories about these Vietnam veterans having all these mental problems, our morale was good except for...had a case of one boy came to me one time, one on one, his name was Kennedy. I think he was out of Tennessee. He had tears in his eyes and he said, "Can I talk to you?" and I said, "Sure." He says, "I got to get out of this Navy." I said, "What are you going to base your argument on?" He said, "I'm only sixteen." I said, "How did you get in?" He said, "Well, I told them I was seventeen." I

said, "You'll have to get out the same way you got in: lie." So he did get out. It could be done.

My dad went to France when he was sixteen, came back and finished his high school. Successful man. So I think our morale was totally good. We had a basketball team whenever we got close to a carrier, we'd always engage a game of basketball. I've played some games on LSTs, shoot them a little low. But it can be done.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever hear Tokyo Rose on the radio?

Mr. Fithian:

Oh, yes, yeah, yeah. We heard her.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you think of her?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, we knew what she was and I had the benefit of serving with some guys that had started out in the war down in the Solomons and they had pretty good talent for that and they informed us younger ones, you know, don't get alarmed about her. She was popular.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I heard she played good music.

Mr. Fithian:

Yeah. She knew more about our Navy than a lot of other people did. I think the suicide planes and the typhoons, whenever you see the water destroy or bend steel and expand the decks of a ship, you know we got expansion plates in them and not be able to go out on deck and have a cigarette because the cigarette light would warn the enemy pilot if he saw it. I forgot how far they could see light like that but when you draw on a cigarette, it would get a pilot's attention

they said for so many feet. We got our share of floating mines around the islands. That was part of our duty and we were proud of our ship and got a lot of good history.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you every cross the equator?

Mr. Fithian:

Oh, yes, yes I did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What kind of ceremony did you have?

Mr. Fithian:

I guess maybe if I was ever disappointed in anything it was with some of my friends that were making book on me. They'd come to the galley and asked for food and I'd give it to them. Those charges came up against me at the hearing when we crossed the equator. They read those charges off against me. For serving them a late supper, you know, and we had a great big Mexican boy there that had the pleasure of rubbing my nose in his belly.

Mr. Misenhimer: King Neptune?

Mr. Fithian:

Wondering why they was collecting garbage from the galley. It's an event and I hold great honor for every man I ever served with.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Good. Now when you got out, did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life?

Mr. Fithian:

No. There was problems at home, my mother had passed away, my father had remarried and I had two girls, sisters in high school. I was busy. One of the things I couldn't understand. I don't

know whether anybody has ever told this to you or not. They had a 52-20 club where you got twenty dollars a month for a year if you couldn't find work.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, twenty dollars a week, right.

Mr. Fithian:

Twenty dollars a week. Well that's just beer money. So I come home and I had a job when I left of course and I went down to the pool hall where I thought I'd see my friends, a town of about 7500, down in southern Illinois. I went in there and the place was full. I said, "What in the world's going on? How come you guys aren't working?" "You can't find work. Ain't no jobs, ain't no jobs." Well I went out the next day and got me a job and I let it go and got me another one the next day and finally I moved away, about two hundred miles, and went to work for Ayrshire Coal Company, a surface mine. Worked my way up. Never got a college education. Told them I wanted to go to school on the G.I. Bill and they said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to study hotel and restaurant management." I still had commissary on my mind and they said, "We don't have any schools on the list like that." So I didn't go to school. I couldn't afford it myself. My dad couldn't afford it. I just struck out and got with a company that was building some new machinery for coal mines and worked my way all the way up to general manager over Kentucky, Illinois and Indiana. I checked out at the age of 55 in 1980 and started a consulting firm and worked the southwest and the west from Gillette, Wyoming and east and I got some jobs in Surinam, South America for ALCOA and then I got an assignment to South Africa for a British coal firm that was putting in drag lines and strip mines and when I started drawing my Social Security why I retired and helped my grandson through school down in San Marcos.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What ribbons and medals did you get?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, the ship was awarded 13 stars for 13 different engagements. They say it's the most highly decorated destroyer in the South Pacific. I got a note here on those because that's one of the questions you asked on your letter. Victory Medal. Good Conduct. American Area.

Asiatic/Pacific with 13 Engagement Stars, Philippine Liberation with one Star. That Congressional Commendation.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you've thought of from your time in World War II?

Mr. Fithian:

Not really. I wished I could have done more earlier but age didn't allow that. Generally it was an education in itself. One of the things I wonder why more boys don't enlist today instead of going to college. I guess you know I just came from a different generation. But my father had a fishing camp down in Mountain Home, Arkansas on Bull Shores Lake and we'd go down there when miner's vacation come. All of us boys worked in the mines and we had children and we'd take our children with us. We'd fish for a week or ten days. We had a flag up at the end of his lane that led off the highway back to the resort and he made sure that on the 4th of July he took those kids down there and they said Pledge of Allegiance to the flag when they were five and six, seven, eight years old, his grandchildren and I thought to myself what a great way to teach and us boys all gathered there at the same time every year. Something the family done.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have we covered everything you had on your notes?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, yes. I don't know. I'll make sure that this itinerary is in there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

OK, good, yes.

Mr. Fithian:

If you want a copy, I have it, of the history of that ship that goes that might help you. It's the history of the Farenholt that starts back at the day it was commissioned. The history was that we picked up a hundred and forty-three survivors from the carrier, U.S.S. Wasp. We got special commendation or notice from MacArthur then from the activity at Rabau and Kwaialein. That's all in here. I will stick that in an envelope and here's the full story. We were there and there's pictures of it and stories on it. I'm at home one night and my wife's at choir and the phone rings about eight o'clock. This guys says, "Is this Gene Fithian?" I thought, "Who in the world would be calling?" I said, "Yes." "Was you ever on the island of Sakishima?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you remember the weather station there?" I thought I got a picture of that. I got him, find out who this is. I said, "Yeah, do you remember that '39 Ford sitting down there at the base of it?" He said, "Yeah, you are Gene Fithian, aren't you?" So then he identified himself. Now his name is Fredonia Samples. He's the author of this book "Wings Over Sakishima" and he is a retired vice president of Boeing Aircraft. Now in the early '50's he was stationed on Sakishima as a radioman and he has now written this book "Wings Over Sakishima" and told the story and it's a very, very interesting book. In fact, if you're interested I will send you, I've got several of them. I'm helping him. I'll send you an order blank and you can do with it what you wish.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Sure, yeah, send me one.

Mr. Fithian:

It's got a lot of history in it. I pass them out on airplanes when I fly down to Dallas and I've given them to different people. It's from before I got on it and they had a lot of history then. Then they called them back early from their liberty down there and so I'll put a copy of that in there. I want to thank you.

Mr. Misenhimer:

After you got off the Farenholt you did what? I'm sorry...

Mr. Fithian:

I went on another destroyer and put it out of commission down in Charleston.

Mr. Misenhimer:

OK.

Mr. Fithian:

The U.S.S. Caperton And then I got transferred up to the amphib base, Little Creek, Virginia and then I went in the Navy hospital in Norfolk to take care of jungle rot and I got discharged out of the receiving station in Brooklyn.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What date were you discharged?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, they had got it in here 26th but the discharge date was supposed to have been the 3rd of October and that is the date I came home but they paid me until November twenty-something because I had leave coming.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What year, 194__

Mr. Fithian:

1946.

Mr. Misenhimer:

1946. OK.

Mr. Fithian:

Then I received another medal in 1947 and that was the American Defense Medal that they came out with. I think everybody got one of those, if not they should have. But I'll package that up for you and probably copy off if you want a copy of my discharge.

Mr. Misenhimer:

April 12, 1945 President Roosevelt died. Did you all hear about that?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes we did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was the reaction when people heard that?

Mr. Fithian:

It took them down a little, it took them down a little. A lot of us were so young we never had voted. Wasn't associated with politicians then.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right. He was the only President most of you had known.

Mr. Fithian:

Exactly right.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when Japan surrendered on August 15 did you have any kind of celebration then?

Mr. Fithian:

Yes. When we first heard of it we was anchored in Buckner Bay there at Okinawa and I can remember there was this one guy that got in the Civil War argument with the guy out of Macon, Georgia pulled his 45 out, he was on duty, he was a gunnery mate, and emptied the chamber into the air and the old man called him up to his cabin and I think he got a reprimand or something like that, nothing that wasn't worth.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was it like to go through the Panama Canal?

Mr. Fithian:

Well, it was very, very interesting. Of course we had to sit in the fresh water lake to knock the barnacles off and I got a chance to go ashore and I was cook of course and bought a bunch of bananas, whole stalk of bananas that were green. I went back and put a wire up between the two smoke stacks and hung that stalk of bananas up there and I said, "Now as them ripen we'll have them for breakfast or we'll make something." I never saw one get ripe.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Somebody ate them all?

Mr. Fithian:

They had them as they ripened, they had them marked. Ready to go. I guess in order to take care of my sons, I'll have to make another book, one for me and then I'll have to have one for each one of them, that would be three more.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Thanks again, Gene, for your time today and your service to our country.

End of Interview

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