

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Nimitz Education and Research Center
Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

Charles Donald Wray

The Woodlands, Texas

January 6, 2016

USS Ommaney Bay CVE-79

Sunk 1/4/1945

Mr. Misenhimer:

My name is Richard Misenhimer, today is January 6, 2016. I am interviewing Mr. Charles Donald "Don" Wray by telephone. His phone number is 281-419-9429. His address is 1481 Sawdust Road, Apt. 911, The Woodlands, Texas, 77380. 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. His daughter Donna Wagner is helping with the interview.

Don, 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 the first thing I need to do is read this agreement with the museum to you to make sure this is okay with you.

"Agreement Read"

Is that okay with you?

Mr. Wray:

Yes, that's okay with me.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What is your birthdate?

Mr. Wray:

It's October the 8th, 1921.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where were you born?

Mr. Wray:

I was born in Oskaloosa, Kansas.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Wray:

Yeah I had six, I had one brother and five sisters.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was your brother in World War II?

Mr. Wray:

Yeah, he was in the Army. He got drafted.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Is he older or younger than you?

Mr. Wray:

He was older than me, two years. He passed away several years ago.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What were your mother's and father's first names?

Mr. Wray:

My father's name was Frank and my mother's name was Florence.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you grew up during the depression, how did the depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Wray:

Well it was pretty rough.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What all happened?

Mr. Wray:

You know there was seven of us children and daddy had a hard time making enough money to pay the rent and buy us groceries.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was your father able to keep working?

Mr. Wray:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what did he do?

Mr. Wray:

At that time he did various jobs and I don't remember.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you all have a garden?

Mr. Wray:

No, we always lived in a town, in the city.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where did you go to high school?

Mr. Wray:

I went to Topeka High School in Topeka, Kansas.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what year did you finish there?

Mr. Wray:

In year of 1939.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what did you do when you finished high school?

Mr. Wray:

Well I finally ended up working for a company called Burroughs Corporation and I ended up working for Burroughs in Kansas City.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what kind of company was Burroughs? What did they do?

Mr. Wray:

Well at that time Burroughs was building adding machines and accounting machines.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what did you do for them?

Mr. Wray:

Why I ended up being a salesman for them.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when did you go into the service?

Mr. Wray:

Burrows had transferred me to Kansas City and that was the time that the Navy was offering what they called their V-5 program, which enabled the people to..., high school students to enlist in V-5 and become pilots. And I enlisted.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what date did you enlist?

Mr. Wray:

Well I don't remember the exact date but I know it was in 1942.

Mr. Misenhimer:

In the summer or what time of year?

Mr. Wray:

That I don't remember.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you went in where did you go for your first training?

Mr. Wray:

Actually on the V-5 program the Navy sent me back home to Topeka and I was sent out to Washburn College for training. And I flew out of Topeka airbase, flew Luscombe Silvaire, which was a single-engine plane and I qualified and got a civilian license. This is a commercial. Then the Navy called me in eventually and sent me out to St. Mary's College outside of Oakland, California for preflight training.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what all did you do there?

Mr. Wray:

I completed the preflight training then they sent me to Long Beach. They sent me to Long Beach, California to take E Base training. And after I completed the E Base training the Navy

sent me to Corpus Christi to take advanced training. Which I did and was commissioned in August of 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now in that E Base training, what all did you do there?

Mr. Wray:

I flew a, it was a twin-wing yellow Peril, you know. And I forget the manufacturer's name, one was Stearman and I forget the other one. But there was two types of yellow Peril that I did in E Base training. Flew various training exercises.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you came to Corpus what kind of training did you have there?

Mr. Wray:

I flew a, I forget what, it was a Grumman, I forget what they called the model of the plane. You know it was a single-engine plane, with a pilot and student. I flew various different training exercises up in the air, you know.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was that the SNJ?

Mr. Wray:

I don't remember?

Mr. Misenhimer:

It was a single-engine?

Mr. Wray:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did it have retractable landing gear?

Mr. Wray:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was that training?

Mr. Wray:

Well it was good, I enjoyed it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then you were commissioned in August of '43?

Mr. Wray:

Yeah, in August of '43.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And then what happened?

Mr. Wray:

After that I was commissioned and I was sent to Opa-locka, Florida which I flew a Brewster Buffalo in training down there and various gunnery missions and so forth, field carrier landings and so forth.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was it to do the first carrier landing?

Mr. Wray:

Well the carrier landings down there were kind of rough, the fact is we had to fly over a power line and cut the engines to get down close enough to the ground to come around the circle so the LSO, the landing signal officer would pick us up. At that time I cracked up a Brewster Buffalo, I hit the ground when I put the throttle back on, it didn't catch and I was grounded for several days while they checked. The Navy tracked my training exercises back to Corpus Christi and so forth and they finally released me and let me fly again.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And then what happened? Then where did you go from there?

Mr. Wray:

From there I went to Great Lakes and we checked out at the Great Lakes Naval Air Station, we checked out on the aircraft carrier out there on the lake.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything in particular happen there?

Mr. Wray:

No, I qualified.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then where did you go?

Mr. Wray:

That's when I went back to the West Coast and joined my squadron. I had orders from there to go and join VC-75, the composite squadron. But I don't remember where it was. I think, vaguely I think it was in Long Beach.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what did you do there?

Mr. Wray:

I joined a squadron and well of course we flew various gunnery positions and so forth, you know exercises.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what kind of plane did you fly there?

Mr. Wray:

I was flying the FM2, which is the Wildcat, the F4F. They had modified it considerably by taking the armor plate off of it so that they could base it out on a little escort carrier.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was it to fly that airplane?

Mr. Wray:

It was fine. No problem.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And then what happened?

Mr. Wray:

Then after that the squadron was on various assignments on the West Coast at different airbases. We finally were put aboard a ship and sent out to Kaneohe out in Hawaii, which is on the other side of the Hawaiian Island from Pearl Harbor. And from there, that's when we were finally sent out to meet the Ommaney Bay.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was the number on the Ommaney Bay?

Mr. Wray:

CVE-79

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Wray:

Well from the Ommaney Bay then we were sent out to the fleet.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where did you go?

Mr. Wray:

I don't really remember, I know that we went out and we flew down in the Solomon Islands for awhile. And we eventually ended up in Kincaid's fleet, the Ommaney Bay did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's the Seventh fleet. About when did you arrive there?

Mr. Wray:

No, I don't remember.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was the first thing you did when you got with that fleet?

Mr. Wray:

Well the only thing I remember in Kincaid's fleet, we took the troops up to Palau and landed them on that island. That's the only thing I remember, is the escort moving. See the escort carriers on the fleet, we would go in earlier and we had a field day you know going out and

shooting at anything that moved or anything that we thought was suspicious because we were at war with the Japanese.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was your first combat mission?

Mr. Wray:

I don't remember.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was it there at Palau?

Mr. Wray:

No down on the..., when we were in the Solomon Islands we supported the troops on Guadalcanal and several other places.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever have any dogfights with Japanese planes?

Mr. Wray:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You never did shoot down any Japanese planes?

Mr. Wray:

Well when we took the troops up to Mindoro, Tom Wilson and I shot down a twin-engine Japanese, but she hit the water and we don't know what happened to her.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What are some other things that happened?

Mr. Wray:

I was in the battle of Leyte Gulf.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, tell me about that.

Mr. Wray:

We took the troops, let's see the battle of Leyte Gulf. We had landed the troops on Leyte and we had taken the troops up to Mindoro, south of Mindoro Island and through the Sulu Sea. And we were flying missions, I don't remember but the Japanese cruisers come through the Surigao Straits and shot the St. Louis and the Gambier Bay, which was two of the Jeeps that were in this sixth group that I was in with the Ommaney Bay. They shot them out of the water so they sent four of us torpedo planes and four fighters. We went over and sank the cruiser.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now were you in Taffy 3?

Mr. Wray:

I was in Kincaid's.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What else happened?

Donna Wagner:

What about your ship when it was sunk?

Mr. Wray:

Oh well, when we were taking the troops to MacArthur, taking the troops up through the Sulu Sea to Lingayen Gulf, north of Manilla and that's when the kamikaze hit the Ommaney Bay. When it hit the Ommaney Bay it broke the water main and the ship was burning up. So I jumped off the ship when they told us to abandon ship and I was picked up by the destroyer Patterson. And that night I was transferred to the New Mexico and I stayed on the Battleship New Mexico up to the Lingayen Gulf.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What was it like to be hit by that kamikaze?

Mr. Wray:

Well I had been out on a flight and at the time when I came back on deck with the flight, that I was on, we were down in the wardroom getting something to eat when the kamikaze hit. So we went aft from the wardroom, went aft and crawled across the hangar deck to a sponson and

stayed out on the sponson till they yelled down from the hangar deck and told us to abandon ship.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where on your ship did this kamikaze hit?

Mr. Wray:

I'm not real sure but I know that from everything that I know that it hit about mid-ship, hit the flight wardroom you know and killed a lot of our guys. My flight instructor Tom Wilson was up there and he got killed.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How about the commanding officer and those, were they hurt?

Mr. Wray:

You talking about the ship or the squadron?

Mr. Misenhimer:

The ship.

Mr. Wray:

The commanding officer of the ship I think was Young on the Ommaney Bay.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How about your squadron, were any people from your squadron hurt or killed?

Mr. Wray:

Yeah, it hit the ready room and all the people in the ready room were killed.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How many people did your squadron loose?

Donna Wagner:

Do you know how many people in your squadron?

Mr. Wray:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Several though?

Mr. Wray:

There's a memorial out in San Diego in the Veteran's Cemetery to the USS Ommaney Bay and it lists all the crewmen on the ship that got killed. And it lists all the people from VC-75 that got killed. And a lot of them I recognize and a lot of them I don't. Because they might have been crewmen that were assigned to the squadron. Did that answer your question?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes sir. When you were picked up out of the water what happened then?

Mr. Wray:

On the Patterson that night they laid a plank aboard the Battleship New Mexico and transferred us from the Patterson over to the New Mex because the Patterson didn't have food and every accommodation to take all the survivors that they had picked up. But the New Mex they could take us. food you know and a place to sleep.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And how long were you on the New Mexico?

Mr. Wray:

I don't remember I was up..., I was on the New Mex up through the battle of Lingayen Gulf. She got hit by a kamikaze up there in Lingayen Gulf and some of our guys from the Ommaney Bay that were assigned a duty on the battleship got killed at that time. But I think the Battleship the New Mexico, I think the officers of the New Mexico, the kamikaze I think hit up near the tower. Did that answer your question?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes sir, it does. And you were on the New Mexico when she was hit by this kamikaze, right?

Donna Wagner:

Yep.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, okay.

Mr. Wray:

I was down on the deck, fact is I crawled underneath the gun mount when the kamikaze was coming in because I wanted to get out of the way. But she didn't hit the gun mount, if she had hit the gun mount I probably wouldn't be here talking to you.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Wray:

Oh after the New Mex, when the battle was..., had the troops aboard up there in Lingayen Gulf then I was transferred to a LST, landing ship tank. Which was going from Lingayen Gulf down to Leyte and I was put on board that to get taken down to Leyte Gulf. And then I was put on the island of Leyte as a survivor. Ommaney Bay had set up a place there to register all of us in. And from putting us on the island, finally they had a ship that was going back to United States. And I was put on this ship, the Alcoe Polaris, and transported back to California to San Francisco.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And about when would that have been?

Mr. Wray:

You know I don't remember.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the Battle of Leyte Gulf was in October of '44 and Lingayen Gulf was in January of '45.

Donna Wagner:

Okay, yeah that's right his ship was hit the day I was born. And I was born January 4, 1945.

Mr. Wray:

Yeah. That's when the ship, the Americans torpedoed the Ommaney Bay in the Sulu Sea there to get her out of the fleet, cause she was dead in the water. That's after I had, I was on the destroyer Patterson I didn't see that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So you came home sometime in early 1945 then?

Mr. Wray:

I came home sometime in '45, I don't remember exactly.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when you got back to the U.S. then what happened?

Mr. Wray:

I had thirty days survivor leave and then the Navy sent me down to Daytona Beach Naval Air Station as an instructor.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tell me about that.

Mr. Wray:

You know I don't remember exactly.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What kind of plane were you instructing in?

Mr. Wray:

They had Wildcats down there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Wray:

Well after taking several groups through the training exercise I was told by the Navy to take another group up to Great Lakes. This is a group that I was going back to the fleet with. To go up to the Great Lakes and check them out on the carrier on the Great Lakes and that's when the war was declared over.

Mr. Misenhimer:

This is when Japan quit in August of '45?

Mr. Wray:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you heard about Japan surrendering did you have any kind of a celebration?

Mr. Wray:

I don't remember what was going on. I was married at the time, my wife was up there with my little daughter Donna who you are talking to here. I was married when the Navy sent me to Opa-locka. My wife and I were married in Miami.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So then what happened after the war got over?

Mr. Wray:

Okay the Navy discharged me and I went back to Kansas City and went to work for Burroughs. And after I worked for Burroughs for awhile, Burroughs transferred me to Detroit and I went and joined the Naval Reserves out at Field Grosse Point. And out there we were flying Corsairs, the F4U, or we were flying the F6F, the Hellcat. I was in the Navy there as a reserve and Burroughs transferred me to Washington, D.C. I was going to join the squadron over at Anacostia Naval Air Station in Washington, D.C. but they had transferred the squadron out to Andrews Air Force Base and they didn't have any openings so I was just inactive reserves. And back in 1959, around that time, the Navy finally caught up with me and discharged me. Again.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What date were you discharged the first time?

Mr. Wray:

I don't have that with me right now. I'd have to look it up.

Mr. Misenhimer:

In 1946?

Mr. Wray:

Probably about that time, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you recall from your time during World War II?

Mr. Wray:

Not that I can think of right now.

Donna Wagner:

What about the Admiral that invited you for ice cream, remember the Admiral that invited you down for ice cream?

Mr. Wray:

Donna was talking about when we were put on the Ommaney Bay, we were put on a rest stop during the fighting on Ponam Island. And another officer, Air officer and I were pretty well lit on drinking beer and we commandeered a ship. Went down to the dock to get a boat to take us back to the Ommaney Bay and at that time we were trying to commandeer the Captain's yacht. And the Captain Young, he eventually sent, when we got back to the ship, he wanted us to come up and he had sent a notice down, I thought I was in deep, deep trouble. But he wanted us to come up and have some ice cream with him. *(laughter)* Here I thought real good about I had some ice cream with the Captain and went back to my squadron. That was one of those episodes that happened during, you know. I remember vividly.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what would you consider your most frightening time during World War II?

Mr. Wray:

Well that's kind of hard to say. You know you're flying around and sometimes when they're shooting at you, you could see the tracer bullets go past you. But that wasn't what was worrying you all the time that you were fighting, was because it was all those other bullets that you couldn't see. So the frightening part of the war was just like any other time when you're fighting with people shooting at you.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the morale in your squadron?

Mr. Wray:

Oh real good, we were fighting. Real good. All the guys were doing their duty.

Whatever they told us to do we went and did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Let me go back and ask a question. On December 7, '41 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, do you recall hearing about that?

Mr. Wray:

Oh yeah. Yeah I was, yeah the attack on Pearl Harbor, yeah. Heard that through the radio.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where were you when you heard it?

Mr. Wray:

Let's see. I don't really remember exactly where I was physically, whether it was in Topeka or whether it was in Kansas City.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you heard that, how did you think that would affect you?

Mr. Wray:

Well of course you know I thought maybe I would get drafted.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you think of the officers you had over you?

Mr. Wray:

On the ship? They were great. We were all doing our duty.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what was the highest rank you got to?

Mr. Wray:

I ended up discharged as a full Lieutenant.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you were in the Reserves, did you have to go to meetings?

Mr. Wray:

Oh yeah. Yeah we had meetings and in the Reserves we always had flights. You know in the Reserves to earn your Reserve pay once a month you had to log so many hours in the air. So we

all flew once a month, it was something, if nothing else take a plane up and just cruise around for an hour or so. And land it back on the deck, at least we were flying see and we got credit for that hours in the air. That's how we earned our money, Reserve pay.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you get home from World War II with any souvenirs?

Mr. Wray:

No. But when my ship was sunk I lost everything I had. You know, all my personal things were in the locker where we lived and I lost everything. I had nothing except the clothes on my back.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever see any USO shows anywhere?

Mr. Wray:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross?

Mr. Wray:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever hear Tokyo Rose on the radio?

Mr. Wray:

No (*laughter*).

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you hear of her?

Donna Wagner:

Did you know who Tokyo Rose was?

Mr. Wray:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you crossed the equator, did you have any kind of a ceremony?

Mr. Wray:

Uh yeah, let's see what'd we do? I forget what they did. When you are aboard a ship across the equator, they have a little ceremony that they put you through you know. But I don't remember specifically what it was.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now April the 12th of 1945 President Roosevelt died, did you all hear about that?

Mr. Wray:

I don't remember, no

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when Germany surrendered in May of '45 did you hear about that?

Mr. Wray:

Well of course we were still fighting when they surrendered, we were still fighting the Japanese.

Donna Wagner:

But you heard about it?

Mr. Wray:

I don't remember whether the ship had heard about it and passed it on down the line to us guys, I have no idea, I don't remember. Probably did, I just don't remember.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you recall about World War II?

Mr. Wray:

Not specifically.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you got out in 1946, did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life?

Mr. Wray:

No. I just went back to my usual company, Burroughs. The Burroughs' manager in Kansas City when I went into the Navy, he sent me letters all the time when I was in the service as to what

was going on with the branch, branch of Burroughs. He was real good, real nice and Mr. DuBois kept us notified all the time. He welcomed us back, put us to work just as if we came back the next day.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you got out did you use your G.I. Bill for anything?

Mr. Wray:

I only used it once for, I bought a house out in Bakersfield, California and I used the G.I. Bill for that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you had any reunions of your squadron?

Mr. Wray:

No, the squadron had kept reunions up till about oh several years ago when it finally disbanded. But it was a ship squadron you know and the VC-75. I corresponded by e-mail to the person that was keeping me notified as to what was going on with the reunions. And he passed away several years ago and so I've lost, they disbanded it. But they don't have a reunion anymore.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you go to any of the reunions?

Mr. Wray:

No, no.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you been on the Honor Flight to Washington, D.C.?

Mr. Wray:

No, there's one that I had signed up for an Honor Flight with the group up in Conroe, but my wife, I was a caregiver and my wife was very, very ill and so I had to cancel that. Now here in Houston where I live they have an Honor Flight going back to D.C. but I think they're waiting now till March or April to schedule it, but I'm on the list. To go back to see the Memorial and so forth. I'm anxious to go because I'd like to see D.C. once before, I lived there for so many years.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I've talked to several people that have been and all of them speak very highly of the Honor Flight.

Donna Wagner:

My son-in-law, my daughter's husband has signed up my dad for the Honor Flight.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh good, good. I hope he can make it.

Donna Wagner:

I think so, but they're waiting I think till spring till the weather gets better for the Honor Flight.

They're waiting till the weather gets a little bit better, so that they can take the veterans.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well Don, have you thought of anything else from your time in the service?

Mr. Wray:

I can't think of anything right at the present.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well Don, I want to thank you again for your time today and thank you for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Wray:

Okay, thank you very much Richard.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, we'll keep in contact.

Mr. Wray:

Sorry I can't hear you, but she hears you real good. *(laughter)*

(End of Interview)

Transcribed by:
Gayle Misenhimer
Harlingen, Texas
March 4, 2016

Oral History by:
Richard Misenhimer
P.O. Box 3453
Alice, Texas 78333
Home: (361) 664-4071
Cell: (361) 701-5848