THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

Clinton E. Morris Smiths Station, Alabama November 2, 2011

Aviation Machinist Mate Third Class, US Navy Plane Captain My name is Richard Misenhimer and today is November 2, 2011. I am interviewing Mr. Clinton E. Morris by telephone. His phone number is 334-297-3566. His address is: 2290 Lee Road, # 249, Smiths Station, Alabama 36877. This interview is in support of the National Museum of Pacific War, Nimitz Education and Research Center, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II

Mr. Misenhimer

Clinton, I want to thank you for taking the 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 to you this agreement with the Museum. "Agreement read." Is that okay with you?

Mr. Morris

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

The next I would like to do is to get an alternative contact. We have found out that sometimes several years down the road we try to get back in contact with a veteran and he has moved or something. Do you have a son or daughter or someone we could contact if we needed to find you?

Mr. Morris

Yes. David Morris. His phone number is 407-370-6861. That is in Orlando, Florida.

Mr. Misenhimer

What is your birth date?

Mr. Morris

April 27, 1926.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where were you born?

Mr. Morris

Palm Beach County, Florida.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes, there were eight of us children. I had four brothers and three sisters.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were any of your brothers in World War II?

Mr. Morris

There were three of us in World War II. One was in the Pacific.

Mr. Misenhimer

Is he still living?

Mr. Morris

Only three of us are living. One of my sisters and one of my brothers. The other brother was in the Korean War. All five of us were in the service Three of us were in World War II and one was in Korea and one was in Viet Nam.

Mr. Misenhimer

Okay. So the one that is living was not in World War II?

Mr. Morris

No, he was in the Korean conflict.

Mr. Misenhimer

Your brother that was in the Pacific, what did he do?

Mr. Morris

He was a boatswain's mate on the USS New Mexico.

Mr. Misenhimer

A battleship?

Mr. Morris

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now you grew up during the Depression. How did the Depression affect you and your family?

Right after I was born in Florida in 1926, a big heavy storm wiped out everything from Palm Beach to Okeechobee Lake and the Depression sort of set in down in Florida then and so we moved back to Alabama. They were planning to move back down there but another storm hit at the same the Great Depression hit the whole country in 1929, so they never returned back to Florida. We came back to Phenix City, Alabama. We were there until 1930, a year after the Depression started. There was no work for my father. He came back up here and all the work stopped until after the war really, a few years later. In 1930 we moved out to the country from Phenix City which joins Columbus, Georgia. We moved about eight miles out and we became sharecroppers. During the sharecropping time, by that time I was 5 and 6 years old. My little brother Sam, who was in the Korean War, was born in 1931 and in 1932 I started the first grade. I went to school for 5 weeks and then school closed for the year. All the public schools in Alabama closed in 1931 because of the Depression. We came back for a year and I started off in the first grade again the next year. During that time, the year we were off, and the things we did during the next few years to survive. We never knew we were poor until years later when we read about it. The things we did, we would cut stove wood and haul it into town on a one-mule wagon and would sell stove wood to city people for \$1 a load. We would cut kindling, the little sticks you start fires with, from kindling stumps in the woods. Then we went squirrel hunting for breakfast. This was on a regular basis. So we had squirrel for breakfast most of the time. We went rabbit hunting during the daytime; us three boys did, me and my two older brothers. Then we got jobs. I worked at a dairy when I was a kid. They gave us an old cow and a new calf if they had too many. So before long we had two or three cows and then we had hogs and pigs and we went fishing. We would go in the woods and find a honeybee hive up in a tree and we would get the honey out of that. We had all kinds of interesting things to do. We never were hungry, we never were cold, and we never were bored like my grandkids are when they come to visit me these days. Going fishing all that time, it was really fun. I remember the first time I ever heard a radio or talked on the telephone. I was about 13 years old then; about the time the war started in Poland. I finally got a bicycle. One of my brothers got a job at a CC Camp and he got me a bicycle. That was the greatest event in my life. So

that is sort of what we did all during the Depression until I went off into the service when I was 17 years old. I dropped out of school in December 1943 and it took them about six to eight weeks for them to find me a place to go.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you go to high school?

Mr. Morris

Smiths Station. Elementary and high school.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you finish high school?

Mr. Morris

I never finished. By the way, in the 5th grade I missed a year. I spent two years in there because I had an eye infection and I had to stay out of school for a year. I finished elementary school in 1940 when I was 14. Three years later I joined the military. I was three years behind then. Really when I returned from the Navy I was really a 9th grade drop out because I had only gone three months in the 10th grade but the principal put me in the 11th grade. I went back to high school on the GI Bill. There were no jobs available when the war ended and there were 15 million people coming home hunting jobs. Most of the factories had closed because they were war industries. I was getting ready to go back when a teacher told me, "Go to Birmingham and take your GED." I had never heard of that before. They were only giving the test in two or three places in the state apparently. I went over there to make her happy. She had been a great teacher to me. I took the GED and they asked me where I wanted my grades sent to. They graded the test and I did well. I said, "Send it to Auburn University." So then I went to Auburn and I got on the basketball team. My freshman coach transferred to the University of West Alabama so I went over there. I finished there. Then I went up to Peabody College at Vanderbilt University and got my master's. I'm getting ahead of myself now. I've forgotten what the question was. (Laugh)

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you go into the service?

I went into the service February 8, 1944.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you volunteer or where you drafted?

Mr. Morris

I volunteered at age 17. My dad had to sign a note permitting me to go in at age 17. My two older brothers were already in. One had his ship sunk and he lost his leg but he survived. My oldest brother was on the *New Mexico* and he had a fabulous adventure on that ship. I got out on June 11, 1946.

Mr. Misenhimer

You went into which branch?

Mr. Morris

Navy. All three of us went into the Navy.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did you choose the Navy?

Mr. Morris

We had an uncle that visited us while we were sharecropping. He had put in about 10 years in the Navy and was home from China. He was telling us all about the Chinese and the Japanese and the island people and their strange customs. So we all three went into the Navy because of his influence on us telling us those exciting stories about faraway places. (Laugh)

Mr. Misenhimer

(Laugh) Join the Navy and see the world.

Mr. Morris

That's right – through a porthole.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you go for your boot camp?

Mr. Morris

Jacksonville Naval Air Station.

Mr. Misenhimer

How was that?

Mr. Morris

It was a very exciting time for me because I was physically fit and I was an athlete. I enjoyed all of it. I was there and enjoyed every bit of it.

Mr. Misenhimer

What all did you have to do?

Mr. Morris

We started out by getting our hair cut off really short. Then they gave us the Flying Five We discovered what that was. It was \$5 to get our shaving gear and toothbrushes and all of that. We learned to march to the chow hall and march back. We learned how to make up our beds. We had to have everything done the Navy way. Then we had the obstacle courses, which I enjoyed. I got into boxing matches at the smokers. Then we learned to march and just get in great shape. I enjoyed boot camp. I got to know the Chief Petty Officer and so forth.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were your drill instructors pretty tough on you?

Mr. Morris

They weren't rough on me because I loved it so much. I enjoyed it because I loved to see those double-to-the-rear marches. Inevitably one would turn around and smack into another and the Petty Officer would scream and holler. I enjoyed watching that; the veins in his neck would stand out. Then we would have one-on-one to throw the other person down; drill and drill and drill. Then we would take about a five-minute break to talk. We might have a lesson on saluting. They would show us how to salute and then we would salute each other and check each other on how we were holding our things and the wrist straight. Then we would have about a 15 minute break to have a talking session. That was when my name changed from Errol to Clinton. He would say, "Does anybody out there have anything they want to say before we go back to work or encourage something?" One of the guys asked, "Can we really write "free" on our letter and not have to put a stamp on it?" He said,

"That's exactly right. Write "free" up there in the right hand corner and you can send all the letters you want free. Now is there anybody else?" So I held my hand up and he said, "Yeah, the tall guy back there in the back, what do you want?" I said, "My name is Errol, that's what I've been called all my life. I don't even use Clinton and at muster they call me Clint-un Morris and I want Errol." Boy he called me up there and he screamed in my face and said "Clinton is your first name and from this day on that is what it is going to be and I don't want you southern boys going by your Mama's pet name. Do you understand?" And so from that day on I have been Clinton Morris. (Laugh) When boot camp was over I remember we had an interview. The guy in there asked, "What would you like to do?" They had an Ensign or maybe a Lieutenant and he said, "What would you like to do?" I said, "Well sir I would like to go overseas. I want to be in the Armed Guards like my brother." That's all the tankers and the merchant ships and they were the gun crews on them. During the first two years of the war they were sinking half of them and we were losing a lot of men on those ships. But my brother was on them and that's what I wanted to be on. He said, "No. Wherever you go it is going to be on an airplane. I'm shipping you to naval air station Miami." I wrote my brothers about it. Four or five months later I was complaining about not getting to go to sea to fight the Japs and Germans and they told me to go see a psychiatrist.

Mr. Misenhimer

In your boot camp did you have any weapons training?

Mr. Morris

No weapons training whatsoever. They picked me for a guard at a boxing match. I participated in those sometimes. They let me wear a .45. I think it was a .45; a big old pistol but it didn't have any bullets in it; like the guy on the Andy Griffith Show. He had to carry his bullet in his shirt pocket. I know they didn't want untrained people carrying them. They wanted big tall guys walking around the stage making it look like the real thing. No weapons training. Even our guns were made out of wood that we drilled with.

Mr. Misenhimer

Is there anything else from boot camp that you recall in particular?

No. It was very interesting. We met guys from other parts of the country, from big towns and little towns. Life changed for us overnight. We learned to take care of our clothes. Being a country boy, I had already been my mother's assistant on wash day so it came natural for me. From coming from my humble beginnings and all of my accomplishments that I have had throughout the years, the one I am most proud of is when I wore that uniform of the United States Navy. When I talk to my groups at the Infantry Museum I bring that out. I take great pride in that.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you do at that air station in Miami?

Mr. Morris

At the naval air station they put me on a C-47. They called it R4D. They taught me how to keep them clean on the bottom and the windshields clean. And to clean the thing out on the inside and to put the gas in and to keep the records straight on that airplane and to know when to take it in for a 15 hour maintenance and a 30 hour check and so forth. They taught me how to warm the engines up. So I learned also to get on the line. We were sending dive bombers out to the bombing range and we sent others out towing what we called the "Devil's Triangle." I would always go an hour early because I wanted to be on time. Then I was directing the planes back in and parking them with signals and sending them off and helping the pilots get their parachutes on and sending them out but my basic job reverted back to taking care of the airplanes and draining the water out of all four tanks. Had to drain the bottom and let fuel come out. When it would hit on the concrete, if it had water in it, it kind of veed out and so then you knew it had water in it. So you let it run until the water was out of it. The water always went to the bottom of the tank. So then I put a safety wire on it. Then I became a flight captain we called them on the plane. My first trip on my plane was to L.A. As we were coming home, we got in the plane and I was on my bed sleeping and the copilot woke me up. He said, "Go up there and sit in my seat. I'm going to take a nap. We've been out here for three days and I didn't get much sleep." They had been partying the whole time. He said, "Your job is to look for airplanes ahead and on the right and watch the instruments and make sure they are all normal. But make sure

the pilot stays awake." So as I was flying, I was thinking, "I wonder if that pilot knows that 12 weeks ago I was a plow boy in Alabama. My highest technology was greasing an axle and on a wheel." I had never seen an airplane on the ground before and here I am with these responsibilities. But that's what I did. We had so much air traffic at Naval Air Station Miami that it was hard to get landing permission. So they shipped us out to a runway small place called Shawnee, Oklahoma. That was a naval air station at Shawnee, Oklahoma and we were functioning as transportation for naval air navigation school. We would fly all over the country and they would navigate by the stars. I was in that until 1945. We had enough navigators so now I'm going to get into the war.

We were getting ready to haul supplies to Saipan. It had just been taken. They thought that we would be invading Japan in a couple of months, by the first of the year I think. So now we were out there and they were training a few more pilots doing touch and go's and this type of thing and we were getting ready, loading up to haul supplies to Saipan. We were hoping they would use our planes for the invasion of the mainland, Honshu. That's how young boys were at that time. then all of a sudden the two bombs went off, the war ended, and there I was in a semi-desert area of Oklahoma. Mr. Misenhimer

Let me go back and ask you some questions. When you went down to Miami did you get any kind of special schooling there?

Mr. Morris

No. I never went to a school. I think things were moving so fast that they would check you out and you would learn something. I learned to take care of that plane. I recall that I tried to transfer out. I saw notices on the board that they needed some submarine people to volunteer. They needed this and that. I always wanted to volunteer because I wanted to get in the action and that Chief would say, "No Morris. You know that job. You do a better job than anybody we have. We're not letting you go. If we do we will have to take another plow-boy and teach him all over again and we can't afford it, okay." (Laugh) So that's what I was doing.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you work on just the one plane or did you work on several planes?

I worked on an AT-7; it's a Beechcraft. We used them before we got enough C-47s and DC-3s. Also later on when the war ended I went to Pensacola and I worked on those little bitty training planes. I had to wind it up on the side and then pull the prop through to get it started and I would usually go up with them. Boy that was the most fun that I ever had when I was flying with those guys that were learning to fly. I think they were called Sterlings or something like that.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was it a single wing or a twin wing?

Mr. Morris

It had double wings.

Mr. Misenhimer

That was the Stearman.

Mr. Morris

Yes. I remember the first time I flew in one of those. He came straight down spinning and I saw the earth spinning down there and from then on I worked and worked and finally they put me on a PBY for air-sea rescue. One time we got an emergency. Okay they came down and I was getting on the plane and a guy came; I was a Third Class Petty Officer and he was a First Class Petty Officer and so he took my place and I didn't get to be a hero even on an air-sea rescue.

Mr. Misenhimer

In Oklahoma did you fly with those people in their planes there?

Mr. Morris

Yes I flew. Every time my plane went up I had to be onboard. There was always a pilot, copilot and flight engineer.

Mr. Misenhimer

You were a flight engineer?

That's what I was, yes. A plane captain is a flight engineer and we had certain things we had to do. Sometimes I worked the radio. Mainly I would go in case the wheels wouldn't go down; I had the job of winding them down. Then I would be available if we landed someplace I had to put the gas in and check the oil. If it was overnight I had to stay with the plane and sleep in it. On occasion if the weather was bad I would stay in the barracks because we were always at a military base. Mr. Misenhimer

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And that was a C-47 also?

Mr. Morris

Yes. From the time we left Miami until the war ended I was strictly; we had about 20 C-47s. They were also called R4Ds. Their other name is DC-3. That was the plane of which I'm speaking.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were you in any particular unit?

Mr. Morris

No except we called it a squadron and we serviced the Naval air navigation school. NAN School that is what it was called there. In Miami it must have been a general detail that I was on. I got good at everything I did and I always showed up early and never went on leave. I was afraid to leave the base. I was a country boy and I might get lost and not get back. I was so motivated. They had me doing various things.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was there any time that you ever felt frightened?

Mr. Morris

Yes. Leaving Memphis going to Oklahoma City we got in bad weather and I got the living daylights scared out of me. We were dropping down 500 feet and bouncing up and being thrown around but those were tough old planes. It was frightening. We lost one plane in that group during the year and a half I was with them. It crashed into the side of a mountain. That is the only people that I knew of that got killed.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were there any other crashes that weren't fatal or anything?

Mr. Morris

No we didn't have any other crashes. We had a storm once out there and two or three of the planes got banged against each other. It was a good training experience for all of us, replacing wings and engines and things like that. Back then we had an aviation machinist and they did the hydraulics, and electricians, and motor changers; repairing damage to fuselage and anything like that.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your rank?

Mr. Morris

AMM 3-C.

Mr. Misenhimer

What does AMM stand for?

Mr. Morris

Aviation Machinist Mate – Third Class. When the war ended they sent me to Pensacola and there before long, you got out by how many points you had. If you had a lot of overseas time you got so many points and all that. So when my points became available I was sent to Mainside Pensacola to be discharged. They were discharging so fast that they had to find a place that would take you. When I was there, they called me in one day, everybody of my rank, that had good marks on everything. They sent me and about two dozen guys in my aviation machinist group and the pilot in this place where I worked. They took us down to the airport to a little stadium and they brought in four jets. We had never seen a jet plane before. They came in and they buzzed that runway about 10 yards above the ground I guess. Then they turned straight up towards the sky. What a shock that was. They were trying to get us to ship over for another term and go for jet school. I got to thinking, "On my God, I'm not even a real good mechanic." I would take my plane down and the mechanics would work on it because they didn't want to fly. I would take the cowling off because that took muscles and I would do the dirty work. I said to myself, "I don't even know the cylinder engines that well and look

what they can do. I can never learn that. I don't want any part of it." I didn't find out until many years later that those engines were the simplest ones of them all. I talked with some older guys that stayed in and got jobs with the Air Force later on and they said, "The jets school they send you through; there wasn't anything difficult about it. They were simple." So I missed a career in the Navy.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you ever see any USO shows anywhere?

Mr. Morris

No. I never saw one.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross?

Mr. Morris

The Red Cross, once when I was in Oklahoma. My brother that was on the *New Mexico* and my other brother who was a gunner's mate on one of these tankers, or merchant ships. They both came home. My brother had gone off in 1940 and this was about 1945. He had never been home. My other brother had only been home once and I had just come back from leave when I got a call from my mother, or she sent me a telegram or something and said, "Your two brothers are here. Can you come and be with us?" I took it down to my Chief Petty Office. He sort of owed me something I guess, so he called the Red Cross and sent me down there and they gave me a pass to come home on. This Chief Petty Officer from Miami made me the leading seaman; that meant I did his job when he wasn't there. We had a hundred of us going from Miami to Shawnee, Oklahoma on the train. We got to Jacksonville and he and a First Class Petty Officer bought two cases of beer and put them in a bathtub and a hundred pounds of ice or something to put on it and they provided a beer free to everybody all the way from Jacksonville to Atlanta. I didn't drink beer. When we got to Jacksonville he said, "Morris, you are the leading seaman, you circle that X. So I was important. I was in charge of all these people. I didn't realize that they had all gotten off and I was the only one that

didn't get to go into town. They all came back and we got to Jacksonville and the same thing happened. I didn't get to go to town again. Then we got to Memphis and I had the same problem. Then as the train was pulling out I had them all circled but the Chief wasn't there. The Chief Petty Officer. There I was going across Arkansas, "What am I going to do? I'm in charge of these people." A lot of these guys were 36, 38 years old. I was only 18 at the time. I told them, "Well, the Chief is going to meet us in Shawnee when we get there. He told us to not get off the train." We went across Arkansas like that and we got there and there was nobody there at the station. I went in and I talked to the clerk. I went over there and pretended that I was making a phone call and went back and told my crew, "We are to stay here until further notice." I told the man from the train, "Make sure that all of the men are off the train and that all the sea bags are off the train." Then about that time in walked a Commander. I think he was like a Colonel. I said, "I am Clinton Morris." I had my pea coat on and he couldn't tell what class you were. I hadn't made Petty Officer yet. I was still a First Class. He didn't know if I was a First Class Petty Officer or what because I had my pea coat on covering all of that. I said, "We are all here. We had a nice trip. Here is the roster. Chief so-and-so (I know his name but I won't call it) will be here on the next train. He said, "Okay." Then he took charge and they took us to our barracks. The next day they took us down to the chow hall. Everything was new. I sat by a window and watched the main gate of this little place and after a while I saw a cab come flying through there and the Chief came in the door and he walked in. He saw me and he came over and gave me a hug. I told him what happened. I said, "If you weren't showing up, we were going down to the hangar and start sweeping the deck and picking up the trash." He said, "Okay Morris." And then he proceeded to give us some instructions and then he said, "If you ever need anything, let me know." (Laugh) I used it a couple of times.

Mr. Misenhimer

How was the morale in your outfit?

Mr. Morris

Always good in our outfit. About half of them were returning people for various reasons and then half of them were new people. I had one guy that didn't want any rank or rate. He kept the lowest

rate. He kept Seaman Second Class or something like that. He had owned his own airport in South Carolina. He was a pilot. He trained these V-6 people and all of a sudden about a year after I went in he decided that he needed to go in the military for some reason. So he was a real father figure for us. He was about 35 years. I met some strange people. I had this one guy that bunked above me. He was called Carl Saçino. He was a professional gambler out of Miami. Another was a big-time boxer out New York. His name was J.J. Kemble. I met rich guys and poor boys and had the time of my life. Our morale was always high.

Mr. Misenhimer

Back on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Do you recall hearing about that?

Mr. Morris

Absolutely. I had gone to church. We came out of church and everybody was going off. There were about five of us teenage boys hanging out together trying to decide what we were going to do for the afternoon. Then one boy in a convertible with a girl in it waved us over and we went over. He just wanted to show off that new car and the girl friend to us. But I could hear his radio. I thought he just wanted to show off his radio. But I had seen a car radio one time so I wasn't impressed with it. I went over there and he said, "Listen, something happened." "Pearl Harbor has been attacked. Japan is sinking our ships." One boy asked, "Where is Pearl Harbor?" Another said, "I don't know." Then the guy said something about Honolulu. Oh yeah, that is in the Hawaiian Islands. "Where are they?" One boy said, "They are in the Pacific." One boy said, "Vernon, your brother, is on the New Mexico and they are at Pearl Harbor." I said, "No. Three or four months ago they sent him with a task force over to Iceland." I didn't know this until years later when I became a history professor, he went over there with a task force to escort our lend-lease material to Russia and to England and things like that. He was saved because his ship went along with two other battleships, the Hornet and a few other ships, destroyers and things like that. As soon as they got over there Pearl Harbor was hit and his ship turned around and went back to Pearl Harbor. From then on he stayed in the Pacific and the South Pacific. He was in the Aleutian Islands and things like that. I remember very well the excitement. By

the way, we went down to Columbus. One of the boys had a car. They were selling newspapers hollering "Extra, extra read all about it. United States attacked."

Mr. Misenhimer

On April 12, 1945, President Roosevelt died. Do you remember hearing about that?

Mr. Morris

Yes. I was in Oklahoma. It came on big time. I've forgotten the date but it wasn't long after that the war ended. I remember those two events. It came over the radio. I remember that.

Mr. Misenhimer

On August 15, 1945 when Japan surrendered and the war was over did you all have a celebration then?

Mr. Morris

We got word. I was in Oklahoma. We got word that a bomb had dropped and another bomb had dropped. We heard things like, "Nobody can visit that place for 10,000 years it is so contaminated" and things like that. Finally the word came through that they had surrendered. I don't talk about this to most acquaintances but I was so disappointed that I didn't get to get in the war. That's the way people felt at that time, young people especially.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you get home with any souvenirs from the war?

Mr. Morris

No, I didn't bring home any souvenirs.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you use your GI Bill?

Mr. Morris

Yes. When I got out and I went back to high school on the GI Bill and that cost no tuition. My full check came to about \$5. I lost a full year of eligibility because later on when I was getting my master's degree I ran out. What we got then, you got twelve months plus the number of months you served. So I had only served 32 or 34 months. By the time I got my bachelor's degree and my

master's degree and I took some extra courses along the way just for interest, I had to end up paying for that last bit. Even then the first school that I went to, I was on a scholarship to Auburn for basketball. But then at Livingston, it was a small state college, and my education cost the government very little. I repaid that with my taxes over the years. (Laugh)

Mr. Misenhimer

Well, I think that is all the questions I have unless you have something else.

Mr. Morris

No. That is about it.

Mr. Misenhimer

Clinton, it was good to talk to you and we will keep in touch.

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