

# The National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with:

William "Bill" Merkel

United States Naval Construction Battalion

26, June 2014

This is Ed Metzler. Today is June 26, 2014. I am in Kerrville, Texas to interview William "Bill" Merkel at his home in Kerrville, 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.

Ed Metzler: Thank you Bill, for spending the time this morning to share your World War II experiences with us. I would like to start by having you introduce yourself, giving us your full name as well as your date and place of birth.

Bill Merkel: I am Bill Merkel. I was born in San Antonio, Texas on February 27, 1926.

Ed: Did you grow up there?

Bill: Yes, I grew up there and went to high school.

Ed: What did your dad do for a living?

Bill: My father was a sheet metal worker. The first few years, after I was born, he was never employed by anybody but himself. He always had a job. I worked with him from the time I was about five until I left high school.

Ed: Those were the Depression years.

Bill: You bet. It was bad enough that my mother had to work as a fulltime employee at J.C. Penny Company where she was in charge of the alteration department. My father had a lot of jobs making restaurant equipment.

Ed: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Bill: Yes, I had an older brother whose name was Marvin and he was three years older than I. I had a sister Mary who was six years older than I. I also had another sister Gladys who was ten years older than. I was the baby and it shows.

Ed: And you never recovered from that.

Bill: That's right and I never wanted to.

Ed: You went to high school in San Antonio?

Bill: Yes. I went to Jefferson High and I had the opportunity to run on the State Championship Team, two years in a row. That was my only organized sport as my mother would not let me play football, because she was afraid, I would get hurt. She was very protective.

Ed: What year did you graduate?

Bill: June of 1944.

Ed: So, the war started when you were a sophomore in high school. What do you remember about the day the war started?

Bill: I was with a bunch of kids at the Majestic Theater in San Antonio and the first thing I thought about was, how is this going to affect me. Then I became excited because I thought that now I will have a chance to become a pilot in the Army Air Corps.

Ed: You wanted to become a pilot because it was glamorous and that kind of stuff?

Bill: Yes. It was a thing we all looked upon as the thing that would put an end to the war. So, that excitement was lost very soon thereafter; because I began taking tests for the V-5 and V-12 Programs and everybody told me my eyesight was too poor and that I would never make it, and that is the way it happened. I suspect that had something to do with my being chosen as for the CBs (Construction Battalion).

Ed: Did your older brother go away to war?

Bill: No. He did not. He was a foreman with the Utility Department.

Ed: Now, you are in school and the war continues, did you have plans after you were to graduate?

Bill: I was drafted. I had a choice of joining on the first of June or waiting for a Draft Notice and I got one and went on active duty the 20<sup>th</sup> of June.

Ed: Where you chosen by the Navy or did you choose the Navy?

Bill: I chose the Navy over the Marine Corps.

Ed: Why?

Bill: I guess I wasn't ready to be killed. I had many peers that went into the Navy and it turned out to be that we often met, by accident, in the Pacific. I didn't know anything about the Marine Corps. at that time.

Ed: Where did you go for Basic Training?

Bill: San Diego Naval Training Center.

Ed: Had you ever been out of Texas, before you got on the train and went to the West Coast.

Bill: No.

Ed: So, you were a local kid a long way from home.

Bill: Yes. The train ride was interesting, good and bad. We got there and started Boot Camp, which I liked a lot. It started off funny. I guess, while on the train, somebody decided I was a leader. So, we were going through the Mess Hall the first morning and I was the last one in line of our group. The server threw something on my tray and I didn't know what it was, so I said, "What is that stuff?" They said that it was Rhubarb. I said, "Rhubarb!" and with that I threw up. By the time my barf hit the floor I had a hand full of mops, brushes and soap. Some of my group, got a big laugh and as a consequence, they got drawn into the clean-up crew too. That same day, we had to go to the barber shop and everyone knew what to expect out of the barbershop. I didn't have any idea the shop would be so big. There must have been sixteen barbers in there, lined up with all of their equipment and they running the recruits though fast. One of the fellows, that I had went to high school with, was very vain about his hair and he kept getting further behind in the line, finally he was the last one. He went up to the barber and he started telling him what he wanted, even before he got into the chair. And of course, it didn't work that way. Then we went and got our clothing and it was a surprise as it was a lot of weight and a lot of pieces. That evening we were learning how to roll those things and putting them into sacks so they would stay well pressed and about that time, someone knocked my glasses off of my bed. It was particularly bad for me, because they were Bifocals and the Navy didn't know about Bifocals. It took me almost the entire time I was in Boot Camp to get my glasses replaced. Which was good and bad. It gave me time away to make this long trip to the hospital, which was the good side. The bad part was I missed a lot of instructions that were part of the training. It worked out ok in the end.

Ed: But you went through part of you Basic training without the proper glasses.

Bill: That's right. I was lucky, I met a young man in my Company, who was younger than me and much sharper than me. Someone suggested that he might be able to help me. He promised to give me a written run down every lesson he had received and he did so. That helped me a lot as I graduated in the top third of the class.

Ed: What about the physical regiment? Was that tough on you?

Bill: No. I was great shape. It was tough on some other people. There were some men in my Company who were in their mid-thirties and they found it pretty tough. Since I was one of the Commanders, I took it pretty easy on them.

Ed: You say you were of the Commanders, tell me about that.

Bill: We had two platoons. Each platoon had a leader with each platoon was led by a twin brother. The training went smooth as silk with everybody graduating. Nobody dropped out, even if they wanted to. So, that was beginning of my time in the Navy.

Ed: So, you just don't drop out of the Navy.

Bill: No, you get kicked out.

Ed: What happens to the people who don't make it?

Bill: I don't know. Our Boot Camp ended as fast as it started and I went home for a two-week leave, which was a good thing. I went back with orders to report at a certain date and a certain time and I got there and there were about thirty people there. They weren't all from my Company but from the various Companies that were there. We didn't know where we were going. They put us on a small transport ship and took us to Oahu. They told us that we were to be there about two weeks and we all celebrated until we found out that we were confined to the base. We played soft-ball almost every day. Then, they finally put us on a big ship, just us thirty guys. They told us that we would be joined the next day by our shipmates. And we were. While we were waiting for the rest of the group to join us, I decided that I had better get cleaned up. I washed my hair in saltwater. That was a big mistake. The next morning, I had my head shaved because it was like grease.

Ed: What happens when you wash your hair in saltwater?

Bill: It get real gummy. We had a place where the thirty-one of us to bed down a night, on the deck, behind one of the heads. That didn't last long, because our shipmates joined us. Three thousand black CBs. It was terribly hot and where they were supposed to be sleeping made it impossible to sleep. If you rolled over, you hit the rear-end of the guy above you. That trip was unbelievable. It took sixty days. They would take us to one place and then another.

Ed: So, you were jumping around the Pacific, trying to get to Guam. Did you know that was your destination?

Bill: No. I never knew it until two days before. Actually, that is when I learned that I was going to be in the CBs (Construction Battalion) which excited me because that was something that I knew.

Ed: Prior to that time, you didn't know what you were going to do or what outfit you were in or anything.

Bill: That' right.

Ed: Did you get sea-sick the first time you went to sea?

Bill: No. While we were on Tinian, we would have time out for a ball game, every week and it would be hotter than Hades. I always had a coke, but on one particular evening, I got a beer. It was so hot that I had about four of them. By the time I got back on the Dredge, I was good for nothing. The next morning, the Chief, that was on the tug we were going to travel on, took delight in saying, "Merkel, go up to the top of that mast and install this pulley." I made it, but soon after, I was sea-sick.

Ed: So, you are joined by how many thousands of black Sea Bees?

Bill: Three thousand.

Ed: They all came aboard the ship where?

Bill: On Oahu. They got on the ship which was headed toward our destination, which we did not know at that time. We had numerous stops before as we waited for a convoy.

Ed: So. you did finally get a convoy?

Bill: We hooked up with a couple of convoys. But, every time we left one, we had to wait along time for the next on.

Ed: Is this where you ran into Rhubarb the first time?

Bill: No. That was during the first day of Boot Camp.

Ed: How was the food aboard ship?

Bill: It was good. Everyplace I went had good food.

Ed: Now, among this group of thirty or so, where some of these guys you had known for a while”

Bill: I met every one of them after Boot Camp, but we became tight friends.

Ed: So, you ended up on Guam. What is Guam like?

Bill: It was like a bunch of trees and a bunch of ships. Everyplace had building and construction going on. It ended up as a major port in the Pacific. Not far from there was Tinian. Tinian had the biggest airport in the world, built for B-29s(Bomber)

Ed: Tell me the process where you get assigned to a Dredge.

Bill: They handed me a piece of paper and said, “Boy this is where you go.” I had never heard of a CB being on a boat. You thought of them as building things and we were under water.

Ed: Under water?

Bill: That is where this comes in (showing photo). The name of the boat is the USS Tualatin. If you know anything about the state of Washington, you know about the Tualatin River.

Ed: So, the dredge is the USS Tualatin. That is a pretty big vessel.

Bill: It is about three hundred feet long.

Ed: I am looking at the photo and I see two very large stacks. It is not a self-propelled unit, except for digging. If we had to move some distance away, we were towed by a Tug boat. Those were called Spuds.

Ed: How many were on the crew of a dredge like this?

Bill: About 100 people.

Ed: So, this is the Tualatin?

Bill: Yes. It was built in Seattle and it's first jobs were near-by and all of a sudden, they were ordered to the Pacific.

Ed: So, they got towed across the Pacific?

Bill: Yes. I don't know if it was towed or put into a Dry Dock and taken across.

Ed: So, they gave you a piece of paper and told you that the Tualatin was your ship.

Bill: Yes, and believe it or not, the first person I met was the Captain. Handrand. He was a man's man. He was a super guy and he knew how to motivate people. He was probably thirty-five years old and he was a motivator

Ed: How did he motivate you?

Bill: He would watch you work and tell you how good you were doing or how lousy you were doing. He would give you suggestions on how to improve what you might be doing. It happened to be just like I always thought leadership should be. I never had a leadership position except in the ROTC in high school, where I was very active. We lived badly, on that ship for sixty days. The Captain called over a Seaman and he said, "This is Bill Merkel, out latest arrival, show him around. The first place, he took me was to my bed. We had a twenty by twenty space, private room, and three bunks. It was like heaven to me. We had our own sink for shaving and thirty paces away was a head where you could shower and so forth. It was a wonderful experience. I was so happy as I got to know people, I thought that it was exactly like being a Civilian. It was until E.H. Norman came aboard as the Captain. Everybody disliked him.

Ed: Where did Handrand go?

Bill: He was shipped off somewhere, but it wasn't in Dredging.

Ed: Did you ever have contact with him, subsequent to the war?

Bill: No and that is true of most people. Most of the people I went in with were from San Antonio. Most of them, I never saw again.

Ed: What kind of work was the dredge doing, during the early days when you first went aboard?



Bill: Digging deeper and tossing the stuff that came out of the ocean, upon the shore to make it land base. We had three finger piers in the harbor and any ship we had could go in there.

Ed: What was the weather like in Guam?

Bill: There was extra humidity there and the same way at Tinian. Tinian was a neat little island.

Ed: What about insects?

Bill: I cannot ever recall a mosquito n that dredge. One time, after the dredge sunk, the first time, I was assigned on shone excavating duty and we slept in a long well-built tent with sides and so on.

Ed: Is thin on Guam?

Bill: No. Okinawa.

Ed: Can we go back to Guam for a moment? You are basically dredging the channels and the harbor area. Are there any events that took place on Guam that stick in your mind, other than what we have talked about?

Bill: No.

Ed: A new Captain came aboard, while you were at Guam, so let's talk about the new Captain.

Bill: Ok. But before I can talk about him, I have to talk about Captain Handrand first. He was a man that I wanted to emulate. He got things done, he didn't chew people, unless they really deserved to be chewed and even then, it wasn't that severe. He just had a way with men. I was ready to go anyplace with him. I heard that he was leaving and within a few days the new Captain came aboard and many of the people who were on the dredge had worked for him in civilian life

Ed: So, a lot of the crew members came along with the dredge, when she was pulled into the war.

Bill: Yes. He called me aside and he told me that the Navy did not want him to be on deck because there had been an accident.

Ed: Tell me about the accident.

Bill: We had a big stoppage of work, because there was a large bolt in this machine that had to be taken out through the front door, because the door was probably sixty inches in diameter and three inches thick. We couldn't find a drawing. We were in touch with people in Seattle and they couldn't find anything that would help us. We knew that it was threaded and my idea was to back it off, incrementally with heat being applied and it worked. It worked so well that it fell on me. It hit the deck first and then bounced on me. I did get a headache from it and it was hard to breathe for a couple of days and I had a few scratches, but that was it as far as I was concerned. The new Captain had just come aboard and he called me aside and said, "You can't work on the deck anymore. The Navy says you can't work on the deck anymore so I am making you my Mess-man. So, that is the way we started out.

Ed: Mess-man, in other words you bring him his food, is that right?

Bill: I had a dining room about twice as large as this room, where he would have visitors.

Ed: Is this for the Officers or for the Captain?

Bill: It was for the Captain and whoever else he invited.

Ed: So, he had a good size dining area.

Bill: The job has some advantages. For instance, I could make my own ice cream and things like that.

Ed: So, how did that work out?

Bill: It didn't work out very well. I asked him about the possibility of a promotion now that I was a Mess-man and my real job was on the deck. He said, "Well it's not likely because they have put a freeze on promotions for food handling people.

Ed: What was your Rating at this point?

Bill: I do not remember when I went from Seaman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class to Seaman 1<sup>st</sup> Class. I do know that I was destined to be Seaman 1<sup>st</sup> as long as I worked for him. I decided that I would just make the best of it. He would have Thursday meetings, where I would not be serving. I failed to mention that I served the Chiefs also.

Ed: Where there any blacks aboard acting as servers?

Bill: No.

Ed: So, things did not go well between you and the Captain, but you thought you would just stick it out. How long did that go on?

Bill: For several months and during this time we got a new man on board and he had not been on the dredge but he had been on Tinian for quite some time. He suggested that we take a day off and go souvenir hunting. That was the main life of a CB.

Ed: That's what you did during your days off?

Bill: Yes, and I had never did it before. He told me to meet him on a certain day and a certain time and he would have a jeep. We met and we went about ten miles from our point on the shore and he turned into an unpaved area. There was a sign post that said, RESTRICTED. I said, "hey, aren't we breaking the law?" He told me that all of the signs were supposed to come down, because the restricted areas had been released. To make a long story short, we had a long rope to go down into a cave. He went first and he was down about six feet and bullets started flying. They shot him once in the butt and once in the arm and I had to get him out of there. He weighed about two-hundred eighty pounds and I had to get him out of there. He was conscious so he could do what I asked him to do. I knew that along the sides of that cave wall, there were places where stones stuck out. I told him that every time you see one of those let me know and you step on it and I will pull. That is the way we got him out, about an hour later.

Ed: How far down in, was he?

Bill: About six and one-half feet. So, I got him out of there. The next thing was, where could we get him treated, I took him to the air field, where the B-29s flew out of and they took care of him. The took me back to the dredge. I thought; Boy this is really going to be something. I am really going to catch it. . Nothing was said and a couple days later the Captain said, "I understand that you had an exciting afternoon. I said, "Captain, that is as mild as you could put it." He said, "I'm glad you were not hurt." I learned at that time, my co-conspirator, whose name I cannot remember, was getting a Purple Heart. And, I was congratulated by his Commander for saving his life. I really appreciated that because I had expected to catch Hell. One thing that the Commander said to me was, "You have a clean record, why aren't you at least a 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Petty Officer?" I said, "I know I have to ask." He said, "We will see

about that.” Three weeks later, the Captain got a letter saying that I was promoted to Carpenters Mate 3rd Class. But I never got recognized in the payee section until almost the day I came back home as hi,

Ed: Tell me about your friend getting shot. Who did it and why?

Bill: There were two Japanese and a woman down in the cave.

Ed: So, they were still hanging out, hiding, even after the island was secured.

Bill: Yes. And, my great fear was; what if he starts shooting again? Thankfully they didn't.

Ed: How long were you at Tinian compared to when you were on Guam.

Bill: It was a much longer period.

Ed: Ok, so Guam was just a brief starting point.

Bill: It was a brief starting point. Around the first of June that year the Tualatin was towed back to Guam, prior to being taken to Okinawa. Later on, I believe it was around the middle of June 1945; I, along with others was victim of e One of the dumbest decisions, I ever saw. They sent us, out in a terrible Typhoon, to go to Okinawa. We were in a Floating Dry Dock. It was stable unless somebody was pulling it and we got into the middle of the Typhoon and the six- inch tow cable broke. When we finally arrived, we were told that we could not enter Buckner Bay right away. We were also told that we were not very far from Formosa. I find it hard to find the words to describe what we went through during that Typhoon. That was the only time during the war that I was ever afraid. I had no control over what might happen. None of us did. It finally calmed down and we were given the clearance to going into Buckner Bay and we saw ships on the shore like they had been thrown there. It was unbelievable. That shows the power of the Lord. We were there about a week and I was given the assignment on shore which involved three men from my unit. We shared a big long tent with other guys who were not from our unit. One night I went to bed and I was asleep and for some reason I woke up and there was this long hairy thing looking into my eyes. It was a small animal similar to a muskrat. I jumped up throwing my pillow, my netting and everything else. I woke up the whole camp. It was not harmful, but it got my attention. We went back aboard the dredge for a few days and he come another Typhoon and we sunk

right where we were anchored. This happened three times. But we always landed right side up.

Ed: How do you refloat a dredge that has been sunk?

Bill: I can't remember. Another thing, I can't remember is why on a certain night, in calm weather, we were out in the middle of Buckner Bay. There all kinds of Navy ships around us and we watched a Kamikaze hit a Hospital ship (USS Comfort). It wasn't very far from us. Roosevelt died, just before that and right after that Truman became President. It was not long after that that the Atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. When we heard that, I was just sure that I would be on my way home the next week or so.

Ed: How did it make one feel to watch a Kamikaze hit a Hospital ship?

Bill: I cried. I did, I cried. Incidentally I cry now, for a lot of reasons. They claim it is because I have Parkinson's, whether that is true or not, it doesn't take much to make me cry. There was no-one aboard that ship that I knew.

Ed: How did you feel about the Japanese?

Bill: I hated them. I just missed being called to Iwo Jima.

Ed: You say, you just missed, how do you know?

Bill: I volunteered.

Ed: To do what at Iwo Jima?

Bill: To do whatever they needed.

Ed: Whatever they needed.

Bill: They were constantly using small boats with sound equipment for checking the depths. Iwo was where the war got really personal to me, because I had several buddies killed there.

Ed: These were guys you knew from San Antonio?

Bill: Yes.

Ed: You volunteered but they didn't need you.

Bill: Well, who knows what my Captain had to do with that.

Ed: That's right, you had to go through your Captain for something like that. So, you are still dealing with this Captain that you didn't get along with.

Bill: That is a mild way to put it.

Ed: Were you under that Captain for the balance of your time.in the Pacific?

Bill: Yes. I was told that I was going to be made Sea-man 3<sup>rd</sup>, but it never came to me. I don't know why, but I know it was motivated by this Officer who came aboard to tell me I was a hero for saving my buddies life.

Ed: Did they ever give you anything more than a pat on the back?

Bill: No. I can't remember the guys name but I know he was from Houston.

Ed: You were on the dredge at Okinawa until the war was over?

Bill: Yes.

Ed: So, you were there when you heard about the bombs.

Bill: Yes.

Ed: You were then when you heard that Japan had surrendered.

Bill: Yes.

Ed: How did you feel. How did everybody feel?

Bill: I think we all felt relief because we didn't want to go into Japan. We would have gone.

Ed: Did you write home and get letters from home?

Bill: Yes. All of the time. Shortly after I got to Guam, my 19<sup>th</sup> Birthday came along and my folks sent me a nice watch and the first night that I had beer, I got into the shower with it on. I stepped out of the shower, I pried the crystal off and I dried the face and put it back together and it never quit. I liked the Navy. The Navy was the one that a reputation of having big ships. I never really wanted to be on a big ship.

Ed: When you were on Okinawa, did you observe any other Kamikaze action, other than the one involving the Hospital ship?

Bill: No. We were not always in Buckner Bay, so it could have happened. I can't ever remember speaking to an Okinawan. Even after the dredge was closed down and we would eat in the big Mess Hall. I just never met one.

Ed: Where you in or near the main town on Okinawa, Naha?

Bill: I never went there.

Ed: Did you get anytime to wander around Okinawa?

Bill: No. Now, there is one good thing I can say about the Captain is that the night before the dredge sunk for the last time, there were a bunch of us up on the upper deck and not far away was the shoreline and the waves going in were unbelievably high, and several of the guys wanted to try for shore. The Captain, pulled his 45 and said "No you are not. I will be responsible for your death if you did. You are not going unless we sink." We did sink, but it was after the storm was over. That is why I left it and I still didn't have my promotion. I was sent to a little office on Guam and I did silly things like telephone connecting and whatever was needed around the office. It was ok, but it was boring. I got a letter, that I can't find, saying that I was promoted to Carpenters Mate 3<sup>rd</sup> Class, five or six months prior.

Ed: So, it finally did come through? You finally got confirmation.

Bill: Yes.

Ed: But the war was over by the time you got it.

Bill: The war was over and I didn't get any back pay.

Ed: When did you go back to the United States?

Bill: Around April 1, 1946. I sailed back on what had been the SS Manhattan, a big Cruise ship.

Ed: Where did you put back in. San Francisco?

Bill: San Francisco.

Ed: You came under the Golden Gate Bridge; how did that feel?

Bill: It was great. The first thing I had was milk. A couple of days later, I got home on a plane.

Ed: What was you plan, at that point?

Bill: Go to school. I started immediately and San Antonio had a few Junior Colleges around and I picked up a few credits. I met a beautiful girl and followed her to SMU (Southern Methodist University) because I had a Scholarship there. But the romance didn't last long.

Ed: You went into the Navy as an eighteen-year-old kid and you came out of the Navy a couple of years later. How did that experience change you as a person? Or, did it, change you?

Bill: I can't really define it; I just know that I was an adult. But I still wasn't drinking.

Ed: What about smoking?

Bill: I did in college. I had a roommate that smoked. I never learned to smoke cigarettes but I did smoke cigars.

Ed: Is there anything else about your World War II experience that you want to talk about?

Bill: One of the interesting things that happened on Tinian was that about every third month there would be a big bunch of Marines come in for R&R (Rest and Recuperation) and on one occasion I met the brother of a buddy of mine who I went to high school with. That was a good experience. Whenever I would run into somebody I knew, it was like a home-coming.

Ed: Did your unit ever have reunions?

Bill: No. I am surprised, because our high school class was very close. It was big but closely knit. When I moved back here, seven years ago, they had an Annual Luncheon for our class. There were some there.

Ed: What about reunion of guys that were on the dredge?

Bill: Never.

Ed: I will close our interview now. Thank you for the time you for your time and I want to thank you for what you and your generation did for our country.

Transcribed by:

Floyd C. Cox

San Antonio, Texas

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