

***NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR***

***Nimitz Education and Research Center  
Fredericksburg, Texas***

***Interview with Thomas Gillespie, Jr.  
U.S. Navy Radioman***

## Interview With Thomas Gillespie, Jr.

This is Ed Metzler. Today is the twenty-first of May, 2008. I am interviewing Mr. Thomas Gillespie, Jr. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas at the Nimitz Museum. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

**Mr. Metzler:** Let me start out, Tom, by thanking you for coming in today and spending your time with us to share your experiences from World War II. Let me get you started by just having you introduce yourself. Tell us when and where you were born, a little bit about your parents, things like that.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Okay. Well, my name is Thomas F. Gillespie, Jr. I was born in a little town, a lumber mill town, called Stamps, Arkansas, on August the thirty-first, 1921. My father was a head of this saw mill, which was a whatchya call a soft wood, pine soft wood. It was considered the largest in the United States at that time. It went on through several years and it's actually what they call quit, or sawed out, no more timber, five or ten years later. And then I went off to junior college.

**Mr. Metzler:** So did your dad move at that point?

**Mr. Gillespie:** No, he stayed right where he was.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And then I went to college.

**Mr. Metzler:** So where'd you go to high school?

**Mr. Gillespie:** I went to high school in the little town of Stamps. We had about twenty-one, twenty-two kids in our graduating class, a small town. And then, after I got out of college and there I—

**Mr. Metzler:** So where'd you go to college?

**Mr. Gillespie:** I went to college at Magnolia A&M College which was a branch of the University of Arkansas at the time. And then the, uh, I wasn't happy with college, I didn't like what I was doing in particular, and I had been, I liked fooling with radios when I was a kid, and also with photography. But anyhow, to make a long story short, my dad saw that I wasn't real happy with what I was doing, so he found a radio college in Port Arthur, Texas, and it was about the only real bonafied, qualified radio school at the time. And I went down there and I just felt alive.

And I wound up, I was there taking news off of the teletype machine on the radio station on this Sunday when they bombed Pearl Harbor.

**Mr. Metzler:** Oh, really!

**Mr. Gillespie:** And the paper started spitting out like crazy. What I was doing, taking the paper and handing it to the announcer.

Well, I went ahead and finished school, and I got my—

**Mr. Metzler:** The announcer was like radio announcer?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yes, radio announcer.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay, okay.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And my ambition was to be a shipboard radio operator. The ships came right by the school, that's what I wanted to do. So I went ahead and got my second class radio telephone commercial license and one of the instructors there told me, he said, "There's a job open we have, a radio technician with a geophysical company in Shreveport, Louisiana." Would I take it? I was sixty miles \_\_\_\_\_??? I'll take it! So I went on up there and I was draft-exempt, deferred, for a short period of time, and then they started chewing up my ankles a little bit.

**Mr. Metzler:** Nibbling.

**Mr. Gillespie:** So I went in to—

**Mr. Metzler:** Now how old were you, you must have been twenty, twenty-one then.

**Mr. Gillespie:** I was twenty.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay.

**Mr. Gillespie:** So I went down to Navy Recruiting, first in Little Rock, I was up around there working, and they told me what they could possibly do, so when, it got to a certain point in time there, where I had to decide what I wanted to do, and I didn't want any part of the Army, really. And I liked the water, and I thought, well, the Navy. So went down to Shreveport, Louisiana and I took an exam down there and now, I want you to listen to this part, this is very unusual.

I took the exam and they said, "We can make you a third class petty officer, and we'll call you a radio technician third class. And we're gonna send you to New Orleans." And they said, "Now, if you hadda been"—I went in on August the nineteenth, and if I'd waited 'til the thirty-first they would have made me second class if I'd been twenty-one years old, because they were begging for technicians back then, and they were few and far between.

To try to make a long story short, I went over to, they sent me down to New Orleans to be inducted in the Navy, and I went across over to the Coast Guard base across the river called Algiers. And there I got in with the, we got assignment doing different odd things, and they found out I could type. I could type about fifty words a minute, forty words a minute.

**Mr. Metzler:** That's good, back then.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And I was copying code, about twenty words a minute. Well they found out I could type and they put me with the Coast Guard 'cause they were handling all the security, the passes, the gate passes, civilians going in there, and the Coast Guard officer tried to get me to transfer with the Coast Guard 'cause he liked my typing, but I didn't do it, thank goodness.

Well, finally it came up and we were waiting to go to a primary radio school and there was one in Chicago, there was one in Idaho, if I remember correctly, one in Texas A&M, and one at the University of Houston, in Houston. And they had an opening for a class in University of Houston, they put us on the train after I'd been there about three or four weeks, and shipped us to Houston, to primary radio school.

You're looking at one Navy guy, the reason I'm tellin' you, is I never went to boot camp.

**Mr. Metzler:** Wow! You were special.

**Mr. Gillespie:** There was very few of us. I didn't even know how to \_\_\_\_\_ ??? and could care less. But they were lookin' for technicians. Well, a lot of the fellows who went to primary school, they busted 'em out of there because they were radio repair men in their local towns, fixing house radios. And they put all these guys in there to use a slide rule, and do your math, and logarithms, and I just had that out of school. And those boys didn't And they knew three times more about fixin' a radio than I did, and they kicked them out and kept guys like me.

Well, when we finished the primary school, I did have a choice of going to aircraft radar, which was a top secret word, you didn't mention the word radar back then. No. Now this was, I went in in 1942 and this was at the, I got out of primary school right before Christmas, so I got to go home to Arkansas for Christmas.

**Mr. Metzler:** Now this is in U of H, huh?

**Mr. Gillespie:** U of H, yes. And then I came back to University of Houston right after the first of the year. I went down to Corpus Christi to a place they called Rhode Island (sp??), which is now Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi.

**Mr. Metzler:** Is this early 'forty-two now?

**Mr. Gillespie:** This was the first part of 'forty-three. January, 'forty-three.

**Mr. Metzler:** I lost track there.

**Mr. Gillespie:** I did want, I didn't care about flying in airplanes. When I'd left out of Port Arthur I had a chance to go with Pan American World Airways as flight radio operator to South America. And make tons of money. I had several real close friends that did that. But I didn't want to go because I didn't want to fly in an airplane, but I had a choice of going to Corpus Christi to aircraft school, radar, or go to Treasure Island in California to shipboard radar. And I didn't want to go as far as California, and I didn't want no part of shipboard for some reason. So I wound up with the aircraft.

And then we came out of where we graduated there, we were, I was, my orders, and several of us, was to go aboard the aircraft carrier the *Bonhomme Richard*, and it was up in dry dock in, ah, up in the East Coast, I've forgotten where it was. And all of a sudden they changed our orders and said "That ship is not ready. We're sending you all to Clinton, Oklahoma." We couldn't find Clinton Oklahoma on the map, hardly.

We were shipped to an airbase that the Navy had that was halfway between Trenton, Oklahoma, and Elk City, Oklahoma. In fact, when we got off the bus we got next thing off the train, what have you, we wound up in sort of a cornfield. And we didn't know what we was going to do.

**Mr. Metzler:** Who is "we"? You were in there with a bunch of other guys?

**Mr. Gillespie:** It was just about forty of us in the bunch.

**Mr. Metzler:** And they'd all gotten out of that U of H school?

**Mr. Gillespie:** No, some of 'em had come from other schools. They had formed this big class down in Corpus.

**Mr. Metzler:** In Corpus.

**Mr. Gillespie:** A few of 'em I knew, we'd stayed together, well, two of us stayed together practically all though the service.

So anyhow, we found out that, we didn't know what we was gonna do when we got there. And this was in, uh, we got there in, uh, about May, I guess it was. And that's where we got introduced to the drones. Now, the original drones that we used were called KDNs, and the ones we wound up with were KDRs.

And that was, that was quite an operation up there. I'm just skipping through the window, you can go back later on if you want to ask more.

**Mr. Metzler:** Let's dig into a little detail as we go along, 'cause if we don't, we'll foget to go back. Describe these drones in some more detail for me, if you would.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, they were twin engine, and they were basically made out of cloth and plywood or some sort of fiberwood stuff.

**Mr. Metzler:** How big were they?

**Mr. Gillespie:** I don't really have the dimensions, but I can send them to you, I got pictures and stuff.

**Mr. Metzler:** No, but I mean, half size, full size?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, they were, in a sense, they were full size airplanes.

**Mr. Metzler:** All right, that was the first thing.

**Mr. Gillespie:** They had a slim fuselage on 'em, and they had, I've forgotten what horsepower engine, but they could carry a two thousand pound bomb.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay!

**Mr. Gillespie:** And they did. And they were sort of a plywood, actually, what it was, but an airplane engine. And they were, of course, expendable. So we trained with those up there. What we did, and this was characteristic, we'd take one of the drones out on the runway when we got it ready.

Now, remember, I said all this time when I was down there in Corpus and what have you and the University of Houston, it was in radar. And that was hush-hush. This was even more so.

**Mr. Metzler:** So they had trained you in radar and its technology, and how to operate it, and all that, when you were down in Corpus?

**Mr. Gillespie:** And to repair it, basically. And operate, yes. When we were actually, actually when we were finished up in University of Houston—no, when I finished up in Corpus Christi I was advanced to radio, I was advanced into aircraft radio technician, that'd be an RT, third class. I went to ART, second class.

Now, there in Clinton, we were divided up into sections. Part of us were working with radars, part of us worked with—no. Basically, I'll back up. We had four basic systems on the airplane. We had the block,, B-L-O-C-K, that was the code name for television. We had cast, C-A-S-T, that was the code name for the radio control equipment. And we had Roger, which was the code name for the radar. And then we had ace, A-C-E, was the code name for the radio altimeter. And I would up with the radio altimeter part of it.

So anyhow, they were trying these airplanes out and they'd take 'em off and fly 'em out of Clinton, and try to land 'em again, which it usually wiped 'em out. But we had television cameras in the airplanes. Up in the nose of it, and I can show you pictures of it.

**Mr. Metzler:** Really. Must have been pretty big and bulky, though, back in the early days.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Oh yeah, oh yeah. And so what they would do, they would add these patrol airplanes would fly back out and circle around over and they'd be in radio communications with 'em. And then they would have these drones tied down to a jeep out on the runway. And now, they had flown this airplane before with a pilot in it, and when he got all the controls set, the trim tabs and all that sort of stuff, then they'd say, "Okay, this airplane is ready," and they would take to the plastic plexiglass canopy off of it, the canopy, and they'd put on a \_\_\_\_\_???, they'd pull it down and make it flat. And that's what you'll see in these pictures.

So anyhow, they'd get out there and there'd be a flight officer, a pilot, sitting in the jeep and he went through his \_\_\_\_\_???, and everything, and had his control bar. And when you was to run these things, if you wanted to turn the radio or control stuff on, they had a regular telephone dial, you'd dial "one." And "two" was for I believe the altimeter. "Three" was for the television, and "four" was for, well, they didn't have, "four" was for to detonate the airplane if something went wrong. Had detonators on it.

Anyhow, so the pilot back there in the Jeep would get the engine revved up like he thought it should be. In the meantime, he'd be talking back and forth to the TBS we had back there. I think we may have been using twin Beaches then, I don't remember. But they'd be flying back in the back. So they'd line up with the runway and at a certain point, the pilot in the airplane that was controlling this would say "Okay, turn her loose," so they'd click a lever there and this airplane would start down the runway. And then they'd say "Okay, take it over," so then the flying, the airplane that was flying, the control airplane, had control of it, and he'd take it off and lift it on up and go on out. And fly it and come back in, and try to make it land. One or two of 'em did, but most of 'em were wiped out. But this was just sort of a testing ground. Then we went to, on August the twenty-ninth, it was almost my birthday, in that year. We left and we were sent by train to Traverse City, Michigan, to train on the lake up there.

**Mr. Metzler:** Traverse City?

**Mr. Gillespie:** In Traverse City, Michigan. And in fact, we got out at Grand Traverse Bay and there did a lot of work. And we took over the airport there and ran the civilians off of it. And then while we was doing all that, they were training and still doin' the same kind of trainin' but more definite training. In the meantime the pilots are having to get in flight time with different airplanes. And a lot of these pilots we had were bored with it, 'cause they'd been overseas before and they were fighter pilots, and now were flying PBS in the control plane, like the one we had out there. And that's the one I rode in a lot.

Now they put me behind the pilot section there, there was a section I forgot what all they had in there, but they put two seats in that section and they had the television receiver in there and the control box and everything, and they had two guys in the airplane doing this. One flying, making the controls, and the other one watching the television to keep it from rolling back and forth and cueing it in. We didn't have any automatic safe back then, this was the nose, so I'll tell you later.



**Mr. Metzler:** Okay.

**Mr. Gillespie:** I'll talk all afternoon with you.

But anyhow, we got up to Traverse City, Michigan, and they decided one day to take one off and we're still flying the old TDNs back then. They were clunky looking airplanes. I don't think I have a picture of those woods they're made of. And so they got up there—

**Mr. Metzler:** The TDN is a single engine?

**Mr. Gillespie:** No, they were both, they were still, it was the same airplane. Same configuration but the TDR like we wound up with was a later, slicker, more streamlined version. Same size and everything.

Well, we got up there and it was, oh, Saturday. I'll never forget this particular Saturday, and of course it was getting cold up there by then, it was September. And they had a high overcast, maybe it was about five or six thousand feet they called it, and this drone got away from 'em. It went up in the overcast. Well, they had, I can tell you, there was a lot of excitement around there for a little while. They didn't know what happened to it, they didn't dare get up in there and look for it, they didn't know what happened to it. And they kept waiting for an airplane crash report to come in. And that didn't happen. So finally they gave up and decided well, the day was over that day, and they would shut the operation down as far as flying was concerned.

The next morning an old Frenchman came up to the main gate where we were, of the airport there, and he had a little piece of—Now these planes were all a dark navy blue, and it looked enough of a number on the tail to tell us that was the airplane we'd been looking for. And they told him that must be part of an old ship or something that floated up there, and they thanked him very much and told him to go home.

**Mr. Metzler:** Shooed him off. (*Laughs*)

**Mr. Gillespie:** Now to back the story up a little farther, more—you want to take all this stuff or not?

**Mr. Metzler:** I'm taking it.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Okay. I mean, if you get tired of listening to me I'll stop.

**Mr. Metzler:** Don't worry.

**Mr. Gillespie:** But this is hilarious. Some of it, it was Chinese fire drill that we're talking. But while we were in Clinton, Oklahoma, took one off one day, and they lost it. And it went right down in a farmer's front yard, they had pretty good sized farms out there, in between some trees.

**Mr. Metzler:** What would these things do, just run out of fuel, or I guess—

**Mr. Gillespie:** No, just lost control of it.

**Mr. Metzler:** Yeah, because they were out of, lost the signal somehow?

**Mr. Gillespie:** They'd lost the signal, they couldn't get it back, or just like radios. We didn't call, we didn't have the terminology "electronics" back then, it was radios.

Anyhow, this airplane crashed. Of course, there wasn't anybody in it. We were, I'll take it back. We were using twin Beechcrafts, SNBs they called 'em, for controlled airplanes. And they called in to base and said this thing had crashed. In the meantime this farmer was running out of his house to save this pilot. No pilot in that thing. So they buzzed him. He's running back in the house, they whip around, come back, same thing. And finally got an ambulance out there, it wasn't too far off the airport, thank goodness. And it came out with a stretcher, went on the blind side of the airplane, took a prop or something, put it on this stretcher—

**Mr. Metzler:** A log or something? (*Chuckles*)

**Mr. Gillespie:** Something. Put a coat over it. The next day's paper, I guess the news, an Elk City paper, about an airplane had crashed, a farmer found it in his front yard or something, they didn't know whether the pilot was injured or killed, but he was found and they put him in an ambulance. There wasn't anybody in the airplane.

So, but anyhow, in November, back up to Traverse City in Michigan. The weather started getting real lousy, I mean, real bad. So they decided that we were gonna move—we were in the stage there, we was gonna move to the West Coast. So I don't remember the exact dates in November, I probably got 'em somewhere, but they took part of our outfit and sent them by train. We went to Monterey, California. And part of 'em flew in the airplanes we had, the TBS, we had them going. We did have TBS \_\_\_\_\_??? And some other odd men there training airplanes we had for the pilots to play with. They all flew out there.

And a bunch of us went in a convoy to drive from Traverse City, Michigan to California.

**Mr. Metzler:** Driving in?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Driving. We had, I don't know what the heck you call those cars, they were like, sort of like what we have now, an SUV. We called 'em "command cars," they had the drab, the olive drab paint on 'em, and we used 'em on a line and stuff, we had APUs in 'em, we had a little test equipment in 'em to run back and forth to the airplane.

**Mr. Metzler:** APU?

**Mr. Gillespie:** APU.

**Mr. Metzler:** What's that?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Automatic Pilot Unit.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay. I'm just trying to get all the terminology down here.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And, anyhow, they had a gasoline engine with a generator on it. So anyhow, \_\_\_\_\_???, he's still, I still keep in touch with him every two or three weeks, he lives up in Minneapolis, name Dick Brown. And he and I worked together in this ACE lab, but they all tear it apart. So we were assigned one truck to drive out there. And we had some equipment in the truck with us. And we had up, if I remember correctly, we had fourteen of those cars. And we had a police escort all the way across the country. And we went down and picked up, and I think it was around East St. Louis, that we picked up Highway 66.

**Mr. Metzler:** Route 66.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Route 66. And away we went. We stopped one night, I know it was in East St. Louis we stopped, and I remember, and we all were carrying .45s on us, too. And we didn't know how to fire 'em practically, but we carried 'em, .45s.

**Mr. Metzler:** Looked good.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Looked good. Oh yeah! (*Both chuckle*) And we pulled in to this motel, what they called 'em back then, a "tourist court," you know. And this was sort of a horseshoe deal out there, on the edge of town there. So this little tourist court

deal had a bar in there, and there was, say, fourteen of us and we had, let's say, there was two of us to a car. And we did have a lead car, a regular car, and a back car behind us with a couple of officers in there, plus the police escort.

And we got in there and they got us all parked and the cars all in there. Of course we had guards around all night and everything. But we found the bar, so we all went in the bar with our .45s on, and we all knew each other. Having a ball, man, we was drivin' cross country. Well, in walks an MP from somewhere, when he saw these cars out there. And here was all these .45s and he like to, he like to drop dead. So he got the officer, and we had to turn in all our guns for the night 'cause we couldn't carry 'em around, afraid we'd get drunk and start shooting somebody, I guess.

**Mr. Metzler:** *(Laughs)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** But anyhow, we'd go through some of those cities at sixty miles, fifty miles an hour, fifty mile an hour then was pretty good speed.

**Mr. Metzler:** Yeah, especially in towns.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And we wound up, our first destination, real stop, would be for two or three days, we went back to Clinton Oklahoma, where we came from. And back then, if you recall, we had, this country had two Thanksgivings. Do you remember that?

**Mr. Metzler:** No, I didn't.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Okay. There were two Thanksgivings in this country. Some states had it one Thursday, and other states had it another Thursday.

**Mr. Metzler:** I had no idea.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, that's true, you can check the record.

**Mr. Metzler:** I believe you.

**Mr. Gillespie:** So anyhow, this Thanksgiving we had Thanksgiving in Clinton, Oklahoma. And I think we pulled out the next day, it was, and bound for California, Monterey. And we got out to Monterey by the next Thursday and we had a second Thanksgiving. So that's why we had two Thanksgivings. Not everybody's ever had that.

**Mr. Metzler:** Yeah, I would say you—

**Mr. Gillespie:** And then, we wound up there, and that's when instead of flying these PBN drones, we started flying the twin Beechcraft. What we called the SNB. The one that had the plastic nose on it they used for navigator training and what have you. And we put the television cameras up in the nose of those. And one of us, there'd be about three of us would go on each flight with these airplanes. And the television guy would sit up in the nose, they had those seats for him up there, and then we had a guy with the radio control, the gyro \_\_\_\_\_???, there, and usually one of our altimeter people like I did went along with 'em to monitor the altitude, just checking everything.

And we flew for many hours every day out there with the Pacific Ocean at four hundred feet. That was the top. Four hundred feet was the top limit of our altimeter back then, and we'd go down in a hundred foot air \_\_\_\_\_???, until we got to a hundred feet, then we could get down to fifty feet. And we'd go, and they would have Coast Guard boats patrolling out there. They knew something, we was doing something. They thought we were making bombing runs at 'em, and we'd run at 'em like that, and pull up and go around.

While we was out there we woke up one day and there was a B24 and a B25 sitting with us, and nobody was on that field except us. Except, they did let a torpedo squadron from Alamitos come down and reload on the other side of the field over there. And we still hadn't gone out on the latest drone, we were using the Beechcraft to play with then. And, actually what they were doing was just, we would try and get all the bugs out of the equipment, I guess, you'd say like that.

**Mr. Metzler:** So at this point did you know that, assuming success in this, that you were headed out to—

**Mr. Gillespie:** Oh yes, there was—

**Mr. Metzler:** They were gonna put you out somewhere in the South Pacific—

**Mr. Gillespie:** Oh yes.

**Mr. Metzler:** —and you'd use these drones to do unmanned bombing runs on Japanese.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well we were told what we were gonna do. And they, actually, I think they pushed us really too hard on this thing. They should of given us a little more

time on it. But anyhow. While we were there we woke up and got up, went up to the hangar, and here's a B24 and a B25 sitting there.

Well, this is kinda off the picture of what I'm supposed to tell you. But, they had a camera crew in there and a crew to fly the B25, and that's where this film *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, Tokyo Bay, that was Monterey Bay. That's what they were doing.

**Mr. Metzler:** Oh really.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And that took that, those pictures. In the meantime, there was, Monterey was a big fishing town back then. And they had, everybody had a story. Making those Japanese flags. And we couldn't figure out what it was for a few days, and they hired a bunch of the fishing boats to go out in Monterey Bay to be part of the Japanese fishing fleet, so to speak, with the Japanese flag. And they forgot that the torpedo squadron from Alameda might be coming down.

So while they had 'em all out there, and they did have a big float out there, barge thing, but the Navy had signalmen on it and radios and communications. And here comes the torpedo squadron down and the leader saw these Japanese ships with the little flag, and they got out on the deck and opened up the bomb bay door. And at the last minute they talked 'em out of it, and told 'em "Get outa here, get outa here, this is a filming deal," and they peeled off and went on back out to do whatever they did, and left. But that was exciting.

**Mr. Metzler:** Now, and so, the film from this staged raid was the film that was provided as a record of the Doolittle raid?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yes, yes. That was, that's part of the movie. But that—

**Mr. Metzler:** Oh this was the movie then.

**Mr. Gillespie:** This was the movie, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*.

**Mr. Metzler:** Yeah, but was made, what, in the 'fifties, I thought.

**Mr. Gillespie:** No.

**Mr. Metzler:** Oh, okay, okay.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Also, at the same time, they made the movie with Mickey Rooney and Elizabeth Taylor, they were kids back then. And this movie was *National Velvet*.

**Mr. Metzler:** Yeah, I remember that one.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And that was made in a race track there around on, uh, I can't think of the island, the peninsula, out there, and part of a race track and the hotel there. And we used to go in the hotel there and drink once in awhile. And we'd see Elizabeth Taylor every once in awhile.

**Mr. Metzler:** *(Chuckles)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** And we'd go down to Pacific Grove, and that was also an Army base.

**Mr. Metzler:** That's the Monterey Peninsula there.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah, Monterey Peninsula. Part of it.

**Mr. Metzler:** Carmel's down there.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Carmel, we'd go into Carmel. That was small, just like in any small town.

**Mr. Metzler:** Before it became famous.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And we was, we run into old Bing Crosby there once in awhile.

But anyhow, then we left that, they told us we were shipping out. And in the meantime we had all been in there long enough to get a rate change, and they said, "Well, there's too many of first class, too many of second class, too many of this and that and the other, we can't do it." So they said, okay, according to the Navy regs, if my rank is full and I'm eligible for an advancement, and you can't give it to me, you've got to transfer me. And that's in the regulations somewhere.

**Mr. Metzler:** Really.

**Mr. Gillespie:** So one of the boys pulled it on 'em. They said, "Okay." He said, "I want out of here." They said, "Well, you can't get out. You're restricted. You can't get out of this outfit." We had about, I think around about \_\_\_\_\_???? other people. We had the whole outfit. This wasn't just a squadron, we had the cooks, we had the mess boys, we had security, everybody.

**Mr. Metzler:** Did you have a designation for this group? I mean—

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, we're all called Special Task Air Group One. That was what we were commissioned, and I've forgot—

**Mr. Metzler:** This was STAG-1 that you mentioned in your e-mail.

**Mr. Gillespie:** STAG-1 One, yeah. Now, actually we were commissioned back there when I was in Clinton, Oklahoma, and I forgot to say what they called it. And we were on the ComAirSoPac if I remember correctly. You know they had a lot of different names for all those—

**Mr. Metzler:** Oh, yeah.

**Mr. Gillespie:** But anyhow, when, so, everybody got a rate increase, and all of us had been second class went up, got bumped up, to first. Aviation radio technician first class. Or ARM first class on whatever it might be. Parachute riggers, everybody. We had the whole nine yards in there. All the mechanics.

So anyhow, we shipped out and part of us, part of 'em went on the aircraft carrier and I have somewheres in my notes, I can't remember exactly the name of it. And some of 'em—Oh! I'll tell you back on this other thing. Some went by train from Traverse City to Monterey, some flew, and those that flew a lot of 'em got lost, they ran out of fuel and they had engine trouble, they got scattered, they all wound up about two weeks later, all in California. We beat 'em there in the cars. But that was kinda the sign of the times. Everybody was learning in those days, there wasn't and of this high tech. Well, there was high tech.

**Mr. Metzler:** It was high tech for then.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah. Well, anyhow, most of us went over on a converted ocean liner, and it was called the *Fred C. Ainsworth*. And that was an Army transport they were using. And we went over, overseas, and when we pulled out from under the Golden Gate Bridge, the next thing we saw was, uh, I can't think of the name of it, what island. But we were unescorted, we were by ourselves, zigzagging all the way across. And then we went into the island of Banika, we went up through the slot between—this was after they'd secured Guadalcanal. And Savo Island and all that. We went right through that on up to the Russel Chain, up to the Russel Islands, and we were on a little island called Banika. And then that's where we operated out of.



And there was, there'd been several reports and different things of the, some of us went up to Bawean Island and operated down there for awhile, over to Boungainville and that area.

**Mr. Metzler:** Now, were you, how were your aircraft, the drones and everything, they were just put on the ship?

**Mr. Gillespie:** They were put on the ship. Most of 'em were still in crates.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay. Broken down.

**Mr. Gillespie:** They were broken down, yes. They got over there and we unpacked 'em and put 'em together and then checked 'em out, and we had, we were operating off of Sunlight Field, they called it. It was actually two fields on the, on Banika. One was an Army field for fighters, and they had, basically, P-38s and what have you, flying over there and training and what have you. And we were on this little strip by ourself called Sunlight Field. 'Course it was coral and what have you, and our revetment was back in the cocoanut trees.

We'd taken the, just basically training with the airplanes we'd been over there, and finally they got the first mission, I've forgotten where, I think it's up on, we flew a warm-up to Green Islands and got up there with 'em, and on the way up there they were flying, we were, had the capability but they didn't do it but once, is my recall. We're flying in, uh, four in a group, they had four different channels, you could control four air planes from one airplane, but that was, they found out pretty quick that was too much.

**Mr. Metzler:** How many drones did you take with you?

**Mr. Gillespie:** I don't remember.

**Mr. Metzler:** Roughly, how many.

**Mr. Gillespie:** I don't have the slightest idea.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Because all that stuff was loaded on freighters and so we never did see it. Now, actually, we didn't, I don't recall seeing the drones that we used, wound up with, until we got overseas. We still had the same equipment, just different

airplanes. And we didn't care about the airplane ourselves, we just wanted the equipment to work, you know.

But anyhow, on the way up there that one time they had four airplanes, four drones, they went across a PT squadron. And we was using a FM frequency modulated signal to control the airplane and these guys happened to be on about the same channel as we were, and they started talking, from what they told us. And that messed up our signal. We lost all four of those drones.

So anyhow, that was just basically what we did over there. And we, uh, and then we decided all of a sudden that, there was a lot of, I think, dissension between Naval aviation out there and the Navy and the Army and the Air Force and all that, and a lot of the brass out there didn't believe what we could do. And some of 'em did and some of 'em didn't. And all of a sudden they decided, and this was in about November of 'forty-four. Yes, November, 'forty-four. That they decided to, we were going to come back to the States and regroup back at Clinton, Oklahoma. But, that they were not gonna bring everybody home. Some would have to stay out there.

**Mr. Metzler:** Now why were they doing that? Do you believe—

**Mr. Gillespie:** We don't know. We don't know. I think it was, I don't know, I couldn't tell you.

**Mr. Metzler:** Were you ever able to actually put any of your drones to use, into combat?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yes, yes, we did. After that non-mission, we actually ran several out there and in this tape I have at home, these cameras, gun cameras, that showed if I recall doing it, actually went in to, ah, going after some caves up there on Bougainville because the Japs were still, the place had been secured but it wasn't.

**Mr. Metzler:** 'Cause they were still dug in.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And they still had, dug in with gun emplacements, anti-aircraft and stuff, and they were running 'em out on little tracks, if I remember correctly. And we were to run these planes into there 'cause it was hard to get out into 'em with a regular airplane. And they got two or three of those and jettisoned the bombs, I don't recall, really.

**Mr. Metzler:** Well, that's a success.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And also, I have some pretty good pictures, that they tried to convince the brass out there what we could do, they, uh, there was a beached Jap ship down on one beach, sort of on the far side of the coral, it came out of the water. And we had the brass out there and we ran some, I think it was two, two or three, I think it was three of the drones one day into the ship to show 'em what we could do. And of course the control ship was forty, fifty miles back out in the boonies, flying around. Well, anyhow—

**Mr. Metzler:** Was that the range that the drones could get out in and still—

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah, that was just about it.

**Mr. Metzler:** About fifty miles?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yes. So, anyhow, the actually, see this is ground video of, sixteen mm. stuff then they were using. And showed one airplane that the drone went over the ship and missed it, and blew up, or, didn't blow up, just crashed on the island over there. And another one that, if I remember correctly, fell short and crashed into the water, and a third one hit the ship.

**Mr. Metzler:** Now the concept here was the aircraft, the drone, with the bomb aboard, would just go in almost like a kamikazi but without a pilot.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Without a pilot.

**Mr. Metzler:** It was not a situation where they would drop the bomb—

**Mr. Gillespie:** Oh no.

**Mr. Metzler:** — and try and recover the drone.

**Mr. Gillespie:** This was a no return airplane.

**Mr. Metzler:** Right.

**Mr. Gillespie:** That was it. In the meantime, when they would take the long, it looked like a grasshopper viewed at high gear, and, oh, that was something else. And one of the parts of the radio control was to jettison the gear on it.

**Mr. Metzler:** Right. To drop it.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And when you'd see it in flight, there's no gear on it. And the auto control wanted to take it and actually blow the airplane up. They had a detonator on it, which we used several times.

**Mr. Metzler:** So there was always, I guess, the nightmare that it would crash but some of the secret equipment, technology, would survive, and—

**Mr. Gillespie:** I'd, we do understand, as far as stuff was kept from us, a lot of policy was going 'cause the airplane was priceless. I think there was possibly one or two that the Japs found out there, as the story goes, I can't verify it, and all, they wondered what happened to the pilot and there was, it was, oh, I could go on this story for hours and hours on this thing.

But anyhow, they finally decided to come back to the States and the skipper got up and his name was Wood, W-O-O-D, Wood. And he was a real nice fella, down to earth man. And he got up that day, I never will forget it, and he said that he'd tried to get all of us back to the States but he couldn't, but he was taking back as many as he could. And he had tears in his eyes when he told us, he said that we were returning to Clinton, Oklahoma, some of us, and they had the list out.

Well, some of the boys wound up down on Guadalcanal with what you call the PV bomber they had down there, the twin engine bomber. Real hardy, though. It was a Lockheed airplane. And I understand several of 'em went on those airplanes blew up for some reason, killed three or four of our guys there.

But, when we went, we got back on Guadalcanal and we stayed there for a few days, and we picked up a ship, an old lakes, Great Lakes, freighter that used to haul railroad cars across. They'd have railroad tracks in it, and they had tracks and then they had, I think, two airplanes on this thing, and had all the rest of us guys. I guess there was two or three hundred of us got to come back, I don't remember how many, really.

**Mr. Metzler:** How many were over there?

**Mr. Gillespie:** There was about eight hundred of us. Most of 'em had to stay over, didn't get to come back. So about—

**Mr. Metzler:** Less than half, actually, came back.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah, yeah. To my knowledge it never got back. But anyhow, the, on this ship was a Corsair fighter, and I'll never forget the name of this guy, his name was

Ike Kepford, he was one of the aces, and there's quite a lot in Naval aviation about him.

**Mr. Metzler:** What's his last name?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Kepford. K-E-P-F-O-R-D. Ike Kepford. In fact, they have, he's on the court down there in Pensacola, in the museum, I've seen his name down there.

But anyhow, we went through the edge of typhoon out there, like to roll the ship. And we got in, we dropped into Maui, and Maui had been a, let's say, the grandfather of our outfit. They were trying to use little drones out there for target practice. And that's where they begin to play with the stuff, and they got big time with it.

So we docked out there, and they called us all on deck and said the names of \_\_\_\_\_??? step forward and get your sea bags, you're gettin' off here. And we all were told we were going home. And one of my buddies, he nudged me in the side and he said, "Ha, ha, I'm a friend of one of the officers on this thing, I get to go home with him." Well, this officer was going off the ship and my friend got pulled off with him, a bunch of 'em, and I got, we went to Pearl Harbor and then we stopped there overnight and they told us that they'd have us back home in the States by Christmas. And we chugged in to San Diego, and the I got on the train from there and I got home to Stamps, Arkansas on Christmas morning about five o'clock.

**Mr. Metzler:** Made it in time for Christmas.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And I thought, it's all hush hush, nobody knew anything, and my mother said "Well, I was waiting for you to show up." And I'll tell you on the side, I don't know whether you want that on here or not. You want to hear it?

**Mr. Metzler:** Sure.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Okay. Well, this fella Brown is from Minneapolis. I still keep up with him. He just got married right before we left out of Monterey from his sweetheart up there in Minneapolis. She came out there. So they had set up a plan. And he had a code in South Pacific, it had blocks and letters and numbers, and he would write her and say, on such and such a day do this, at such and such a time, be sure and check on there And she'd look at these numbers and figures and she figured out within almost a pinhead where we were out there.

**Mr. Metzler:** *(Laughs)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** In the meantime—

**Mr. Metzler:** So they had a code.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah, they had a code. In the meantime she would, he would run by me . . .

**END OF SIDE ONE  
BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO**

**Mr. Gillespie:** Oh, Dick would invite me to go have lunch with ‘em on Sundays. So I’d go to this little apartment, a little rinky dink thing they had, to have lunch with ‘em .

**Mr. Metzler:** This was before you went overseas.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah, before we went overseas. So his wife asked me—I’m going backwards on you right now.

**Mr. Metzler:** No, that’s all right.

**Mr. Gillespie:** So his wife asked me, said where my folks lived, and their phone number, and their address. So she, when she found out where we were, she’d been keepiing in touch with my mother I found out, and said about where we were out there, so when we got back into San Diego I thought, well, I’ve come all this far, I haven’t tried to tell my folks anything, now I’m back in the States. But you never knew what was gonna happen, you might get changed again. I didn’t want ‘em to be disappointed. I’d just wait and walk in the door.

Well, the first thing my buddy did when we got off the ship, he called his wife and he told her, said “Hey, I’m back in the States.” And the first thing she asked was “Well, did Tom get home?” He says “Yeah, he’s here too.” So she called my mother on the phone and told her I was back in the States, and here I’d gone all that way on to surprise her. I thought she’d been to a fortune teller or something.

**Mr. Metzler:** *(Laughs)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** So when, oh, when we left out of, when we left, when we got to San Diego, we though we was gonna go rght on, we knew we was gonna get Christmas leave, and we thought we would all go back to Clinton, Oklahoma. Well, we were told, actually, no, when we got to—I’ll back up on that. I made a mistake.

When we got to Maui the ones that got off, we knew something went wrong then, 'cause they told us that they were abandoning the deal, so to speak, and we were not going back to Clinton, Oklahoma. A few of 'em might go back there. And we would be reassigned. So when I got to San Diego I was reassigned, I thought I was going back overseas again, you know. But I was reassigned to CASU 54 in Fallon, Nevada. I couldn't find Fallon, Nevada on the map. And that's where the top \_\_\_\_\_??? for Naval aviation, was.

So I got out to Reno and I never saw so many lights in all my life. Took a bus down to the station and then that's where I was for—

**Mr. Metzler:** Biggst Little City in the World.

**Mr. Gillespie:** —nine—yeah. And I was there about a week working with the day shift, and the chief that was running the shop and everybody was wearing cowboy boots around there.

**Mr. Metzler:** Now the war's still on, right?

**Mr. Gillespie:** The war's still on.

**Mr. Metzler:** Yeah.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Anyhow, the, ah, after about a week there this chief called me in one day and he said, "I want to put you in charge of the night shift." I was out of radio control stuff, that was over with. And he said "With the experience you have and what have you, and I want you to run the night shift." We had, I had about nine or ten guys and they're technicians, and all we were doing was repairing the radios that were coming in, and the line men would put 'em in the airplanes, the F4Us, the F6s, or whatever they were up there.

And one day the chief, I happened to come in a bit early that day, and he said "Hey, they want to see you up in Personnel, upstairs in the next hangar." I said "Okay." And the name of Chief Woody, he was from Brownsville, I believe, he was an old salt. He'd been in there a long time. And I walked in this Personnel Office and this little ensign in there said, "You're gettin' transferred to Banana River, Florida." I said, "Sir, why'd they transfer me to Banana River?" By then I was married, I was married when I came back to the States. And they said "Well, we see by your records that you have been getting flight pay and you have Combat Air Crew Wings," which I do. And he said, "Looking in your records, you haven't been to gunnery school and you cannot be classified as

combat air crew flight wing without gunnery training, so we're gonna send you to gunnery school." And here I was a technician.

So I thought, man, the war has just come to an end, now it was this, what a gravy train this was, real neat duty after. So I went back downstairs and this old chief was sitting up there, he's a long, tall, lanky guy. Said "Hey, boy, come over here. What did they want up there in Personnel?" I said, "Chief, I gotta go to gunnery school. The ensign told me I was gonna be transferred." He said, "Boy, they can't do that to you." I said, "Chief, that's what they said." He said, "Come on, we're gonna go up to Personnel." And that's about the way he talked.

So I went back up to Personnel Office with him and I said "That's the ensign over there." So he went looking at this ensign and he said "Sir, you can't send this boy to Banana River, to gunnery school." He said, "Why, Chief, we certainly can. It's the rules here, and it says that if you're an enlisted man and you have Flight Combat Air Crew Wings and what have you, you have to go to gunnery school and he hasn't been to gunnery school."

And this old chief was pretty sharp. I don't know where he got his information from, but he said, "Well, if you look on such and such a page in such and such, you'll see that aircraft radio technicians, they do a lot of flying and checking and what have you, and can have Combat Air Crew Wings and get flight pay, and they don't have to be a qualified gunner."

And this kid looked it up, this young ensign looked it up, and he said "Chief, you're right." The chief said "Get out now and go to work, boy, and forget about it."

**Mr. Metzler:** *(Laughs)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** So that's where I got my, I got out of the Navy in the last part of November, about the middle of November, in 'forty-five. I had, I thought it'd be end up being quite long—Oh, the Navy, they tried several times, they really asked me to sign over, stay in the regular Navy, and they offered me this, and offered me that, and I thought, no. What they want to do, they want people to go back overseas, to relieve the boys to come home, and I'm already home. And I said, "Thank you, but no thank you."

And I went to several reunions later on, two or three of the reunions we had. Everybody's practically gone now. And I said, I asked one of the men that was—Oh! And while I was there, I forgot to tell you this, about when he turned



me over to run the radio shop there at night. In Fallon. That he made me chief, and I came out of the Navy about what, about twenty, about twenty-five years old and I was aircraft chief radio technician. Actually the foreman. And I was very proud of that. Of course, it didn't mean anything back then, all you wanted to do was get out of there anyhow.

**Mr. Metzler:** Yeah, nobody cared what their rank was.

**Mr. Gillespie:** But I did have, two or three of the guys, I got to know 'em real well, that stayed in. One or two were chief, and one or two was first class. They all wound up pretty much up in the ranks as officers, 'cause they were sent back to learn technical stuff to more advanced equipment. And I asked one of 'em, was a real close friend, I said "I'm gonna ask you a question." I said "If you had to do it over, would you have reenlisted and stayed in and went on up in the brass like you did, or what?" He said, "No, I wouldn't." And I said, "That's stange." I said, "Why?" And his reasoning was, his answer was, when you get so far up in the echelon there's a lot of infighting, who gets advanced and who doesn't. And he said, "It was aj ust a different ball game back then," and he said, "When I did retire"—I think he went with General Electric or somebody for quite some time, he was well fixed, you know, but had a good—

And luckily, very few officers ever got injured. I don't, we had one plane that crashed in the peninsula in Monterey, in what they call the Palisades, or whatever it was. It was a TBF and we had about four guys in it, lost an engine or something and went down, lost him there. And we didn't lose a single man overseas, not a one.

**Mr. Metzler:** A couple of questions. What happened to the guys that got forced off at Maui. Do you have any idea what—

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yes, I do. One of 'em, I have a picture here of one of 'em. They stayed out there and more or less just kinda played around with the equipment and didn't do much of anything, to tell you the truth. And they all came back home in good shape. But I kept up with one of these guys. Well, in fact, he and I from the time we were down in Nw Orleans, in Algiers over there, this man was about forty years old then, and he was the band director of the Friendswood High School Band down here in Friendswood, Texas. He went in because he just got tired of directing a band.

He was a terrific musician. And he had a little trumpet with about, oh, about a foot long little case. And when they sent us enough, I shoulda told you this,

when they sent us from Algiers to University of Houston on this overnight train, and they had a bunch of boots on that, they were goin' to boot camp in San Diego, and these kids were kinda running back and forth on the train. And they had an old salty chief that finally got all these kids settled down. Of course, we were kids too.

**Mr. Metzler:** Right.

**Mr. Gillespie:** They got 'em up in the other cars. Oh after, this guy's name was Otto Parrish, he said, "Hey, Gillespie, you wanna have some fun?" I said, "Sure." So he said "Watch this." So he had his horn case underneath the seat, and he got it out and warmed it up a little bit. And he tiptoed over and walked up there in the next car and got up where these kids are down sleep and blew "Reveille" and hauled back, they sat up, and this chief came hauling back down there. "Where's this blankety-blank blank," which I won't put on the tape.

**Mr. Metzler:** *(Laughs)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** And I said, "Nobody knows who it was," you know. And this all went on. And I kept in touch with Otto over the years. He finally wound up, he was inducted into the University of Texas Musical Hall of Fame several years ago. He passed away, I lost track of him, and the wife was supposed to tell me what happened to him but she never did. I'd say he's been gone about eight or nine years now. And the only one that I can still keep in touch with is my friend up there in Minneapolis. I talk to him about once a week or so, that's good.

**Mr. Metzler:** How do you feel about not having really been able to successfully, I'll use that term, successfully complete the project. I mean, it didn't quite live up to its potential.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well frankly, we were all disappointed. We worked our hearts out on this deal.

**Mr. Metzler:** I would think so.

**Mr. Gillespie:** We did, and we tried, and we, see, we flew, I flew a lot in the control airplanes at times. And I flew sometimes back there, you know they have what we call a "stinger" back in where the radio compartment, way back in the tail there, I guess you've seen it out here. But anyhow, I'd ride back there sometimes and listen to the communications, and I was able to crawl up through a tunnel they had underneath, if I remember right, underneath the turret gun, the top gun up there.

But I had some real hair-raising experiences with, ah, on those twin Beeches when we were flying 'em out there. We were flying 'em quite a lot and they would get a, we got some pretty close scrapes, I mean, getting too close to things before we'd pull up, and we could disengage equipment too, or the power.

**Mr. Metzler:** So tell me about some of these close scrapes. Give me an exmple or two.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, one we had out there was this one I was telling you about, where we followed these ships. This ol' boy got us down to fifty feet and with this radio altimeter, we had some pretty good swells out there, of course, the radio altimeter was readin' the return off of the water and the Beechcraft was going with the swells like this, and we got up pretty close to where we was supposed to pull out or disengage the gear or tell us to get out of there. And we got real close to a ship and the plane was kinda easing down toward it, and our pilot's sitting there in the airplane, so this thing is going too far, he reached down and disengaged the equipment real quick and pulled it up, and we could count the number of hairs on there, the boy was up in the crow's nest with binoculars.

**Mr. Metzler:** *(Laughs)* That close, huh?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah. And then at some time they'd go after and make runs on those seals on the rocks off the coast of Carmel out there, and we could count the number of whiskers the seals had, once in awhile. It was a little uncomfortable. And then finally, I think right after this particular one I was on there that got so close, that they came out with memorndum that we go no lower than a hundred feet.

But, and, we had one plane that got away on takeoff. The Beechcraft, it just got away, it lost an engine on takeoff if I remember correctly, and plowed into two or three airplanes, and then burnt pretty bad. All the guys got out of there, one, two got burnt real good. But they were cured sooner or later. Stuff like this.

**Mr. Metzler:** Well now, this was a very highly classified project.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Metzler:** So tell me how that impacted what you did.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, it didn't impact you much, it was just the case that you can't go around telling anybody "Hey, man I'm flying an airplane nobody even knows." You kept your mouth shut, you know, or there's be touble. In fact, when we were in Corpus in this radar school, they told us that they had guys stashed around in

different parts, civilians, to listen to you, you know, like that, and be careful. And all that sort of thing.

But we felt real disappointed that we didn't get to talk of what we did, but I think if you go back, in my opinion, what I read in the books and over the years, there was a lot of competition out there between the Army and the Navy and the Marines Corps.

**Mr. Metzler:** Interservice rivalry.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yes, that's a good term for it.

**Mr. Metzler:** That's the term they use.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And I think that that had a lot to do with it, and I think that—Oh! another thing that happened to us, the officer that was in charge of the television part, the block, we called it. You didn't dare mention television block, even when you was working with each other. And there was Tiny Mertz, if I remember correctly, and he was an engineer with RCA before the war. And he perfected what we have now as your automatic synchronization where your television doesn't roll back and forth and sideways.

**Mr. Metzler:** Right.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And he designed the original circuit to put in the receiver and the transmitter, and he got back to the States and all of a sudden he disappeared from our outfit for about a month, and he came back and they had modifications just to put in there that helped a lot. But he was actually the one that more or less, as far as I know, started such a thing as automatic synch. That was one thing that we had to do, was to keep the television from rollin' side to side and up and down.

And they had several reunions. I didn't, I went to one in Washington D.C., I've forgotten how many years ago, about, oh, fifteen, no, about twelve years ago I guess. And the first one I went to was in, they had down in Clear Lake, down at Clear Lake City, out of Houston, and we went to NASA when we were down there,. And then the one that I really, really enjoyed, in fact this one boy that passed away was in this television part, he more or less ramrodded, helped put things together for the reunion down there, and he was the one that gave me the video I told you about I have at home. He and I were real close together, and he'd met my wife and knew her.

But I think the best reunion I went to was the one that I went to down in Pensacola. And I just couldn't believe the museum down there and couldn't believe that, they told us that they had the airplane down there, putting it together. They had found it, and this is the only airplane left of the bunch.

**Mr. Metzler:** The drone.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah. And it was found in a barn up in, out of Clinton, Oklahoma. A farmer had it somehow, somebody did. And some of our pilots back then, several years ago, found out about it and I do not know whether they paid him something for it or he donated it to 'em, but it wound up, and they had it put together down at Fort—I'll show you a picture of it. The only thing, it's not on the airplane, they don't have the radio altimeter antennas on the belly and they didn't have the whip antenna on the top for the radio control signal. But the airplane is the true airplane.

**Mr. Metzler:** As far as we know, that's the only one that survived.

**Mr. Gillespie:** It is the only one that survived. Now I think at one time they did find pieces of one or two out there somewhere. And there's this outfit, I can't figure today, that records a lot of stuff in the South Pacific. He has a website I ran into one time, and I sent him an e-mail once and asked him, did he, had he ever heard of the outfit, and he said yes, he had, but didn't know anything about it. And I said, "I'll send you a picture." So I sent him one of our, I sent one of these pictures to him, several years ago. And to look on his website now, it's shown on there, courtesy of the picture I sent him up there. But this is the only one.

**Mr. Metzler:** Let's have a look at these pictures while we're taping here. Maybe it'll trigger—

#### **SOUND OF PAPER SHUFFLING**

**Mr. Gillespie:** I brought this up here if you want it. I'll let you look at the pictures first. That's a drone.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay. So just for the purposes of the tape, we're looking at color photographs of the only surviving drone, radio controlled drone, that is at the Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Florida.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And that's what they call a TDR, that was the latest model.

**Mr. Metzler:** Um-hum. And it looks just like almost a good sized piloted aircraft, exactly, without a cockpit.

**Mr. Gillespie:** There I am, and these two boys are gone. This is the one that was the quality musician, that had the little trumpet.

**Mr. Metzler:** Did Reveille.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Now, this hole right there was a television camera.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay, the hole on the nose is a spot for a television camera.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah.

**Mr. Metzler:** Just not well known that TV was actually being used—

**Mr. Gillespie:** It was used back then.

**Mr. Metzler:** —in World War II. What else we got there, Tom.

**Mr. Gillespie:** The other thing I have here is a short rundown on what we did. Now, the mn that wrote this, I don't know whether he's still alive or not, but some of his information in there I'm not, I never heard of before, and I'm not concerned about. He even wrote a book on that at one time, and—

**Mr. Metzler:** James J. B. Hall the Second.

**Mr. Gillespie:** But these pictures that's in here around there, a lot of people, I think, have 'em.

**Mr. Metzler:** Is this an extra copy, or is this your own?

**Mr. Gillespie:** I brought it for you.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay, good.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Now, one other piece of information that might be a little inteesting to you, or to the museum. He mentions it in there, and if this man was there at the time I don't know. See, we were off by ourselves doing our little, in our cubbyhole, doing our work. I'm just telling you about what I actually saw and really knew.

**Mr. Metzler:** Right.

**Mr. Gillespie:** But, one of the other reasons I think, another reason tht we got called back home was, you remember Joe Kennedy was killed in an airplane that exploded?

**Mr. Metzler:** Correct.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Had you heard the history of that?

**Mr. Metzler:** I guess I don't know. Tell me what you know about that.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, it's, the story varies a little bit here and there, but, they had an Army bunch that came through right behind us when we left out of Clinton, Oklahoma to start training. And Joe Kennedy was in that outfit and they called them STAG 2.

**Mr. Metzler:** Called him STAG 2?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Called this group, the group, STAG 2. Now that's all I know about him except, if I recall correctly, and I think it's true, they were using or going to, they were going to use B24s and they were going to fly them in to the submarine pens over there on the coast of France.

**Mr. Metzler:** Brest, yeah.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And what they were doing that they were, had taken a crew, a flight crew, and taken these planes off, and engaging the equipment and getting it all set up and then bailing out of the airplane and then the control airplane would take 'em over and go in. And for some reason, some electronic failure or something the plane he was in went over—oh, and they had to, when they engaged all this stuff, they engaged all the automatic flight control, and also activated the explosion device in case they lost the airplane. The detonator. And apparently when they engaged the controls for the airplane the detonator went off and got him.

Now, I understand also, and I can't, I don't have any paperwork to verify it, but what we were told by some of our officers, at some of our reunions we had later on, that Joe Kennedy, the father, demanded from the Government, "What caused that airplane to blow, what happened to my son." And he was told that their flight, why, it's all classified, forget it.

And then I understand also that when Kennedy got to be President that he also, between the two of 'em, I can't verify any of this.

**Mr. Metzler:** This is hearsay. But that's okay.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And I think it's pretty good hearsay, that they couldn't get an answer because it was still classified.

**Mr. Metzler:** So when was all of this declassified?

**Mr. Gillespie:** Ed, if I remember correctly, I'm gonna say ten years ago. I don't know, I don't know. We would get dribbling here and a little dribble here, and this fella here came out with his writing and stuff, and the book that he wrote that, I was gonna buy one of the books, I was curious, and one of my friends, I think this fella that was the trumpet player, the cornet player, had bought one, and he told me, "Don't waste your money, this guy is building himself up that he was a big boy in this thing, and there was a lot of what he and his buddies did rather than what we was trying to accomplish." And that's, I guess that's, what else you wanna know?

**Mr. Metzler:** What else can, do you want to tell.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, that's about all I guess I know, really.

**Mr. Metzler:** Okay, all right.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Oh, we did have, I had, one of the fellas that, and he was a, this boy was a, was actually a gunner, and he was, I don't why he was ever a tech for it, and he didn't know either, really. But he came into our squad when it was formed as a radioman. Now, we had radiomen, and they were gunners. And then we had the radio technicians. That was kind of a new kid on the block, for us. And, we were getting ratings like that and they called us "Box Tops." Did you ever hear that term before?

**Mr. Metzler:** No sir.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, the old salts that had been in the Navy for ahundred years, called us "Box Tops." Because, you remember back in the 'thirties, you'd get a box of cereal, you'd cut the box top off and you'd get a prize or something.

**Mr. Metzler:** Send it in.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Well, we got enough box tops that we'd get a rate. That's definitely how we got the name Box Tops. Okay. *(Laughs)*



**Mr. Metzler:** *(Laughs)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** That's true!

**Mr. Metzler:** I believe you.

**Mr. Gillespie:** That's true!

**Mr. Metzler:** That's a good story.

**Mr. Gillespie:** And I'd love people to know what they call the Hooligan's Navy and stuff like that. Do you know what Hooligan's Navy was?

**Mr. Metzler:** No, tell me.

**Mr. Gillespie:** That's the Coast Guard, they called 'em. And if you wanted to start a fight, all a sailor or a marine had to do was go up to a Coast Guard guy and say "Hey, man, you in the Hooligan's Navy," and you had a fight going. About the same as you'd go up to a marine and call him a seagoing bellhop, you'd better be ready to fight.

**Mr. Metzler:** Seagoing bellhop. *(Laughs)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** Never heard of that?

**Mr. Metzler:** No. *(Much laughter from both)*

**Mr. Gillespie:** Where you been, man?

**Mr. Metzler:** Well, you helping me along on a lot of this stuff.

**Mr. Gillespie:** You never heard of it? Man.

**Mr. Metzler:** Oh god, that's a good story.

**Mr. Gillespie:** But, anyhow, I forgot what I was gonna tell you now. I got off on this other subject. But, we had, we had a lot of pride in the outfit, and I think we could of done a lot of good out there, more than we did. We just, I don't think we had the backing of the country, not the country, but the military.

**Mr. Metzler:** Military leadership.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah, yeah.

**Mr. Metzler:** And here may have been some infighting and jealousies involved, is what I heard you say.

**Mr. Gillespie:** Yeah. I guess, later on, the, at the end of the war, or, and I think possibly, some of our, the bunch that got off in Maui, they had begun to use a smaller airplane to fly out there, they were using them for gun practice a lot. I think that's the reason actually, come to think of it, and I know when the war was over and I got discharged, I decided I wasn't going back to Arkansas, there wasn't any airplanes in Arkansas, and I decided that was gonna be my balliwick. And when I got my discharge out of San Francisco, actually, that I was living there in Fallon. My wife lived in Liberty, Texas and we came back and I decided to stay in Houston. I had a couple of relatives down there.

And I tried to get on American Airlines out there in Reno and they didn't want anybody. 'Course they didn't have much radios and nobody knew an awful lot. And I went to work with a radio home sale house in Houston, and they, I was there about a month or two and I didn't like the job at all. That wasn't my ball game. I didn't know what I wanted to do. We didn't have any car. I was making eighty-seven cents an hour. That's pretty good money. My wife was working. She was making a dollar and something being a teller in a bank there, and she was doing pretty good.

The boss of this outfit liked to hire all the veterans he could because his sons weren't physically able to go in the service, and he was trying to do his part by hiring veterans, you know.

**Mr. Metzler:** Um-hum.

**Mr. Gillespie:** So he told me, he said "They just opened up a radio shop in the Beechcraft people out there at the airport here in Houston and I've got a salesman that's looking out there, see if he can find anything." Sure enough, this guy was looking for aircraft radioman, so to speak. And I went out there and lo and behold! we got going and I got pictures of all this stuff at home, I just found 'em recently. But we were taking, the Beechcraft dealer there, where I was working was the largest in the country at the time, and they're flying in new Beechcraft with basic instruments and one radio, and we'd make a custom installation and what have you on 'em.

And back then, the only new radios you could get was a new war surplus. There wasn't any new stuff off the lines just then. And lo and behold! three fourths of

the stuff we put on the airplanes was what I was working on for the last nine months out there in Fallon, Nevada. I was really getting to do in Fallon what I wanted to do, was really repair radios and stuff, not one specialized thing.

And then I had a ball, and I stayed. In fact, I retired doing that kind of work.

**Mr. Metzler:** Well, I'm gonna end this here now. Tom, thanks for spending the time with us, telling us. This is a very unusual story of an unusual operation that most people don't know about, so this is a valuable edition to our museum.

**Mr. Gillespie:** I think it would be, and I would appreciate anything you can do. I mean, I don't want any credit for anything. I mean, it's just sort of a lost part of the war.

**Mr. Metzler:** Story. A lost story. It really is. Well, thanks again.

**Finalized copy**

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