

The National Museum of the Pacific War
(Admiral Nimitz Museum)

Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with
Elwyn Edward Becker
8646288
Aviation Radioman 2c (CA)
SV-V6 USNR

2 October '43
to
22 April '46

Interview by
John B. Tombaugh and Peg Van Meter
June 3, 2005

Elwyn Edward Becker
8646288
Aviation Radio Man 2c (CA)
SV-V6 USNR

Medals Earned:
American Area Campaign Medal
Victory Medal
Good Conduct
Ruptured Duck
Air Crewman wings but no battle stars.

Original Interview
by
John B. Tombaugh and Peg Van Meter

My name is John Tombaugh and Peg Van Meter and I are interviewing this gentleman on June 3, 2005.

Mr. Tombaugh

Would you please state your name and address?

Mr. Becker

Elwyn Edward Becker, 103 North Perry St., Fulton, Indiana.

Mr. Tombaugh

What were your parents names and where were they born?

Mr. Becker

Ed and Hazel Freed Becker. My father was born in Fulton, Indiana and my mother in Fairbury, Illinois.

Mr. Tombaugh

Where did you go to school?

Mr. Becker

The first six years I went to six different schools then after sixth grade I went to Woodrow School in Fulton County, Indiana. I then went to high school at Rochester High School, Rochester, Indiana and graduated in 1943.

Mr. Tombaugh

When you got out of high school what did you do?

Mr. Becker

I worked on a farm for Carl Newcomb as a farm hand.

Mr. Tombaugh

When did you enter the military?

Mr. Becker

I was drafted on October 2, 1943.

Mr. Tombaugh

Where did you have your basic training?

Mr. Becker

Boot Camp was at Great Lakes Naval Training Station at Great Lakes, Illinois.

Mr. Tombaugh

You were drafted into the Navy?

Mr. Becker

Like I said, it was called selective volunteers.

Mr. Tombaugh

What were the conditions like at the base?

Mr. Becker

It was pretty cold; I was there until December. I had just come off the farm as a farm hand and the Navy was easy work for me. We had to get up at 5 a.m. in the morning which was still dark and do calisthenics. It never bothered me but some of the older guys had problems. Then we drilled and the fellow that marched in front of me was a southern kid and he just wasn't quite all there; he a nice guy. We would be marching and they would say to the rear march and he didn't know how to do it and would turn around and hit me in the head with his rifle. He would get in behind me and we wore slippers over our shoes and he was always pulling mine off. He was never in cadence. I never got mad at him as he was a pretty good kid. It went on for a month or so and was funny. He didn't know his right from his left and things like that.

The Lake Michigan was frozen over and we were in class a lot.

Mr. Tombaugh

What was the food like?

Mr. Becker

The food was great because we were the last squad in the mess hall, a kid by the name of Marvin Lujack, we were always together, and he knew my Aunt Emma.

He said: "Let's go in for seconds."

I said: "Okay."

He never put any weight but I put 15 pounds on in twelve weeks. We really had delicious food. There is one thing they always had and that was lemon pie and I wouldn't eat it before but I got so I liked lemon pie.

Our Chief was real easy on us. He only got after us a time or two for discipline.

One Saturday morning they got us in formation to walk us three miles to the Great Lakes Football Field. When we got there Notre Dame was undefeated for the season and this was the last season game and they were playing Great Lakes. Great Lakes had a lot of pro players. Johnny Blue Jack was the quarterback for Notre Dame. I was a great Notre Dame fan back then because Purdue and Indiana didn't have much. I was the only sailor that was rooting for Notre Dame. Notre Dame got ahead 14 to 12 with less than a minute to go so they kicked off to Great Lakes and Great Lakes started their drive to the goal line and they were about 50 yards out and the guy went back to pass and the two linemen of Notre Dame just missed him. He threw the ball and we all looked down to the goal line and there was a Great Lakes guy wide open and they beat Notre Dame 19 to 14. That was the only game that Notre Dame lost that year and they were national champions. That was the first time I had ever seen a football game and boy that was a thrill.

Mr. Tombaugh

You made a lot of friends in boot camp. Have you kept in touch with them?

Mr. Becker

No.

Mr. Tombaugh

When did you graduate from basic?

Mr. Becker

I believe it was December 1, 1943. I came home for ten days then back to Great Lakes for assignment. I was interviewed and the man said: "What do you want to do?"

I said: "I would like to fly."

He said: "Would you like to be a radio man."

I said: "I know nothing about radio's, I took typing in high school." I found out then that a radio man had to type.

Mr. Tombaugh

Where did you go next?

Mr. Becker

To Memphis, Tennessee for radio school. Millington was where the school was at and they had issued us long underwear while we were stationed at Great Lakes. I wore them down at Millington and when we would go into our classes they were completely full and you would get hot and sweaty. Then we would go outside and get chilly so I wound up with scarlet fever from January 9 until February 1. I was in sick-bay at U.S. Navy Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. That set me back to another class.

We had skeet shooting and learned morse code. I had a problem with that as I cannot carry a tune. You would see these guys typing and after the morse code stopped they would still type for 10 to 20 seconds longer. Sometimes you had five letter blocks as codes, but I had to pick out each individual letter. I still don't know how I ever passed it.

They also put the shotguns in a turret and then throw the target out to the side. I got pretty good at that I think I shot every one of them.

We did a lot of marching also. We learned Semaphore, blinkers, and the set-up on the inside the fuselage of the plane. We had to learn all of that though we never flew any down at school.

Somebody down there, some politician, made everybody buy a raincoat, it wasn't rubber, it was some kind of fabric and every sailor had to have a raincoat. Everybody paid for that raincoat. I never used it.

We played a lot of softball and ran a lot. We did a lot of calisthenics. I was there on D Day. I remember it was raining and we were marching from class back to the barracks and I picked up a paper and read all about D Day.

Mr. Tombaugh

Where were you on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Becker

I was sitting at home at Rochester, IN. south on SR 25 about 5 miles and trying to figure out where Pearl Harbor was but didn't find out until the next day.

Mr. Tombaugh

What was your feeling of the United States going into the war at that time?

Mr. Becker

I was young and didn't think to much about it, but knew eventually that I would have to go into service and defend this country.

Mr. Tombaugh

After finishing schooling did you get a furlough?

Mr. Becker

No. We got on a troop train to Purcell, Oklahoma to gunnery school and spent my 19th birthday on the troop train. It was hot and you stopped at every little town.

Mr. Tombaugh

Do you remember the ladies that would come out to the train and take your letters to mail them and have donuts?

Mr. Becker

Yes. We got to Purcell, Oklahoma for gunnery school and our physical education officer was a long distance runner. July and August in Oklahoma, boy was it hot ! Every morning about 10 o'clock we would run for three miles. Everybody made it. Then we would go out and do calisthenics and you put your hand down in that old red clay. The barracks didn't have air conditioning we were young and didn't have it at home. It was dry and everything was burned up.

We learned to strip down and put back together a 30 cal. machine gun.

The following taken from the files of John B. Tombaugh:

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Machine Guns
M1919A4 .30 cal. air-cooled machine
gun, 45 lb weight
M1919A6 .30 cal. 32 lb weight
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continued:

They had a target going around on a track and we were back on a stationary platform as the target came around the instructor had me all lined up with twin .30's. Here came the target and I pulled the trigger and the bullets were over the target. I was right on the target but real high but hit it the next time.

I was there for two month's until September. I then went on a troop train to De Land, Florida. We did stop at one place where the people were out having a picnic and they gave us their food and drink. It was very hot and that generous offer gave a home sick boy

a real treat. I'll never forget those wonderful people. I went to De Land, Florida for flight school SBD Dive Bomber, we started flying on the 22nd of September, 1944. The pilot was from Michigan.

On the 30th of September we started dive bombing, we would go up to 10,000' and pull out about 2,000'. They had a small cabin motor boat on the lake and he would zigzag on the lake. We had a small bomb and the pilot would try for that boat, never knew if we hit him as I couldn't see where the bomb went. The pilot was there for a month and the 28th of October, he got drunk on liberty and put his fist through a plate glass window. For that action he cut his fingers and they had to skin graft so they put his hand in behind his back. I went over to see him and he had to be in a lot of pain, I don't know how long he was there as I never saw him again because of his accident, my pilot was then the Squadron Commander.

The following is taken from the files of John B. Tombaugh:

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SBD Dauntless two seat Dive Bomber L.W.  
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Power :One Pratt and Whitney R-1820  
radial piston engine.  
HP :1,200 hp.  
Speed :252 mph at 13,800'  
Ceiling :24,300  
Range :1,115 miles w/1,000 lb bomb  
Wing Span :41' 6"  
Length :33'  
Height :12' 11"  
Weight :6,533 Empty, 10,700 full  
Armament :Two .5 and two .3 m.g.s  
Retractable Landing Gear  
Tail dragger w/ tail hook for landing on  
carrier deck.  
Builder :Douglas Aircraft Co., El  
Segundo, California and Tulsa,  
Oklahoma.  
5,936 SBD's were built.  
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Mr. Tombaugh

When did you graduate from there?

Mr. Becker

I graduated on November 19, 1944.

Mr. Tombaugh

Did you come home on leave?

Mr. Becker

I flew from Miami, Florida to Indianapolis, Indiana. I was home

for two weeks and my high school sweetheart and I saw a lot of friends while I was home.

Mr. Tombaugh

Where did you go next?

Mr. Becker

To Norfolk, Virginia on December 1, 1944, this was for reassignment and my first job was packing groceries at the commissary, finally they sent me to Cape May, New Jersey. I remember New Year's Day as it was bitterly cold and snowing.

We were being checked out on a new plane called the Curtiss 2B2C Helldiver. I was checked out in one but never flew in one.

The following is taken from the files of John B. Tombaugh:

SB2C Helldiver two seat Dive bomber L.W.

Power :One Wright R-2600-20 radial
 piston engine.
HP :1,600 ho.
Speed :290 max
Ceiling :27,600'
Range :1,324
Wing Span :49'9"
Length :36'8"
Height :13'2"
Weight :10,589 E/16,287 F
Armament :two 20mm cannons; two .30 cal.
 mgs.
Bomb load :up to 1,000 lbs internal an
 1,000 lbs external.
Retractable Landing Gear
Tail Dragger
3,180 of these were built over the years.

You couldn't fly during January but one plane went up and came down with his gas line frozen and he had to make a dead stick landing to end of the runway, but everybody was all right.

On January 17th we went up for radar hopping. Now radar then looked like a thermometer and off to the side was a little white line and as you moved toward the object the line would move down. The first time the pilot lined up with a ship I couldn't see it, but the second time I did okay, it was really hard on your eyes.

On January 25th I was at Key West, Florida, I wrote a letter home and said I was glad to be away from the bitter cold up north.

On February 1st, 1945 eight sailors (air crewmen) traveled by train from Cape May, New Jersey to Miami, Florida. We then caught

and gunnery practice. We also flew coverage for the bombed out CV 13 USS Franklin on 24 April, 1945. During one of the flights over the ocean I looked out the waist hatch and saw the end of a rainbow.

I remember when President Franklin DD. Roosevelt died. I was at the Key West Naval Air Station standing on the dock, probably home sick, and there was not much activity. My buddy, Roy, came out and told me of Roosevelt's passing. There was not much in the way of conversation that evening.

On May 25th, 1945 the entire VPB 204 Squadron was transferred to Coco Solo Naval Air Base, Colon, Panama Canal Zone which is located on the east Isthmus side of the Canal.

One of our long flights was 7 hours and non-stop over the water to the Galapagos Islands, Archipelago, DeColon. The Charles Darwin research station was on Isla Cruz and located at 0 degrees longitude and 90 degrees latitude. The naval air station was isolated from all the natives. The sailors were all alone.

Here the nights were cold and the days hot, a lot better than at the Canal Zone.

I remember one time we flew in to this village and the villagers came out to the plane in long dugout canoes to get us as the plane was not outfitted with landing gear nor was there any mooring buoys to tie down the plane to.

The people were glad to see us, all smiling. We delivered some supplies to them. The native men wore a garment which was simply something wrapped around their waist.

Located up on a steep hill was a long row of shacks with no paints, only weather-beaten boards. I don't know how those people lived. So much disease, their life span was possibly only into their 30's.

On VJ Day, August 14, 1945, we were at Porteo Costello, located in the northern part of South America. This was 7 hours from the Canal Zone and on our way back the first Radioman came back to the galley where I was and told me the war was over.

I didn't realize it at the time that it would be 8 months before I could get out of the Navy and back into civilian life. If I had enlisted in October of 1943 for a 4 year hitch then I would have not been able to get out until Oct. of 1947.

When we returned to the Coco Solo Naval Air Station everybody was in bed and the ramp was deserted with the exception of the mooring crew. As such there was no celebrating and we simply tied down the plane and went to our bunks with the joyous news of the end of the war in our hearts and that we soon would be back home for good.

In March of 1946 my crew was assigned duty to Bermuda. We flew from the Panama Canal through the Bermuda Triangle. We had some problems with our radar about one hundred miles out but arrived at the Naval Air Base with out any problems.

We were stationed there for a month. This is a British controlled island and the British speaking people there were very friendly.

We flew over Cuba several times but never did land at "Gitmo" (Guantanamo Bay), Cuba; I would have liked to stop there just to say I was there and to see the conditions in 1944 to 1946 at the base.

One thing I regret is I never took a ride through the Canal after the war was over. I was just not really interested in that until I returned home and saw a program on TV about the building of the canal.

One day after the war was over two of my buddies and I went for a ride on the shortest railroad in the world which carried us to Panama City which is located in west side of the Isthmus.

After the war was over we didn't do to much, just went out to the Galapagos Islands and stayed for a month at a time for three or four trips.

One time we had a single engine abandon ship drill.

Mr. Tombaugh

How was the fishing down there?

Mr. Becker

We caught mackerels and had a fish fry that night.

Mr. Tombaugh

Did you have a camera back then?

Mr. Becker

No, my buddy is the one that took all the pictures.

We had some training exercises and war games.

On December 15 I had a leave. To get from the Canal Zone to New Orleans, Louisiana we had to take a ship which took four days. That was the only time while I was in the Navy I was ever on a ship. The captain had us painting. I took the train into Logansport, Indiana and then hitchhiked home.

When I went back I caught a NATS plane back.
Mr. Tombaugh

When did you get out of the service?

Mr. Becker

April 22, 1946 I was in 8 months after the war was over.

Mr. Tombaugh

Did you see any of the USO shows?

Mr. Becker

One time we picked up the Tommy Tucker Band. That was the only one that I remember.

Mr. Tombaugh

What was your wife's name?

Mr. Becker

Mary Powell, we were married on February 9, 1958 and she died on April 9, 2002.

Mr. Tombaugh

Do you have children?

Mr. Becker

Yes, Penny and Linda.

Mr. Tombaugh

What would you tell the young people today?

Mr. Becker

I was proud to service my country. I wish all Americans would respect both the flag and the National Anthem (Especially the younger generations). There was a lot of suffering and blood shed during the war years. I get teary eyed every time I see the flag at special events and think about those Americans that fought and shed their blood and died for this country. More veterans from World War II are starting to tell their story.

-END-

7 hours