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Interview With

FLOYD THORN

August 14, 2000

Place of Interview: Kerrville, Texas

Interviewer: William J. Alexander

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Oral History Collection

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Mr. Alexander: This is Bill Alexander interviewing Mr. Floyd Thorn to get his experiences in World War II. More specifically, Mr. Thorn served in the Pacific Theater during World War II as a member of the U.S. Navy reconnaissance squadron VP-44. He was present at the Pearl Harbor attack, as well as the Battle of Midway.

With that, I'll ask you, sir, where were you born, and when?

Mr. Thorn: I was born in Van Alstyne, Texas, on July 7, 1918.

Mr. Alexander: What were your parents' names?

Mr. Thorn: They were Floyd B. Thorn, Sr., and Irma Rose Thorn.

Mr. Alexander: Just where is Van Alstyne?

Thorn: It's in North Texas, north of Dallas.

Alexander: How about brothers and sisters?

Thorn: I have one brother, William E. Thorn, who is a Baptist minister. He's retired now and is kind of on the lecture circuit. He writes books--about three or four a year.

Alexander: And where does he live?

Thorn: He lives in San Angelo, Texas. And I have two sisters. My older sister, who just recently lost her eyesight, lives near Atlanta, Georgia; and my younger sister lives in Arlington, Texas.

Alexander: So, most of your siblings are here, then, in the state of Texas.

Thorn: Right. I have two daughters...well, I had two daughters: Kathleen, who died last year; and Colleen, who lives in Irving, near Dallas. That's about it, except for a whole bunch of cousins and that sort of thing.

Alexander: Did you go to high school in Van Alstyne?

Thorn: Oh, no! I left there at a very young age. I have no memory of being there at all. Then we moved to McAlester, Oklahoma. I can remember McAlester. I remember the [U.S.

Navy dirigible] *Los Angeles* flying over as a kid. It made quite an impression on me.

Alexander: The old *Los Angeles* dirigible.

Thorn: Right.

Alexander: Was your father in the oil business?

Thorn: No, he was a Baptist minister.

Alexander: So, your brother is a minister, and your father was a minister, also.

Thorn: Yes. Then we moved to Houston, Texas.

Alexander: Let's go back to the dirigible for a second. How did you happen to see it? Did it just fly over, or had it stopped someplace where you were?

Thorn: No, it flew over. Everybody in town, I guess, ran outside to look at it.

Alexander: It wasn't going very fast, was it? It was a big ship.

Thorn: It was a big ship.

Alexander: What would you say was the altitude that it was flying?

Thorn: Oh, I don't remember, exactly.

Alexander: Well, it's not too important. It was a Navy airship, and I think it did have an accident somewhere along in years that killed several

people.

Thorn: They lost a lot of people with dirigibles.

Alexander: How long were you in McAlester?

Thorn: From McAlester, we moved to Waco, Texas. I spent most of my growing up in Waco. I stayed there until I hit high school.

Alexander: So, most of your grade school work was in Waco?

Thorn: Yes, and in McAlester. Then we moved to Houston. I didn't get along with the public school system too well, so I went to San Marcos Academy in San Marcos, Texas. It was a good move.

Alexander: Was that during your high school years?

Thorn: All of my high school was done there.

Alexander: And you would have gone into high school in what year?

Thorn: Well, I graduated in 1935.

Alexander: So, you would have started high school in 1931, probably.

Thorn: It was right around there, yes--1930 or 1931. Then I left San Marcos and went to Waco, to Baylor [University]. I left the university in 1938 and went to Pensacola [Florida, site

of the U.S. Navy's flight school.]

Alexander: Let's ask about that. Did you actually graduate from Baylor?

Thorn: Actually, I had to take two courses by correspondence, but I didn't have to go back to school.

Alexander: How did you happen to go to Pensacola?

Thorn: Well, an idiot could see that we were getting into the war.

Alexander: Even in 1938, that was pretty obvious.

Thorn: It was pretty obvious that it was going to happen. Somebody was going to have to knock that clown [German Chancellor Adolf Hitler] off. I had already learned to fly.

Alexander: How did you do that?

Thorn: My dad had some good friends who were pilots. When I went back to school at Baylor, I got tied in pretty close with one of them. I had a job on the weekends. I'd take passengers up. I'd help him buy the gas and pay for the airplane.

Alexander: Did he teach you how to fly?

Thorn: Learning how to fly...well, I'll tell you how much confidence I had in it. I didn't tell

the Navy that I had any experience whatsoever.

Alexander: In those days--in the mid-1930s--we didn't have the same type of regulations and so forth that we have today.

Thorn: No.

Alexander: Did you qualify for a pilot's license?

Thorn: I got a limited commercial license, and then a straight commercial license.

Alexander: Before you left for Pensacola?

Thorn: That's right.

Alexander: And you knocked on their door and said, "Hi! Here I am!" But you didn't say anything about flying an airplane?

Thorn: No. I applied to the Navy. In peacetime, the Navy was rather selective. They were graduating about 10 or 12 percent from flight school.

Alexander: That's not very many.

Thorn: No. So, I went on through flight training...

Alexander: So, again, you said, "Hi! Here I am. I want to learn to fly! I want to fly for the Navy!" But you didn't say: "By the way, I already have 150 or 200 hours of flying."

You didn't do that. So, how did you make out? Let's talk about the training that you got there for a minute.

Thorn: I started in primary flight training, just acting like I didn't know anything about it.

Alexander: You were flying what?

Thorn: N3Ns. That was a biplane built by the Naval Aircraft Factory.

Alexander: Was it a two-seater?

Thorn: Yes. It was a big ol' biplane. Then we transferred over into Stearmans--the "Yellow Peril." [Editor's note: "Yellow Peril" was an unofficial nickname for the Stearman PT-17 "Kaydet" biplane trainer.]

Alexander: When you got into the N3N, did your instructor have any idea that you knew the pedal from the stick?

Thorn: No, not really. And I didn't know nearly as much as I thought I did (chuckle). The thing was that I had a lot more time to spend on tactics, gunnery, and navigation. It gave me a distinct advantage.

Alexander: You had not had those things except at Pensacola, had you?

Thorn: Well, yes, I did. I took a course in navigation by correspondence from the Weems School of Navigation. Admiral [Philip Van Horn] Weems started a navigation school.

Alexander: Was that while you were at Baylor?

Thorn: Well, that was while I was at Baylor, and while I was learning to fly. Weems had gotten out of the Navy, as I understand it. I'm not really up-to-date on it, but he started the navigation school. It was by correspondence.

Alexander: When you took this correspondence course and started working on navigation, was it primarily celestial navigation? What did you do? What did they teach you?

Thorn: The first part of it was pilotage and dead reckoning. Then we got into celestial navigation. It was a tough course, as far as celestial navigation was concerned. At that stage in the game, it was tough because the average student wasn't equipped in mathematics well enough to really do much. So, the U.S. Government came out with the HO-214. That was a Hydrographics Office

publication with tables for celestial navigation. Then they came out with a short form during the war because the HO-214 had some limitations. The short form was called the HO-218. I didn't have a lot of respect for it.

So, I had learned in the meanwhile Mark Saint Heller [?], which is an all-mathematics-type calculation, which I used all the time that I was in the service.

Alexander: When you're talking about being in Pensacola, were they not giving you some of the same types of things?

Thorn: They had navigation courses, and they were written by Weems (chuckle).

Alexander: Who else (chuckle)? So, that should have given you a pretty good "leg up" [advantage], at least for what you were getting into, whereas somebody else who hadn't done what you had was getting it "cold" [unfamiliar].

Thorn: That's right.

Alexander: Did you have one instructor that you were responsible to?

Thorn: Not really. I think that the idea that the

Navy had at the time was to expose you to a number of instructors, and that was worthwhile.

Alexander: How many were in your class? Do you recall about how many there were?

Thorn: The figure that came out was that twelve of us got our "wings" [aviator's insignia] out of 102 or 103. They didn't have any vacancies because it was peacetime.

Alexander: You were very fortunate, then, to graduate from Pensacola.

Thorn: Yes. But it had some advantages. In other words, if you graduated from Pensacola, you were a "cinch" for anywhere you wanted to get a job. The airlines would hire you in a minute.

Alexander: When you graduated, was it as an ensign?

Thorn: No, they didn't graduate us as ensigns. They didn't have any vacancies, so they sent us to the fleet as cadets, with our wings. Those wings felt just about the size as those hanging on the wall over there [gesture] when they pinned them on me (chuckle).

Alexander: (Chuckle) Pretty heavy!

Thorn: But we weren't commissioned until later.

Alexander: What was your first duty assignment when you got out of Pensacola?

Thorn: When I got out of Pensacola, the first thing they did was send me to the Mine Warfare Laboratory in Yorktown, Virginia, because a keypunch card fell out that showed that I had taken a degree in mathematics and physics. So, they sent me there.

Alexander: Was that what you majored in at Baylor?

Thorn: That's right. So, then I stationed at the Mine Warfare Laboratory. I was commissioned. My book was logged in as "Fleet Mine Warfare Officer," which didn't mean a thing (chuckle).

Alexander: But you became an officer.

Thorn: Well, we were considered officers, even though we were cadets.

Alexander: But you didn't get the pay of an officer.

Thorn: We did have that star [line officer's insignia] on our sleeves.

Alexander: Were you wearing bluejacket uniforms?

Thorn: No. We wore regular officer's uniforms. We had the stars, so we were line officers, but

we had no stripes. There was just the star. There were some unusual situations. The fact that we went to the fleet as cadets followed us for the rest of our careers. What happened was that when it came time for that class to normally be promoted, the date had already passed. So, they just didn't do anything.

Alexander: How many of you were there? Was there still just those ten or twelve of you?

Thorn: I don't really know the whole number, but I had a friend who told me that there were several hundred of us who were involved in this.

Alexander: How long did you sign up for when you went to Pensacola in the first place? Was that a four-year hitch?

Thorn: It was originally four years, assuming no national emergency or anything. Of course, [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt just extended it.

Alexander: The inevitability of war was there, but at the time, 1938, you signed up until 1942.

Thorn: Yes, but the war had started by 1942.

Alexander: Before we get there, let's catch up with where you are in Virginia.

Thorn: I was a mine warfare officer.

Alexander: What does a mine warfare officer do?

Thorn: We learned how to handle two types of mines. They were magnetic mines: the Mark 12, and then the Mark 13, which was a mine of our own making.

Alexander: What was the difference between the two?

Thorn: One was a magnetic dip needle-type mine.

Alexander: Which means that, basically, when the needle dipped, it exploded. Is that right?

Thorn: That's right.

Alexander: How many buttons were on those mines? Four, five, or six? Any of which would explode it?

Thorn: As far as I know, the Mark 12 just had a magnetic dip needle. When the ship moved over, that needle would point to it and hit a contact.

Alexander: So, it was based on where the needle was?

Thorn: Right, but you had the ability to...I don't know the actual mechanics, but the working of it was that it could be set for a large ship,

a medium-sized ship, or a small ship. That was the Mark 12.

Then the Mark 13 was an induction mine. That means that the magnetic profile, with the ship moving, moved with the ship. That gives a magnetic transfer effect on this great, big, many-turned coil. That gave an impulse that would detonate the mine. It could also be armed as a bomb. It had a fuze in the nose, and you could select that. If you wanted it to be a mine, you left the wire hanging in the nose fuze. It would go down in the water and only be set off magnetically.

We didn't use a lot of them in the Pacific. To tell you the truth, I don't think that we could have swept the Mark 13s, so we weren't really happy with them. The Geneva Convention said that you should be able to sweep your mines. However, they made a hell of a bomb! The Mark 13 was a good bomb.

Alexander: And that would be dropped by TBMs or TBFs?

[Editor's note: The TBF is the Grumman

Avenger torpedo plane. The TBM was a licensed version of the Avenger built by General Electric.]

Thorn: No, by PBYS [Consolidated Catalina flying boats].

Alexander: Primarily?

Thorn: Usually, because of the weight.

Alexander: How long were you there in Virginia, approximately?

Thorn: I think it was six or eight weeks.

Alexander: It was just a short time. So, that was just to indoctrinate you, really.

Thorn: Yes. I'll tell you, I think that they were using a lot of those schools strictly as...the case was that they had you, and they didn't know what to do with you. I think that they ran you through schools. If you had any kind of technical background in your studies, why, they'd send you to places like that.

Alexander: Where did you go after Virginia?

Thorn: After I left Virginia, I went to operational training in San Diego, California, at North Island.

Alexander: Are you talking about Naval Air Station, San Diego?

Thorn: Yes. I had operational training there. I had orders to go to VP-44.

Alexander: That was a squadron, right?

Thorn: Right, but it was in the Pacific, already. I went to operational training first, and then I was to report to VP-44.

Alexander: When you say "operational training," what kind of training is that?

Thorn: They taught you combat tactics. They just polished your skills to make you ready for the fleet.

Alexander: So, what you're talking about here is basically air-to-air combat training. You were getting that sort of thing?

Thorn: Yes.

Alexander: In what kind of airplane?

Thorn: In this case, PBYs.

Alexander: PBYs? I just don't think about them in that context.

Thorn: As an airplane, the PBY probably did its job as well as any airplane that the country had. It was used for so many different things. It

could land on the water, and they had a version that was an "amphibian." You could land that version in the water or on land. It was hell for [being] stout! It was a good, solid airplane.

Alexander: It was a twin-engine plane.

Thorn: Yes--Pratt & Whitneys, ultimately.

Alexander: Who built them?

Thorn: Consolidated. That airplane was a really fine airplane. But they taught us stuff like open-sea landings.

Alexander: That means out in the middle of nowhere?

Thorn: Yes, and in rough water.

Alexander: For what reason?

Thorn: For rescue operations, or if you were putting coastwatchers ashore on Jap-held islands. We did a lot of that. I guess that we were there for about four or five months at North Island. Then we went to Honolulu.

Alexander: Where are we now in the timeframe? What year are we in?

Thorn: This had to be in early 1941, before [the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on] December 7.

Alexander: So, you did this work at North Island in 1941, then.

Thorn: Yes. Then I reported to VP-44 in Honolulu. They were at Pearl Harbor. The skipper was Bob Brixner. The executive officer was Don Gumz. He was from an old Navy family.

Alexander: What rank were they?

Thorn: When I first came aboard, Brixner was a full commander, but he made captain. Gumz was a lieutenant commander, and he made commander.

Alexander: And when did you arrive there? In early 1941, would you say?

Thorn: It was early 1941. The dates are really hazy.

Alexander: Those are not too important. What's really important is to keep what part of a year we're in.

Thorn: What we did was primarily utility training. They really kept us training. We did navigation, open-sea landings, and operations. That sort of training went on. The efficiency of the squadron was directly reported by the fitness reports of the skipper. So, they took care of seeing that

we got pretty sharp and that we knew what we were doing. There were a lot of things that went on.

We had great sport because we were based with seaplanes. The Army was expanding, and their B-17s [Boeing Flying Fortress heavy bombers] were flying out.

Alexander: Where were they flying out to?

Thorn: They were coming out from the West Coast to Hickam Field [the Army Air Forces base adjacent to Pearl Harbor]. They were getting lost, and we were out hunting for them a good percentage of the time. But they did pretty well; they did better. I went on many a flight where we'd go out and send "M-O"s by code so they could home in on it.

Alexander: An "M-O" is...?

Thorn: We'd just key the letters "M" and "O" [makes Morse Code sounds for the letters]. Anyway, it was a time for polishing the skills of people. There were some people in the Navy who had some insight into the fact that something was getting ready to happen. I don't know what. We were stationed there at

Pearl Harbor.

Alexander: Where were you, specifically?

Thorn: We were on Ford Island. They were just finishing the new barracks. It was just inland, about 300 yards from where the [battleship BB-39] Arizona went down.

We flew "hops" out of there. They were building the base at Johnston Island, which is just a pimple out there. It's in the middle of nowhere. It's a very small island. In very good conditions, you can see it from just about eleven miles. If you're not within eleven miles of it, you're not going to see it. We were under radio silence, and it misted a lot.

Alexander: How far was that from Pearl Harbor?

Thorn: As I remember it, about 700 miles.

Alexander: Was it primarily used for reconnaissance, or was it just pretty much a place where you could get refueled and so forth?

Thorn: It was sort of, like...it wasn't as big as a carrier (chuckle). The runway was longer than the island was. Of course, the big reef was out there, but they dredged a runway

inside the reef that gave you protected water for a landing. It was used a lot for patrol operations.

We also had it as an outlying base for distress. Submarines would come in there. Typical of the day, I was flying patrols out of there. Our squadron used it primarily to check out new people on their navigation. They would leave Johnston Island, flying south-southwest, go across the Equator, across the International Date Line; and come back across the Equator, back across the International Date Line; and then they had to find an island that they had to hit within eleven miles, and you'd flown 1,200 miles.

Alexander: And you had empty fuel tanks.

Thorn: That's right. If we found that the young kids coming in, if they didn't make that trip to Johnston Island, they were going to work on their navigation. They were going to after that. It made believers out of everybody.

Alexander: What happened if you got into a lot of heavy haze, cloud cover, or so forth?

Thorn: Sometimes, if a flight was getting overdue, we'd launch a plane. He'd break radio silence away from the island. If he located the guy, he'd take him back in.

Alexander: Did you lose quite a few of those planes?

Thorn: I only know of two instances. One I know the outcome of, but the other one, I don't. We found one flight that went down, but he had made a landing in the water. He was sitting there, sending "M-Os". We picked him up.

On another flight, I was going from Pearl Harbor to Sydney, Australia. I found a plane in the water, and I called Johnston Island. Then I called the Hawaiian Network and told them his exact location. I asked if they wanted me to land and pick him up, and they said, "No, we'll send a plane out of Johnston Island." I stayed over him until they got there, and I went back to Pearl Harbor and waited for the next day to go on. Johnston Island was just another base out in the middle of nowhere.

Alexander: I'm trying to remember. Was Johnston Island part of the Amelia Earhart saga or not?

Thorn: It was a little bit north of there. She was in the Baker-Howland area.

Alexander: Was Johnston Island an active base at that time?

Thorn: No. It was just an atoll.

Alexander: Let's go back to your situation prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Where were you when the attack started?

Thorn: I was in Room 208 of the Moana Hotel.

Alexander: I won't go any further than that. That was pretty good duty, getting a weekend pass, I'd suppose.

Thorn: Oh, it was peacetime! Everything was "no strings attached." We had a pilot who had married into the Cook family, one of the "Big Five." [Editor's note: "The Big Five" were the five companies, including Castle & Cook, that dominated Hawaiian sugar production and economic development in the 19th and 20th Centuries.] Mr. and Mrs. Cook were very nice about entertaining us. They had a big mansion out on the Moana Valley, going up toward the Pali.

She asked us one time if we would help

her out. She didn't feel good about having a beach house, and she asked if we wouldn't take that beach house and live in it so it would be occupied. So, we made a wartime sacrifice (chuckle). Our next-door neighbor was Doris Duke. So, we made that supreme sacrifice.

They were two of the finest people. You know, Teddy Cook was president of the Bishop Bank, and he had no end to money. You talk about people who don't have locks on their doors; they didn't even have doors on that mansion. They had art objects in there...I'll bet you he had \$35,000 or \$40,000 worth of camera equipment bought at the prices back then. They were so generous with their time, and they'd do nice things.

When I got hurt at Midway, they flew me back to Aiea Heights, which is a little hospital at Pearl Harbor, near Ford Island. When I came to, Mrs. Cook was on one side of the bed. Mrs. Cook did a lot of charity work. She did a lot of work with the Aiea School for Girls, the Lilioukalani School for

Girls. Teddy had a sly sense of humor. He said, "She's out there saving those bad girls, and she won't save me one." (chuckle) But they were some of the nicest people.

To give you an idea of how good they were, they gave me this carving out of core wood. It takes a plate insert into it, and it has my name across it. Your seat at the table was carved in that, so when they set it, you went to the same place everytime. They were just wonderful people.

Alexander: I'm going to stop the tape here, so let me pause it and turn it over.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Alexander: Now, when the attack on Pearl Harbor happened, you were at the hotel.

Thorn: Right.

Alexander: Were you in bed at the time it happened? It was noon, wasn't it? When was it? Was it at 7:00 or 8:00 a.m.?

Thorn: It was 7:00 a.m. [actually 7:55 a.m.] when the Japs hit. We had been up late. I'm getting in rather delicate territory here. I had a young lady with me. We heard this

rumbling sound. You know what it is when you hear it. I knew it was bombing, so we went down to the lobby to try to get back to the base. She had to get back to the hospital.

At first, I started off with a bad taste in my mouth when the cab driver wanted \$100 to take me to the train. He saw the business end of my .45 [-caliber semi-automatic pistol]. [Editor's note: It was a very rare instance when an officer carried a sidearm while on liberty.] If I would have had the time, I would have marched him in to the brig. But he took us to the train, and we got on a flatcar and rode to the break-off. She got off and headed for Hickam, and I tried to get to Ford Island. There were no boats--fire everywhere, and oil.

Alexander: Were you on the shore, looking across?

Thorn: I was looking across at Ford Island.

Alexander: I'm surprised that you could see.

Thorn: Well, you could see it, but there was no way to get to it with a small boat. There was so much confusion.

We got in the water and started

swimming. There were three of us from the squadron. As the skipper said later, that made it collective stupidity (chuckle). But it was just amazing--the confusion. You saw so much that you didn't know what to look at.

Alexander: That's an interesting statement to make here. You were on the ground. What you could see was limited, but what you saw was so engulfing.

Thorn: Of course, we were trying to get to our squadron office. Our planes were burning. The movies always show these PBVs burning up on the ramp there.

Alexander: They always make you feel good about that, right [facetious comment]? I'm trying to figure out how you would get into the water and swim to that island while coming from the eastern side of the harbor.

Thorn: Oh, it was swimming distance. You could get there. It was maybe a quarter-mile at the most.

Alexander: What about all the chaos that was going on, and the oil and fuel being dumped in there, and fire?

Thorn: Our standing orders were that if anything started, we were to get to our squadron headquarters. Our orders were to report in for duty under any circumstances. As the skipper said, "collective stupidity" set in. We didn't change a thing, and I don't think that we helped a hell of a lot. We became part of the problem, I'm sure.

Alexander: You did get to Ford Island?

Thorn: Some chief saw us and sent a motor whaleboat over to pick us up. They took us to the island. But we at least got some attention.

Alexander: What was it like to be on the island at that point?

Thorn: We got there just about the time that the second pass came over--maybe the tail-end of it, I'd say. [Editor's note: The second wave of Japanese planes hit Pearl Harbor at 8:55 a.m. and withdrew around 9:45 a.m.] I didn't see a whole lot in the way of Jap planes; it was just the aftermath more than anything else. We didn't waste a lot of time getting to the base.

Alexander: What was it like? Was it chaos? What, with

the people running around...you had, what, four battleships right there? [Editor's note: There were nine battleships berthed at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, seven of them docked at "Battleship Row" off of Ford Island.]

Thorn: There were wounded lying on the ground in rows.

Alexander: Was anybody attending to them?

Thorn: People were trying to. You see, we had civilians living on the island. The families of some of the officers were out there, trying to take care of their own people, I guess. I don't know. But we got in and reported in. Of the thirty-six officers, I think twelve of us got on the island.

We had a plane out on patrol. It was a training flight, and he got shot at when he came back in. That was typical of the confusion that was going on. He was shot at by our own people. It was such a shock that all of us were pretty much in shock.

Captain Brixner...that man...I knew from that day on that this would be a guy that

you'd hear from. He was uncanny. We had a plane that lost an engine out of Pearl Harbor while flying. We didn't know what sector he was in accurately. Bob Brixner looked at it and said, "Show me his flight plan." He looked at it and said, "Well, he's been on the water for almost two hours. At that point, the current goes in [such a direction]. Take [this vector]." We picked him up right on the nose. In the Battle of Midway--this was later--he put six planes on patrol and picked up the Jap fleet.

Alexander: Oh, they picked up the Jap fleet. That's how they found it?

Thorn: PBYS found it.

Alexander: I'd forgotten about that.

Thorn: If you look very carefully...I don't know how true it is, but the story ran around the squadron that in every single major engagement during World War II--with surface ships involved and attacks on islands--first contact was made by Catalinas.

Alexander: That's certainly very likely. Going back to Pearl Harbor, do you recall anything else on

that day that was memorable?

Thorn: I remember that they sent us back across in a fifty-foot motor launch. We caught the cane train again and went into town--into Honolulu--because the barracks were pretty much torn up. The BOQ [bachelor officers' quarters] was a mess. I spent the second night back at the hotel.

Then the third night, they had stuff pretty well straightened out at the BOQ, so we went back to the island. That was pretty fast. But we didn't have any airplanes. We didn't have anything left.

Alexander: Let me ask you this. Do you remember the four squadrons of B-17s that were en route at the time? [Editor's note: On the evening of December 6, thirteen U.S. Army Air Forces B-17 bombers took off from California and headed to Oahu, where they were scheduled to land on the morning of December 7. The U. S. Army radar base on Oahu picked up the first wave of incoming Japanese planes around 7:00 a.m., but the officer on duty, Lieutenant Kermit Tyler, mistook the Japanese strike

force for the expected flight of B-17s and did not report the radar findings to his superiors.]

Thorn: I've heard about it, but I don't know about it.

Alexander: You were not aware of it?

Thorn: No. But they didn't know what to do with us. We didn't have any airplanes, and with all the confusion, nobody knew when we'd get airplanes. So, temporarily they detached us. I was put in a utility squadron, VR-1.

Alexander: They just made that up at the time?

Thorn: Yes.

Alexander: Can I add one thing before we finish December 7? Were you expecting another attack after the first two?

Thorn: Yes, we were, particularly during the next four or five hours. The Marines were disappointed, I think, that we didn't have another one (chuckle).

Alexander: I've talked to a couple of them, and I don't know if they'd agree with that or not; of course, they're ready to go anytime.

Thorn: They're ready to go anytime!

Alexander: Go ahead, then. What was VR-1?

Thorn: VR-1 was a utility squadron.

Alexander: Which means what?

Thorn: They had just every kind of airplane you'd ever heard of, and they did anything that the admiral wanted us to do.

Alexander: Was this Admiral Kimmel? [Editor's note: Admiral Husband E. Kimmel was the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack.]

Thorn: Kimmel was still in charge, but he wasn't available. I didn't even meet him.

Alexander: What do you mean by "wasn't available?"

Thorn: He wasn't there. He was detained by some of the staff. They just got him away from things. I don't know whether it was part of a battle plan or not, but he went to Ford Island, somewhere in there. He went to the Yards and Docks Building and set up his flag there.

Alexander: On Ford Island?

Thorn: No, on the east side of Pearl Harbor. We didn't see him. I didn't meet the commanding officer who was CINCPAC until Admiral

[Chester A.] Nimitz got out there.

Alexander: Which was in the beginning of January, 1942, I think. [Editor's note: Admiral Nimitz became CINCPAC on December 31, 1941.]

Thorn: I don't remember exactly, but I know that it was very, very quickly. You heard all these stories, you know. I had an old leading chief who told me: "One of the first things that you gotta learn how to do is to ignore all this 'crap' that goes on. All this talk that goes on--just learn to ignore it. Don't pay any attention to it, and you'll be better off."

Alexander: He was an "old salt" [experienced sailor].

Thorn: Oh, yes! Talking about the chiefs, you learned so much from those people. At one time, I got into a bad situation...I'm getting out of order here.

Alexander: Let's not forget that. We'll stay kind of going day-to-day or whatever. Going back to VR-1, what did you have to do? What involvement did you have in that?

Thorn: I don't really know. I just got a set of orders that said: "Report to VR-1."

Alexander: Did you have an airplane to fly?

Thorn: No. There must have been twenty airplanes to fly--everything from a big, four-engine flying boat that belonged to the admiral to F4Fs [Grumman Wildcat fighters]. We had a little bit of everything. Of course, the first thing we did was to fly the admiral when he wanted to go somewhere. This was Admiral Nimitz, when he got there. I know that we flew him to Johnston Island.

Alexander: What for?

Thorn: He went there to look around. I don't know if it was for an inspection or what.

Alexander: What did you fly him in?

Thorn: In a big, four-engine flying boat. It was a big Consolidated PB4Y4. The food was good--really good!

Alexander: Was his aide with him? I'm trying to think of his name. [Editor's note: Lieutenant Hal Lamar served for a time as Nimitz's aide. The University of North Texas Oral History Collection holds an interview with Lamar, cataloged OH1059.]

Thorn: We didn't see a whole lot of him.

Alexander: When was this? How long after Nimitz came aboard?

Thorn: I think that this was part of his deal, because we immediately came back the same day. They took off and went to Midway--the admiral and the flight. I didn't make the flight to Midway.

Alexander: But you made the flight to Johnston Island and back to Honolulu.

Thorn: Yes, but then they went on to Midway. I think he was just looking over what the defenses were. I just wasn't "in the loop" [privy to important information] enough to know what he was doing.

Alexander: I'm sure that's true. How many crew would you have on that PB4Y4?

Thorn: I think it was somewhere around ten or twelve, but I'm not sure. When the admiral was aboard, he usually had three or four people with him.

Alexander: But how about as far as your crew was concerned?

Thorn: We had about ten. We had three pilots, usually. The cockpit was conventional.

Right behind it was a navigation room. Behind that, on the port side, was the admiral's ready cabin. On the other side there was *beaucoups* [a great deal of] radio gear.

Alexander: How about escorts?

Thorn: We didn't have any.

Alexander: That was pretty gutsy, then.

Thorn: Now, we had some patrols that covered the area pretty well. I do know that when we got to Johnston Island, there were eight fighters sitting there, which normally wouldn't have been there. When they came in, I don't know.

Alexander: You were surprised to see them. Was it unusual to see them?

Thorn: Yes.

Alexander: I was going to ask you this. Did you get to talk with any of the other staff people, other than the admiral, like, intelligence people or anyone like that that you ferried around?

Thorn: No. I was on a mission with a patrol plane commander, and we took three people from the

Navy and three people from the State Department, and we flew down to Tonga [actually Tongatapu]. We met the old Queen [Salote Tupou III] there and made arrangements to build an airstrip.

Alexander: Where is Tonga?

Thorn: It's down almost to Fiji, south of Fiji. There are about a thousand islands there. The Queen was a salty old "bag." Boy, I'll tell you! The first British residents she had after she took over, she beheaded. They knew who was running the show. She went to the coronation [of Queen Elizabeth II] in England. Her son, I'll bet, weighed 350 pounds. He was a big guy! But she was a real character.

Alexander: I was wondering if you might have ever run across a fellow by the name of Rochefort. [Editor's note: Commander Joseph J. Rochefort was the head of Fleet Radio Unit, Pacific (FRUPAC), which was the chief intelligence gathering and codebreaking office of the Pacific Fleet.]

Thorn: Rochefort was in intelligence. He had a

funny, whiny kind of voice. I was never around him a whole lot, but I did get to see him quite often.

Alexander: He has been given as the primary reason why we broke the Japanese code.

Thorn: Oh, sure! There's no question about that. We got to know that story pretty well. I'll tell you, when a staff job or when a patrol plane squadron got rescue duty, you got put "in the loop" pretty high because the PBYP, among other things, was slow. So, you had to know ahead of time where the action was going to be so you could get up there. On the flight, the strike force goes past you, and you arrive about the same time that they do so you could get them coming off the target and pick up the stragglers. That's the reason that you could pick up...I don't know the facts, actually, or the actual count, but we used to say: "If you get shot down off of target with us covering you, and if we have New Zealand P-40s [Curtiss Warhawk fighters] flying cover on us, your chances are almost ten-to-one or twelve-to-one that we'll pick

you up."

Alexander: That's very high.

Thorn: Yes.

Alexander: I was talking about Rochefort because they broke that code [JN-25] very early--in fact, I believe, in time for Midway.

Thorn: Oh, sure! In fact, Midway was what confirmed the fact that they had the key to the Japanese code.

Alexander: I think that Midway was because of the water supply. There were a lot of people back in the States who didn't believe that they really had broken the code, and I think that that's what did it. [Editor's note: Rochefort and his team had deciphered enough of JN-25 to suspect that the Japanese intended to invade Midway Island, which they believed had been designated in JN-25 as "MI." To test this suspicion, Midway was ordered to transmit an uncoded message that its freshwater condenser had broken. This transmission was picked up by Japanese radio operators, who then encrypted the message into JN-25 and passed it on to Imperial

Japanese Navy headquarters. This JN-25 message, which noted that "MI" was having problems with its freshwater supply, was then duly intercepted by Rochefort, confirming that Midway was in fact the target of the "MI" invasion.]

Thorn: Ernie King didn't believe it at the time. [Editor's note: Admiral Ernest J. King was the Commander-in-Chief U.S. Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations on the Joint Chiefs of Staff.] I heard him stand up over at Naval Air Station, Kaneohe. He said: "I'm Ernest King. You all know who I am. I'm a self-appointed son-of-a-bitch." (chuckle) Truer words were never spoken! And, you know, the guy was a good naval officer, but nobody knew it! How many guys would promote [Admiral William F. ("Bull")] Halsey or Nimitz over hundreds of other people to get them to where they were to run the war. We had one hell of a team, and Ernie King was the one who picked them. But I was scared to death everytime he came around anywhere near us. I went "undercover" (chuckle).

Alexander: We're now getting close to Midway [June 4-6, 1942]. What were you in rank by this point? Did you ever get out of being a cadet?

Thorn: Yes. By this time, I got to be an ensign, and I was as "green" [inexperienced] as they make 'em.

Alexander: Let's talk about getting ready for Midway. How soon were you involved in what was going to happen there?

Thorn: I didn't know anything about that. I was still in that utility squadron. I was just a "cab driver." But they had two newly-commissioned ensigns right out of flight school that they wanted to get aboard an [aircraft] carrier. The carrier was not coming into Pearl Harbor. We didn't have a captain that would bring a carrier into Pearl Harbor during that period.

Alexander: Of course, that was because there was an awful lot of salvage and everything else going on, I would think; but he also wouldn't want to have anything happen to his ship.

Thorn: They didn't want them exposed. So, the carrier was going to be right at 400 miles

off the island, and they were afraid that these ensigns couldn't find it in the dark. Even though the Hawaiian Network was going to give us some vector points...

Alexander: The Hawaiian Network? I heard you say that awhile ago.

Thorn: It was the radio network.

Alexander: FM [frequency modulation]?

Thorn: It was high-powered. It had a tremendous amount of power. It was the largest transmitter in the world up to that time. The idea was that they were going to be able to talk to the submarines, supposedly while submerged. It didn't work too well, but, anyway...some of this is a little bit hazy to me.

Alexander: These two guys, you said, they were thinking of sending them out to the carrier.

Thorn: They were just right out of flight training and right out of operational training. They were afraid that they wouldn't find the carrier, so they wanted somebody to take them out there. I took them out there.

Alexander: In a PBY?

Thorn: No. They were in other fighters.

Alexander: You were flying one, also?

Thorn: I flew a fighter, also.

Alexander: To guide them out there?

Thorn: Yes. See, I had gone through fighter school when I was in Pensacola. I took them out, and I was really proud of those two kids. They got down on that deck just as slick as a whistle. I talked to an ol' chief about that. I said, "Chief, those kids made a real nice landing." He said [makes low, grumbling voice], "They always do when they're scared."
(chuckle)

Alexander: And you knew they were scared!

Thorn: Oh, you'd better believe it!

Alexander: Did you land on there, also?

Thorn: Oh, sure! I didn't go back.

Alexander: Was this a task force?

Thorn: This is the task force that went on to Midway.

Alexander: So, are we in May to June, 1942?

Thorn: I'd have to look to recall the dates. It all gets hazy and runs together. But this was the day before, so we had about twenty hours

of steaming before we got to the location. I thought that I was there just as a passenger. I didn't think anything about it.

Alexander: But it was the full task force--the Yorktown?

[Editor's note: There were two task forces involved in the Battle of Midway. Task Force 16, which sailed from Pearl Harbor on May 28, included the aircraft carriers *Enterprise* (CV-6) and *Hornet* (CV-8), while Task Force 17, which sailed from Pearl Harbor on May 30, included the *Yorktown* (CV-5). The two task forces never rendezvoused during the battle.]

Thorn: They were in the area, but we couldn't see them. We didn't know where they were.

Alexander: What ship was this?

Thorn: This was the *Yorktown*. Anyway, I guess about midnight, there was a flight officer from another ship aboard. His name was Dixie Kiefer. [Editor's note: Commander Kiefer was the executive officer of the *Yorktown*.] He came in and woke me up, and he said, "You're gonna be flying picket [combat air patrol, or CAP] in the morning." So, that was the first I knew of it.

Alexander: Had you ever flown picket before?

Thorn: No.

Alexander: You really hadn't been in any combat area, had you?

Thorn: Nobody else had, either (chuckle). It was a new experience for everybody. Well, we did get in a little combat around Makin Island [Gilbert Islands].

Alexander: Let's talk about picket duty now. Did you fly picket that morning?

Thorn: Yes.

Alexander: How far ahead of the task force were you?

Thorn: You didn't get ahead of the task force. You flew over the ship to protect the ship.

Alexander: So, you were staying in the vicinity right there?

Thorn: Yes, in two-plane groups.

Alexander: Picket, later on, I think, was a different situation.

Thorn: Well, we called it "picket." You were up there, and your purpose was to protect the ships.

Alexander: I think that the "picket" that I'm thinking about from later on is when they put the

destroyers out, and they were the picket.
[Editor's note: Mr. Alexander is referring to the screening forces of destroyers laid out to protect capital ships from *kamikaze* suicide planes. This tactic was adopted in late 1944, when the Japanese *kamikaze* attacks began.]

Thorn: Well, that's a different type of picket.

Alexander: I'm sorry. I was mixing that up. Excuse me. Let me ask you something. When you were flying up there with two planes, you were doing what? Just a "racetrack" around them, or what?

Thorn: We usually flew sort of like you were flying around pylons.

Alexander: Yes, like a racetrack--a mile [this way] and a mile [that way].

Thorn: Yes. If you were good at it, you'd spend a lot of time going in really tight circles where the sun was behind you, so he [an enemy pilot] is looking into the sun if he's going to try to get to you. You could keep him from attacking out of the sun that way--by getting "up-sun" on him.

Alexander: When you went up and started this picket assignment, were you expecting to see Japanese planes? Or did you know at that time?

Thorn: We didn't really know. We hadn't been discovered. We came down and refueled after about an hour-and-a-half. We refueled and climbed back up.

Alexander: We're going to stop right there.

[Tape 2, Side 1]

Alexander: We were talking about the picket work. You said that you had not been discovered.

Thorn: No, not at that time.

Alexander: What were you hearing? Of course, you probably wouldn't know what was going on, as far as what the Japanese navy was doing. Had they sent somebody out to find the Japanese navy?

Thorn: Yes. VP-44 moved up to Midway. Bob Brixner, the skipper, sent six planes out.

Alexander: They went out to Midway. Were they based at Midway?

Thorn: They were based at Midway. He sent six planes out, and he spotted the Japanese.

Jake Reid was one of the pilots. They had a lot of stories. They all came back, talking about it. Of course, I knew all of the people. [Jarlath J.] "Jigs" Lyons was the patrol plane commander. He wrote a little "to-do" in a dispatch that he sent back to the squadron. He said that when they sent in that contact report at Midway, it said: "Jap fleet sighted. [So many] ships of [such-and-such] class. Notify next of kin." (chuckle) I never knew whether that was true or not, but it's such a good story! They had some recordings of Midway. Midway did a bunch of recording.

Alexander: The task force?

Thorn: The base itself. They recorded the patrol planes, and for some of those kids, it was their first combat. They called Don Gumz. He was the "exec" [executive officer]. He was handling radio communications.

Alexander: Where was he located? Was he at Midway?

Thorn: He was in a plane. He actually operated out of a plane. They called him Don "Beat Your" Gumz. He was a great guy! Anyway, they

called back, and they said, "Skipper, they're killing young guys out here!" (chuckle) It was exciting. You know, it's nothing like you think it's going to be.

Alexander: Where were you at the time when they found the Japanese fleet?

Thorn: I was flying picket on the Yorktown. We got jumped. I don't remember the exact time, but it seems like it must have been around 1:00 p.m. or 2:00 p.m. when we got jumped.

Alexander: By the Japs, which means that they had spotted you, then.

Thorn: Yes. That's when you learned a little bit about a two-plane formation.

Alexander: Tell us about that.

Thorn: The lead plane would turn his belly up toward the guy.

Alexander: In other words, he'd pull the stick back and go straight up.

Thorn: No. He made a climbing turn with his belly up. That guy saw the belly and headed for him. The second plane then had him right in his target.

Alexander: Because when the Japanese is coming back at

him, he's not seeing the fellow behind him.

Is that what you're saying?

Thorn: No. What I'm saying is that when he saw that belly, he'd get suckered in and start to shoot at it. That laid him wide-open for the guy behind him.

Alexander: He just got right in front of him, didn't he? Between the two airplanes?

Thorn: That's right. Dixie did that twice.

Alexander: Dixie was the guy in the back?

Thorn: He was the guy in the lead plane. I was flying number two, behind him.

Alexander: Had you worked this out someway between the two of you?

Thorn: I had studied the two-plane formation.

Alexander: So, you were not surprised when he pulled up ahead of you?

Thorn: No. This was common practice. The only thing was that they didn't tell you just how tough it was, when you knew that that guy was trying to kill you, to turn your belly up. That was when it got tough.

Alexander: This first Japanese plane--was it a Zero [Mitsubishi A6M fighter]?

Thorn: It was a Zero.

Alexander: And he went after your friend.

Thorn: Right.

Alexander: And you shot him down? You got him?

Thorn: That's right. The first two, I shot down.

Alexander: They did it again?

Thorn: Another plane did it, yes.

Alexander: So, you got two of them right there?

Thorn: That's right, on that first pass.

Alexander: And what was the name of the fellow in the lead plane?

Thorn: Dixie. He was sixty-two years old. He was flying picket because he just put himself on the picket list. I don't think they would have let him do it if they would have realized that he was going to do it.

Alexander: Did he get shot up at all? The Jap...

Thorn: We both got our planes shot up. That was my problem! I was in good shape, and the engine was running fine. It didn't act like there were any problems. I came to land, caught the second [arresting] wire, which was a soft wire, and the tail stayed on the wire and the rest of the airplane rolled up in a ball.

Alexander: With you in it?

Thorn: Yes.

Alexander: You didn't go over the deck, did you?

Thorn: I hit the wall of the island [superstructure]. A colored gentleman in an asbestos suit came out there and said, "Now, don't get excited! We're gonna get you out of here!" He got me out.

Alexander: Were you hurt very badly?

Thorn: Yes. My back was broken, and both my knees were crushed. But I was lucky. I had one of the best doctors that the Navy had. He was an interesting person. His name was Edward Stabens [?]. He was a New Yorker. I said, "How'd you wind up in New York, 'Doc?'" He said, "Stabens [?] was the guy who made the deal with the Indians." If you look it up, it was! That was his ancestor. I said, "Where's your house? Where does your family live?" He said, "Well, actually, the center of the farm was at 50th and Broad Street." You couldn't imagine the money he had! The great thing about that guy was the fact that he was eaten up with the Navy because his

practice was so unchallenging to him. He was doing something that had some importance to it in the Navy, and he just ate it up.

Alexander: He just wanted to be a good flight surgeon.

Thorn: Yes, and he was great. He felt like the best way to handle these spinal injuries was to do anything you could to get them going. He had a team, and they worked miracles with us guys.

Alexander: With you?

Thorn: With everybody that he handled.

Alexander: Obviously, you've done well with your back.

Thorn: I've done really well with it. They put me in a brace, and I went back to duty. But I couldn't parachute very well with a seat pack.

Alexander: How soon did you get back on the line, then?

Thorn: I was out for about four months. I was paralyzed for two.

Alexander: They got you back to Honolulu, I'm sure.

Thorn: Yes. Then I went back to the utility squadron, but I was immediately transferred back to VP-44--my old squadron. We went south. We had a new skipper by that time.

His name was [Commander Robert A.] "Rosie" Rosasco. He was an Italian from the old Rosasco shipping line. He was another one who thought that he was an aviator.

Alexander: Was he, or was he not?

Thorn: Well, he was an old man when he went through flight training. Well, he was "mature"-- let's put it that way. He flew fighters, mostly. In the big flying boats, he just lacked "the touch." He just really didn't have it, but he worked at it. You were lucky if he didn't pick on you, because he wanted to learn to fly again. If he liked you, why, he'd choose you to go with (chuckle). He just wasn't at his peak, but he had the guts of a gorilla.

Alexander: What was his rank?

Thorn: At that time, he was a commander. He made captain, and he ultimately made admiral. Gumz was still there.

Alexander: Let's do this now. You've gone back to the utility squadron. No, that's not true.

Thorn: No, I've gone back to VP-44.

Alexander: What did they have you doing there? Was this

out of Pearl Harbor?

Thorn: I was put in a plane as the first pilot. I was not the patrol plane commander. That was "Jigs" Lyons, whom I had been with earlier. We flew patrols. We went south, to Nouméa [on New Caledonia Island]. We went into Nouméa, and then we went up to Espiritu Santo [New Hebrides Islands]. We were based aboard the *Curtiss* [AV-4], a big seaplane tender. They finally made it into a communications ship. It was a big ship! It had three admirals aboard. We had three flags aboard that thing at one time.

Alexander: One of them was [Rear Admiral John R.] McCain.

Thorn: That's right--the "old man." I knew him quite well. He was a good man. The "Bull" [Admiral Halsey] was aboard.

Alexander: Were you aboard that ship, then?

Thorn: Yes, we were based on it.

Alexander: She was at Pearl Harbor at the time of the attack.

Thorn: Yes, but now it was down there. She was at Espiritu Santo.

Alexander: Which is near the Solomon Islands.

Thorn: It was 600 miles from the Solomons. We were in the south end of the Torres [island] group.

That was an interesting ship. I had a crazy, crazy thing happen. They were relieving the skipper. They brought a new skipper in to take over the *Curtiss*. As they were wont to do, they had a little beer "bust" over on the island. They didn't ever want to have it aboard the ship, so they'd move it to the island. Both skippers went over.

I was a "boot" [new arrival], so they said, "You have the duty," and "Washing-Machine Charlie" came over (chuckle). [Editor's note: "Washing-Machine Charlie" was a nickname for a solitary enemy plane flying a harassment raid.] A Jap patrol plane came over at high altitude.

I had had enough training to know that you don't sit at anchorage and let yourself get bombed. So, I went to the bridge, and there was an old bosun [chief boatswain's

mate] up there. He had the best voice! He could have aped any foghorn on the face of the earth! I told him, "Prepare to get under way!" He said, "Prepare to land two men on the cruiser buoy!" I'd give a command, and he'd change it and give the right one (chuckle).

Anyway, nothing happened. We got out and got under way. I said, "All ahead forward!" He said [makes groaning voice], "All ahead one-eighth!" We came back and made the buoy the first time. I made the buoy with no problem.

That night, the skipper called me in. It would have been his butt if this ever got out. He called me in, and he said [raises voice]: "Thorn, have you been qualified as a deck officer?" I said, "I don't know. They wrote something in my log." He said, "How about getting [that] for me?"

Alexander: I'll bet he did! You just indicated that the entry was made in the log by the skipper.

Thorn: What was so funny--I got such a "kick" out of it--was when "Bull" Halsey got wind of this.

He called me in and said, "Have you thought about staying in the Navy?" I said, "Well, I just haven't thought about it." He said, "I'm not supposed to know about this, but last weekend you learned a good lesson." I said, "What's that, Sir?" He said, "To listen to your chief." He knew the whole story! He knew exactly what was going on. He said, "You ought to consider staying in the Navy." You know, Halsey was a bluffer. He could bluff his way in poker like you wouldn't believe. When we got ready for what we called the First Battle of Santa Cruz, we didn't have a pot out there. We had no carriers or anything. I think the *Enterprise* got in there.

Alexander: But you were still on the *Curtiss*?

Thorn: Oh, yes! We were flying patrols. "Jigs" and I had rescue duty, so we were in a staff meeting. He started naming off all the ships that were in this Jap task force. We had the *Curtiss* and the [destroyer tender AD-14] *Dixie*. She was set up with a machine shop to repair destroyers. We had one modern

destroyer, and three old four-stacker World War I-vintage destroyers. There were some other ships at sea around, but it just didn't sound real good. When they said something about twenty-three cruisers and named them off, this one young officer--I don't even know who he was--said, "Admiral, what are we going to do? "Bull" said, "We're gonna have the God-damndest naval fight you ever saw!" (chuckle)

We had a guy in the squadron who had been out on patrol for twenty-two of twenty-four consecutive hours. He was just dog-tired, and we were still hunting that Jap task force. The admiral was up on the bridge, and down below, on the gangway, this crew came in. The guy was physically a brute, but he was one of the most gentle people you'll ever meet in your life. The pilot said, "You guys go get something to eat. There's one rule you gotta have in times like this: if you get an opportunity to eat, eat! It may be a long time before you eat again. Then go get in the sack."

The "Bull" said, "Belay that! Eat, and then you get back in the air!" The "Bull" came through the light-lock. He walked in with a big ol' tear rolling down his cheek. He wasn't half as tough as he let on. It hurt him to do that.

That's not all I saw the "Bull" do. He'd deny this, probably, if he was alive. When we knew what the bad situation was at Santa Cruz, he got on his knees and prayed. He was an enigma. You didn't know him. He'd say things like: "Well, what do you want to do? Live forever?" He'd be so brutish about it, almost, but then he'd turn around and be real gentle.

I flew him on a long trip. This was back in Pearl Harbor. This was when he went down to take over the 3rd Fleet. [Editor's note: The 3rd Fleet, which was commanded by Halsey, did not come into being until August, 1944.]

Alexander: Tell us about that. He was with Nimitz at the time, wasn't he?

Thorn: That's right. He sent him down to relieve

[Vice Admiral Robert L.] Ghormley.

Alexander: Ghormley was on Guadalcanal [Solomon Islands] at the time, was he not?

Thorn: No.

Alexander: At Nouméa?

Thorn: No, down in Australia.

Alexander: But he was in charge of the action at Guadalcanal.

Thorn: At Guadalcanal, yes.

Alexander: He was relieved by Halsey at Guadalcanal.

[Editor's note: Nimitz relieved Ghormley as Commander-in-Chief Southern Pacific Forces and replaced him with Halsey at Nouméa on October 18, 1942.]

Thorn: That's right, after they lost those three cruisers in one night. [Editor's note: As a result of faulty intelligence and several tactical mistakes, the U.S. cruisers *Quincy*, *Vincennes*, and *Astoria* were sunk during the Battle of Savo Island on August 8-9, 1942. In addition, the cruiser *Chicago* was heavily damaged, and the Australian cruiser *HMAS Canberra* was also sunk.]

Alexander: That's right. That was that terrible night,

including the deaths of the Sullivan boys.

[Editor's note: The five Sullivan brothers were killed when the cruiser USS Juneau was sunk during the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal on November 13-14, 1942.]

Thorn: And it was dumb. It was just plain dumb.

Alexander: You're talking about that terrible battle that we had. Yes, it was dumb. Let me ask you a question now. Was Halsey brought back up to Pearl Harbor to be with Nimitz to get this command, or did you have to go and get him?

Thorn: He went down to relieve Ghormley. He was stationed at Pearl Harbor before that.

Alexander: Was this the time when you took him down there?

Thorn: I took him down there, yes.

Alexander: Was that the first time that you met him?

Thorn: It was the first time I'd met him.

Alexander: He was still under the command of Nimitz?

Thorn: Oh, yes.

Alexander: He always was?

Thorn: He always was. We took off, and we flew from Pearl Harbor. We elected to make landfall.

We were going to go to Christmas Island, but there were some islands on [this side of it]. We got good position there, and then we headed for Baker Island. What was interesting was that we landed, and everybody was all excited because the "Bull" was aboard. They had been notified somehow.

Alexander: What were you flying?

Thorn: A PBV. So, we got there, and they said, "Admiral, we've got food ready for you." He said, "Well, I'm going to stay here with the boys. Feed the crew first." It was amazing, how good the food was.

Alexander: I'm sure it was, if it was prepared for the admiral.

Thorn: He ate with us. We left there, and we flew to American Samoa. We landed there. They said, "Admiral, we have a dinner for you. The skipper wants you to have dinner with him." He said, "No, I'm going to eat with the crew." We were flying from there on to Nouméa, and he said, "Thorn, you're going to find out that at sea, if you take care of your crew, they'll take care of you." You'd

think that he could just run roughshod over people, but he didn't. He was a different kind of guy. Another guy who was very gentle and easy to get along with was McCain. He was a good guy, and he understood aviation tactics.

Alexander: He was in charge of one of the task forces of the 3rd Fleet.

Thorn: We had some mighty good officers. We had a few "horse's asses."

Alexander: You're always going to have those. I'm looking at my notes here. All right. I've got something that I think you mentioned the other night--"cold beer on Guadalcanal." What was that story?

Thorn: Well, I know that they had a mountain of beer out at Guadalcanal, but this was later. This was after the Army came in.

Alexander: So, this was after it was secured. [Editor's note: U.S. Army troops began to supplement U.S. Marine forces in October, 1942, two months after the invasion began. Guadalcanal was not secured until February, 1943.]

Thorn: They brought in two divisions of Army troops.

We took the 2nd Marine Raider Battalion and the 1st Marine Division out.

Alexander: Halsey didn't make his headquarters on Guadalcanal.

Thorn: No. He was aboard ship. But when we got there, we lost control of the area. "Ironbottom Sound" [the body of water between Guadalcanal, Savo, and Florida Islands] got its name during that period because we and the Japanese sank so many ships in there it was like the bottom was iron-plated. They didn't have any supplies, and there was no way for them to take care of their wounded. We had one old PBY5-A.

By this time VP-44 was sent back to Pearl Harbor, and we just had "proceed" orders. We thought that we were going home. Then they explained that they were expanding so fast, and they needed combat-experienced pilots, so we were in. They signed us all off as patrol plane commanders and moved us over to Kaneohe. It's on the other side of Oahu.

We got ready to go straight back down to

the South Pacific. We got down there in time for the wind-up at Guadalcanal, and then the landings in the Russell Islands, which were almost unopposed. We did our first coastwatcher duty in VP-44.

Alexander: When you say "coastwatcher duty," what do you mean? Are you talking about putting men on those islands?

Thorn: We'd take in supplies, haul out prisoners, and just support the coastwatchers. It was very gratifying duty. It wasn't a real healthy duty, but it was gratifying. It was always touching when you landed on a Jap-occupied island, you know. But those people were amazing.

Alexander: Were most of these natives?

Thorn: No, most of them were Australians. They were people who had worked and lived in the islands.

A guy named [Donald] Kennedy was at Seghe Passage at Munda [New Georgia, Central Solomon Islands]. They were getting ready for the landing at Munda [June, 1943], when we were going to go take it. He was on the

southeast end of the island. There was a coconut plantation down there, and he moved into the house and recruited the local natives. He had about seventy-five or eighty of them--a little army down there--and we supplied them. They loved machetes, and they wanted machetes. We also hauled a bunch of 30.06 [-caliber] Enfield rifles to them. [Editor's note: Kennedy's area of coastwatching responsibility, the largest during the war, stretched from the Western and Central Solomons to the Russell Islands. He organized an efficient network of natives, who were able to provide intelligence, scouting, rescue services, and transport for the Allies.]

I made a trip to take some food and stuff up to him, and to pick up two prisoners. He wanted me to get him some paste-on dots--just red dots. I said, "Where in the hell am I going to get red dots?" He wanted to put them on the trees. He also wanted thirty-five rolls of primer cord. Can you imagine what would have happened to that

airplane with thirty-five rolls of primer cord in it? Anyway, I got him the dots. I got them from the supply department, and I got the primer cord and took it to him. They went out there and put it around these palm trees.

The morning of the landing, in forty-five minutes, all those trees were down. They had dragged them off to the side, and we were landing right there. I landed a PB5-A in an amphibious job. They just cut those trees down.

I went up there one night to take some stuff to him and to pick up some prisoners. They wanted another prisoner. They said, "Get us an officer." He said [imitates Australian accent], "What rank?" (chuckle) He was a character!

Alexander: I'm going to go back on a couple of these now. I wanted to ask you this. This is going back to Midway for a minute. Did you ever get credit for those "kills" that you had?

Thorn: Yes. It showed up in the reports, and they

entered it in my log book. It's kind of funny because I really wasn't even supposed to be aboard that ship (chuckle).

Alexander: Because you ferried those guys out there?

Thorn: Yes. I wasn't attached to a squadron. You know, "Bull" Halsey had a funny thing to say when I was operating as flight officer in VP-44 during the rescue operations at Munda.

We were already beginning to patrol the area up around Rabaul [on New Britain Island]. That's where the big Japanese base was. By that time, we were getting replacements coming right straight from Pensacola. These kids didn't know their butts from \$900. Sometimes in rough seas...take a runway and imagine ten-foot humps in it. You had to do it absolutely right, or it was "Katy bar the door." It was just a case where it was easier to do it yourself than to send them, because you knew that they weren't going to come back--until you had a chance to work with them a little bit. I didn't even realize this, but the admiral came aboard. We were aboard the

"Wright Maru"--the USS *Wright* [AV-1]. It was a seaplane tender--an old, single-screw "Hog Islander" [World War I-era ship built at the Hog Island, Pennsylvania, Ship Works].

Alexander: Wasn't she also in the Solomons?

Thorn: Yes.

Alexander: But she was a seaplane tender?

Thorn: That's right. That's what we were.

Alexander: I was thinking that the *Wright* was a PT boat tender.

Thorn: No. We had a funny thing happen one morning. "Washing-Machine Charlie" spotted us. We were up at the Ontong Passage, on the north shore of Munda. Ol' "Charlie" hit us on the fantail with a little eighteen-pounder. It was a little, tiny bomb, but it made a hell of a racket. It did a little bit of damage. Anyway, the next morning they came out with a dispatch that said: "The USS *Wright* was attacked by Japanese a bomber last night. A column of rust could be seen for forty miles." (chuckle) I thought that was great!

Alexander: The other night you mentioned something that I want to ask you about. You were taking

Admiral Halsey to meet General [Douglas A.]
MacArthur. How did that start?

Thorn: I made a couple of trips. They didn't want
him flying his big flying boat over there...

Alexander: You're talking about Halsey?

Thorn: Right, unless it was in a very, very
protected area, which it usually was because
"Dugout Doug" didn't spend a lot of time up
on the front. [Editor's note: MacArthur
merited the derisive nickname "Dugout Doug"
for remaining in his fortified complex at
Corregidor during most of the Philippines
Campaign of 1941-1942.]

Alexander: Not at that time, no.

Thorn: Well, I don't think that he ever did. I
don't want to put this on the tape.
[Interview ends abruptly]