

**ADMIRAL NIMITZ NATIONAL MUSEUM  
OF THE PACIFIC WAR  
Fredericksburg, Texas**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**ERNEST WINGEN**

**NAVY SEABEES**

**Oral Interview**

**October 19, 2001**

**ORAL INTERVIEW  
ERNEST WINGEN  
NAVY SEABEES**

My name is Rick Pratt. Today is October 19, 2001. I am interviewing Ernest Wingen. This interview is taking place in the Woodfield Suites, San Antonio, Texas. The interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific Wars Center for War Studies for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

**Mr. Pratt:** Mr. Wingen, thank you very much for taking time to relate the experiences you underwent during World War II. To begin with, when and where were you born?

**Mr. Wingen:** I was born in 1923 in Salem, South Dakota.

**Mr. Pratt:** Who were your parents?

**Mr. Wingen:** My dad was Patrick and my mother was Sophie. He was a plumber and heater and thrash person. He had thrashing machines. My mother was a florist. She had greenhouses and gardens.

**Mr. Pratt:** Did you have any brothers and sisters?

**Mr. Wingen:** I had two brothers and one sister, all older than me. I am the baby in the family.

**Mr. Pratt:** What were their names?

**Mr. Wingen:** My sister was Patricia. My oldest brother was Joseph and the second was Michael.

**Mr. Pratt:** Where did you go to school?

**Mr. Wingen:** I went to school at St. Mary's Grade and High School in Salem, South Dakota. Prior to World War II, I started at South Dakota State College in Brookings. I quit college and went into the service for three years. Then I returned to college after the war to get my degree and a Masters.

**Mr. Pratt:** So where did you enter the Military?

**Mr. Wingen:** In Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I went down to the recruiting station.

**Mr. Pratt:** When was that?

**Mr. Wingen:** January, 1943. My buddy and I had been to college. We would walk up and down the street and people would look at us like draft dodgers. We felt kind of out of place. We were patriotic guys and were taking ROTC in college. Finally, we decided to go into the service. So I went up and had a physical to see if I was ok.

And I was except I was color-blind. I knew I would never get into the Navy being color-blind. So the doctor gave me the color-blind chart and told me that is what they had at Sioux Falls

and to just memorize the pages and I would be ok. Which I did; and I was. So I got into the Navy. Then I was sent to Farragat, Idaho to Boot Camp. They had the color chart up on the wall. I couldn't tell the colors. My buddy, Dick Parker, and I had taken our aptitude tests. He went on the Officers' Candidate School and became an officer in the Navy. And I got put in the Seabees. I was happy about it. We were by far the best outfit in the service and I really enjoyed it. It was where I belonged.

**Mr. Pratt:** Had you done much construction before?

**Mr. Wingen:** I had worked on farms. With machinery, with the thrashers with my dad.

**Mr. Pratt:** What kind of training did they give you?

**Mr. Wingen:** When we got to Camp Perry, Virginia, we formed the 93<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. We were commissioned at Camp Perry. I had requested heavy equipment. I ran into an operator, by the name of Duward Bedford, from Mabank, Texas. He was a prime time operator. I became an oiler for him and he taught me about the machine and how to operate the machine. Later on I was able to get my own machine.

**Mr. Pratt:** Sounds like you were an apprentice under him.

**Mr. Wingen:** That's right.

**Mr. Pratt:** But you already knew a little bit about the machinery ....

**Mr. Wingen:** Everybody has their aptitudes and I had a mechanical aptitude.

**Mr. Pratt:** Then you were assigned to the 93<sup>rd</sup> Battalion in Camp Perry, Virginia. About when was this?

**Mr. Wingen:** That was April, 1943.

**Mr. Pratt:** You trained to be a machine operator.

**Mr. Wingen:** Yes, shovels and cranes and back hoes and that type of machinery.

**Mr. Pratt:** What type of clothing and equipment were you issued?

**Mr. Wingen:** Regular Navy dungarees. That is what we wore most of the time.

**Mr. Pratt:** How long were you in Virginia before you shipped out?

**Mr. Wingen:** We stayed there approximately 2 months and then we were transferred up to Camp Endicot, Rhode Island, where we continued our training. After we finished there, which was about July or August, we were shipped by troop train all the way across the country to Camp Parks, California, near Oakland. We continued our training there. Then we were shipped down to Port Huememe, California, where we shipped out in October.

**Mr. Pratt:** Where did you go from there? What was your first stop?

**Mr. Wingen:** When we left Port Huememe, we went overseas. On the way, we cross the equator. I don't know if people are familiar with this, you become a shell-back if you crossed the equator. Now my son has crossed it many times. He is in the Navy for life. He is a 21 year veteran already.

Then we went to the Russell Island groups for acclimatization, just to get used to the temperature, the climate and humidity. We were only there for a couple of months and then we went up and invaded Green Island, which is up above Bougainville. We built two air strips, numerous roads and campsites on the island. From those strips, the first B 24 bombers took off and bombed Truk, which is a turning point in World War II. We stayed on Green Island for about a year and then went up and took part in the invasion of the Philippines.

**Mr. Pratt:** What islands did you come upon then?

**Mr. Wingen:** When we got off the ship, we were supposed to go to Leyte and build a couple of air strips. We were headed for Leyte and the harbor patrol cut us off and switched us over to Samar because if we had landed at Leyte there was a troop of 20,000 Japanese waiting for us. So we were glad to be turned around.

We landed on Samar. So we didn't have a job to do on Samar like we were supposed to be doing n Leyte. So we started digging a road on the top of this mountain right above Leyte Gulf for a recreation area. But we had something to do. I worked the night shift. I would work till it got dark and the air raids would go off and I would just bow my bucket up and watch the bombing and fireworks that went on. We knocked down planes just about every night. It was kind of fun watching that action.

Now we talked about color blind. One night a green flare went off. My shovel had 1500 watts of lights that could show when I worked at night. So I flipped on my lights and went to work. Pretty soon I am hearing gunshots over my head. So I reached up and turned my lights off and come to find out it was a red flare instead of a green flare. That is where my color blindness could have caught up with me.

**Mr. Pratt:** How did you build these roads? What kind of equipment did you use? Could you describe the process of deciding where and what to build?

**Mr. Wingen:** First we had to shovel. We would take the shovel and move the coral and level out a road.

**Mr. Pratt:** Did you ever have to bring in any base or any other material?

**Mr. Wingen:** Not in that case we didn't. Now coral is a living animal and if it is set over a number of years, it is harder than concrete. But if it is young coral, then it digs like sand. That is really beautiful digging. So it has to be blasted by dynamite to break it up into smaller pieces.

**Mr. Pratt:** Where did you get the coral?

**Mr. Wingen:** The whole island is coral and you just start where ever you want and you have coral. In some areas, there is a narrow or small layer of dirt.

**Mr. Pratt:** So you mostly were working on road building?

**Mr. Wingen:** Our big job was to build air strips.

**Mr. Pratt:** That is like a road that is wider and longer.

**Mr. Wingen:** That is right. We built this one strip that was 10,000 feet long for the B-29 bombers when they landed. You could take a cat and run over one end of the strip and you could stand 10,000 feet away, which is almost 2 miles, and you could feel it shiver. It was just a solid piece of coral all of the way. It was wonderful stuff for strips.

**Mr. Pratt:** So how deep would the landing strip itself be?

**Mr. Wingen:** I imagine a couple of feet deep. I didn't really get out on the strip. I just dug the coral and they loaded it up on trucks. We just kept working it back and forth and wetting it down and working it back and forth.

**Mr. Pratt:** So basically all they used was coral?

**Mr. Wingen:** Absolutely all we used was coral.

**Mr. Pratt:** So this was on Green Island?

**Mr. Wingen:** Well, we built two strips on Green Island and we moved up to the Philippines and we built two strips on Samar. Then we moved about 60 miles north of the southern tip of Samar and built these strips. Plus, I would like to see it today, we called it a million dollar Naval Air Station with just 100's of Quonset buildings and storage houses for supplies. That was our job during the war.

**Mr. Pratt:** So how long were you on Samar?

**Mr. Wingen:** About a year. Till the war ended in August and we had to stay there. Incidentally, my father died three days after the war ended. He was back in the states. When the war was over, I probably shouldn't publicize the fact, there were telegrams lying on the Red Cross desk for over a week before I was notified that my father had passed away. That always was a sort spot with me.

Anyway, I would not get home to be with my Mom. It was in November before we finally left for the states and I got home and discharged in December, 1945.

**Mr. Pratt:** You went back to school?

**Mr. Wingen:** Yes, I returned to school and got married. Finished my education. I was a teacher of vocational agriculture. I taught for 29 years in South Dakota and 6 years in Minnesota.

**Mr. Pratt:** Taught kids how to drive heavy equipment?

**Mr. Wingen:** No, I loved that but I taught them how to drive tractors and handle machinery and plant crops.

**Mr. Pratt:** So what led a Midwest farm boy to want to go to sea?

**Mr. Wingen:** I guess I didn't want to. I guess I was patriotic enough to want to be a part of what we were doing.

**Mr. Pratt:** Why did you choose the Navy over the Army or Air Force?

**Mr. Wingen:** I guess the Navy is kind of a show off bunch. You think about someone in the Navy as a happy, go-lucky guy. You can think about an Army guy as having to carry a rifle and get in the mud and stuff. I wound up in the best outfit. The Seabees. All experienced guys, very few young kids that didn't know what they were doing. Each had a job to do.

The attitude of the country was fantastic. You could get out and put your thumb out to hitch-hike a ride and they would stop and pick you up. When we got to California, before we shipped out, there wasn't a Sunday that we weren't invited to somebody's home for dinner. It was the best of times and the worst of times. I was so lucky to have lived through that time and appreciate what we have here in the United States.

Through my life, I have had 8 children. Consequently, I have 21 grandchildren, and 5 great-children. I am retired now and enjoying my grandkids. I think back to the times if hadn't won World War II, where would we be today?

**Mr. Pratt:** Thank you for taking the time to share your story with us.

Typed by  
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