

The National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with:

George Gehl

United States Navy

February 22, 2014

My name is Clarence Bryk and today is February 22, 2014. I have the privilege of interviewing Mr. George Gehl. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas at the Nimitz Museum. The interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Clarence Bryk: Let me introduce Mr. Gehl who is going to tell us about where he came from and his introduction into the military.

George Gehl: I was born in New Salem, North Dakota. A town of about 300 and I don't think it has grown much since then. I was at the bowling alley the morning of December 7 when it was broadcast over the radio that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. I was fourteen at the time. My uncle Matt came from Chicago and visited us. He was working for the railroad as a Round House foreman and he got me a job working on steam engine locomotives. I saved enough money to take a bus to Chicago and I enlisted in the Navy in Chicago. My training was Great Lakes Naval Training Station and I will never forget one episode; we were on gunnery field shooting off the big guns and the Gunners Mate pushed my head against the mount and said, "Hit the damn, thing will you!?" So that was quite an experience for a new recruit. I spent a little time at Great Lakes and then I was sent to Norman, Oklahoma, of all places, for the Navy Air Corps. I ended up in the Mess Hall there and I was there for three months and then, they sent me to San Francisco. I was on Market Street stationed as a guard at the Federal Building for about three months. Then I was shipped overseas. I will never forget; we were on an Army Transport and we were leaving San Francisco about mid-night. I woke up and the damn sea-bags were floating all around me. I asked a fellow, "What the hell happened?" He said, "Oh, we broke a seam on the ship and they are trying to fix it." We got to Pearl Harbor and spent a couple of days there while they got things all straightened out.

Clarence: What year was that?

George: 1944. Then we headed for the Philippine Islands. We went to one island and they dumped us off there and we stayed for a couple of days, then, all of a sudden, we are back on a ship and going to another island. I think I went to three different islands but I can't remember which ones they were, except Luzon at Manila. That is where I ended up. They were building a base there. The 7th Fleet with Admiral Kinkaid. That was where I stayed and I enjoyed it very much

and I got to meet Admiral Kinkaid. When I was going back to the states, we were in a storm, from the time we left until the time we came into San Francisco.

Clarence: Was that the time we lost a lot of ships in a big Typhoon?

George: I don't know, but I do know that we bounced around. The ship was a Kaiser built ship and the Captain came on the speaker and said, "Be prepared to abandon ship. These ships are known to split in half." We made it back.

Clarence: Tell me a little bit about your stay in Manila. What was it like?

George: Well, there were still Japanese snipers in the town.

Clarence: Where they taken out?

George: Yes, Every so often.

Clarence: What was the city like?

George: It was all bombed out. It was a really a disaster. About the time I was ready to leave, they had started to rebuild the city. That was really amazing. They had wooden scaffolding going up everywhere and workmen were pushing wheel barrows with cement in them.

Clarence: Did you see or meet any of the people who had been held as Prisoner of War by the Japanese?

George: No. Our camp was about a mile from an air field so sometimes we would go to the air field and hitch a ride to Clark field which was about 100 miles from Manila, just for the plane ride. We figured we would catch a plane back, unfortunately there were no planes available to hop on so we had to hitch-hike back.

Clarence: Did you sustain any attacks? Any fly overs or things like that?

George: No. The snipers were a problem sometimes, but that is all. They would come out of man-holes and places like that.

Clarence: Was this in the Fall of 1944?

George: It was 1945, then.

Clarence: You were building a base there and you were all finished. Did the base have a name?

George: It was just the 7th Fleet Base. Later on, about the time I was leaving, it was changed to the Philippine Sea Frontier.

Clarence: So, you were there, when the Atomic Bomb was dropped?

George: Oh, no. The bomb was dropped before I got there. I didn't get there until late 1945.

Clarence: What do you remember most, when you think about that time? What comes to mind? Does anything stand out?

George: General McArthur's Headquarters was down the road from ours. We were right across the bay from, our 7th Fleet Headquarters was right across Manila Bay. I remember one time; Mc Arthur came in his Staff car and he was followed by a few other cars.

Clarence: Did you see him?

George: Yeh.

Clarence: What did people think about him at the time?

George: I thought he was a kind of a show off. Maybe a little egotistical.

Clarence: How did people treat you in Manila?

George: Very nice.

Clarence: They suffered a lot, didn't they?

George: Yes, they did.

Clarence: Did you have any instances where you helped him like food and things like that? I am talking about the Military

George: Yes, I saw people at the Mess Hall, picking up food and things like that. A truck load of blacks came into the area where we had ours and they stirred up a lot of trouble. So, the SPs (Shore Patrol) had to straighten that all out. When they finally decided that blacks and whites were going to be living together, things got a lot better.

Clarence: How did they make that happen?

George: I have not idea. But, all of a sudden, we were stationed together.

Clarence: Were they pretty well integrated? Did they have any jobs that were important, or were they just menial jobs?

George: Menial jobs. Talking about segregation, I worked for the Railroad and got passes to go different places and I and the family were going through the Southern part of the country and it was the black section and the white section and we were coming from Chicago we thought nothing of walking through the area and intermingling with the blacks and they would look at you and say, "What are you doing in here?"

Clarence: What kind of living conditions did you have in Manila?

George: We were in barracks.

Clarence: What kind of food did you have there?

George: We would have S.O.S., which is slang for, shit on the shingle for breakfast.

Clarence: Did they have any USO (United Service Organization) groups come through?

George: Oh, yes.

Clarence: Do you remember any particular group that came through?

George: There were quite a few of them. I can't remember any particular ones.

Clarence: Did Bob Hope's group come through?

George: Yes. I think he did.

Clarence: Did he have some beautiful girls with him?

George: Oh, yes.

Clarence: How long did it take you to get over there? You went to Pearl Harbor first and then to the Philippines, correct?

George: It took seven days to get to Pearl Harbor and that was in a storm. The sea was as smooth as glass all the way into the Philippines. I can't recall how many days.

Clarence: You were on the ship for many days after Pearl Harbor. Was it about a month?

George: Yes.

Clarence: What kind of food did you eat?

George: I remember that I really didn't care as long as I had something to eat. A lot of the guys were complaining, though. But it didn't bother me as I was used to not having much?

Clarence: What did the guys do all day, while on the ship?

George: A lot of boring stuff, like swabbing the decks.

Clarence: A lot of card games going on?

George: Yes.

Clarence: A lot of money change hands?

George: I guess so, but I didn't bother about that. I am not much of a gambler. I wasn't a smoker, but you could buy a pack of cigarettes for five cents a pack. When I was in San Francisco, I would buy a carton of cigarettes and guys would say, "I'll give you five bucks for a pack." So, I ended up with a pretty good-sized nest egg.

Clarence: Tell me, when the ship is out there and you are going from Pearl Harbor to the Philippines, it is a long haul. Did you have tenders come out with supplies?

George: It would surprise you. I would look around and see a big fleet of ships out there and then, here we are all by ourselves. To this day, I can't figure out why we didn't know the Japanese were coming into Pearl Harbor.

Clarence: Did you have a supply ship come up to your ship during your trip?

George: Yes.

Clarence: Did they bring the mail for you?

George: Yes.

Clarence: Did you get mail from home pretty regularly?

George: Once we left San Francisco, it took three weeks to get the mail.

Clarence: You would get it on ship. Would a supply ship drop it off?

George: Yes. I remember, they would shoot a line over from our ship and they would shoot the bag over from the supply ship.

Clarence: Mail time was a big event?

George: Yes.

Clarence: Did you write your folks a lot?

George: Yes. My dad died when I was two and my mother more or less kept up the hardware store as we were the only hardware store in town. I had three brothers One, who was in the CCC was killed going back to camp. My next older brother was in the Army and in Germany for three years.

Clarence: Did he come home ok?

George: He would tell stories about getting shot at. Luckily, he never got hit.

Clarence: You had this long ship ride. Were you happy to get on land again?

George: Yes.

Clarence: Were you prone to sea-sickness?

George: No. I was quite fortunate. Especially coming from San Francisco to Pearl Harbor in that storm.

Clarence: How many were on that ship?

George: I don't know. Maybe 500 or maybe a 1000.

Clarence: Did you have any submarine warnings or anything like that?

George: We had a submarine warning one time. We dumped a few cans over and that was more or less it.

Clarence: Do you mean Depth Charges? Did they actually go off?

George: Yes.

Clarence: Was it the real thing or was it a false alarm?

George: I don't know, we didn't stick around to see the results.

Clarence: When you landed in the Philippines, did you go into a regular harbor and was it operating pretty well?

George: No. We took a Landing Craft into the shore and dumped us.

Clarence: On the beach?

George: Yes. Why did they send us in there and a couple of days later pick us up and go back out again? We didn't know.

Clarence: They eventually got you to Manila by trucks or what-ever?

George: No, we pulled into the Manila harbor.

Clarence: Was it pretty much torn apart then?

George: Oh yes! It was torn apart.

Clarence: When you got off the ship, where did you go?

George: They put us on a truck. There wasn't that many stationed at the base at that time. Maybe a hundred or so.

Clarence: What was your first impression when you got off the ship?

George: It is hard for me to remember. I do remember I was glad to get on solid ground.

Clarence: Was it pretty well organized when you got there?

George: Yes.

Clarence: Did you have any friends that you were with for a period of time?

George: Yes.

Clarence: Did you meet them on the ship or?

George: Actually, some of them were from Boot Camp.

Clarence: You were pretty young at the time were you not?

George: Yes. I was eighteen.

Clarence: Were the rest of them pretty young, also?

George: Yes.

Clarence: So, some of you stuck together?

George: Yes. In fact, one of my friends married one of my cousins.

Clarence: How did that work out?

George: They had five kids. I would say it worked out pretty well.

Clarence: What did you do during the day? Were in construction or.....?

George: Construction and standing guard and stuff like that. The C.B.s (Construction Battalion) We were a working crew.

Clarence: All the equipment that was needed was there? So, it was pretty well organized by then.

George: Yes.

Clarence: What did you do for fun?

George: We made our own fun. We had a basketball court and stuff like that, that we had managed to get together. We would count the planes when they took off and we would count them when they came back, to see if those that went out, came back.

Clarence: What kind of airplane where they flying out of there?

George: They were P-38s (Fighter plane). There were some others to. Boy, when they took off, it was something to see. And when they were coming back too/

Clarence: Were they pretty noisy?

George: Oh, yeh.

Clarence: Did you see any other famous people while you were there?

George: No.

Clarence: How long did you spend on the island?

George: I was in Manila about a year.

Clarence: What did you miss most, about home, at that time?

George: Actually, I was content. It made no difference where I was, I was content>

Clarence: What was the most difficult time for you during this time.

George: I don't recall. I just did my duty and that it was.

Clarence: Do you ever think about it at all?

George: Yes. Every once in a while.

Clarence: What pops up in your mind, when you think about it?

George: Basic training is one thing. When we were in Norman, Oklahoma, there was a University there and we were about fifty miles from Oklahoma City, where we would go on Liberty.

Clarence: Was it a Dry State at the time?

George: Oh, I'll say it was dry, except for 3.2 beer. To get any liquor, you had to get in touch with a cabby and they could find you liquor if you wanted it.

Clarence: What do you remember about Norman?

George: It was Christmas time and in the front yards of some of the home there were pumps, pumping oil.

Clarence: Were the people good to you?

George: Yes. Back when I was younger, the Southern Pacific, when their passenger trains would come into Mandan, North Dakota, the Indians would put on a dance and the people were afraid to get off the train.

Clarence: You went from Norman to San Francisco on the train. How was it?

George: It wasn't too bad.

Clarence: How did you eat when you were on a Troop Train?

George: They had a nice Dining Car. And we ate what they were preparing tht day. No choices.

Clarence: Did you eat Spam?

George: Oh, boy. All kinds.

Clarence: You daughter told me to ask you about the banana story>

George: A big truck would come on the base and sell bananas. I ate bananas day after day.

Clarence: Do you remember what you paid for them?

George: I think it was five or ten cents a bunch. There were six or eight in a bunch.

Clarence: So, you left the Philippines to go back home, do you remember what month that was?

George: I think it was May 1946.

Clarence: You were there for quite awhile after the war was over. How did you hear the war was over?

George: I know we had quite a celebration, on the base. I can't remember.

Clarence: How did you find out about the Atomic bomb being dropped?

George: The radio.

Clarence: Do you ever regret the fact that we dropped those two bombs?

George: No. They came over and killed our boys. There is no sense in trying to kill one another off. I was glad that they did something to finish it and have peace.

Clarence: Do you have any thoughts when you see Japanese people? You are in Seattle, and you have a lot of Japanese there, when you see any, does anything go through your mind? Do you associate it with back then, or is it just all gone?

George: My thoughts are; Why can't people get along? Why do we have to have wars?

Clarence: Is there any thing else that you would like to add, before we conclude this?

George: No. Just that I have enjoyed this interview.

Clarence: Thank you it has been enjoyable to hear your story. It has been very gracious of you to do this.

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