

Veteran: **PHILLIPS, Frederick T.**
Service Branch: **AIR FORCE**
Interviewer: Mayo, Aimee
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Highlights of Service: **World War II; Captain; Squadron Commander; Served in New Guinea and the Philippines**

Interviewer: This is Aimee Mayo interviewing Frederick Phillips today at the Sterling Municipal Library in Baytown, Texas. Today is April 15, 2002.

How old were you? You were in the Air Force, right?

Veteran: Yes. Actually, I served my overseas time in Air Force, but I started out as a field artillery officer. The reason for that was that back during those days engineering people were scarce, and there was a surplus of engineers in the field artillery. I wanted to get into the Air Force, and I managed to talk to the right people and find out how to get the transfer out of field artillery into the Air Force, and I pursued that. Actually, it was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. The field artillery organization that I was in was captured in the Battle of the Bulge in Germany, and that was when they were taking no prisoners, and they lined all the men up on a stone wall in Belgium, and they machine gunned the whole organization—killed everybody. So, I would have been one of the lead officers in that and no doubt killed. So, just wanting to make that transfer literally saved my life.

Interviewer: I would imagine you were very relieved.

Veteran: When I read of this massacre in the paper, I had to cry. It was overwhelming.

Interviewer: How old were you when you joined the service?

Veteran: I was 22.

Interviewer: What was it like being 22 years old, and you're in the service, and you're overseas, and you're going through all this training? How was in mentally and physically?

Veteran: I started training for this actually in 1937. I had gone to some military camps and had actually earned an officer's rank by the time I went to A&M as a freshman in 1939. So, I went to school and graduated with a degree in chemical engineering, and all through that time at A&M we knew that we were going to go war as soon as we graduated. Pearl Harbor happened when I was a junior in college, so we knew the handwriting was on the wall. I guess you'd have to say that we were all just living a rather fatalistic kind of life knowing that if we graduated, we might not come back. We lived with that possibility. My main hope was that I could get an education and become an officer and not have to go into the trenches and look at the other end of an enemy gun barrel, and so I worked very hard to get an education so that I could make a contribution and perhaps avoid, like I say, being in the trenches fighting in the infantry.

Interviewer: Did you just join the military on your own, or were you drafted?

Veteran: Actually, I went to A&M, and I enrolled in the Reserve Officer Training program—volunteered for that. In order to complete that, you signed a contract saying that 'if I complete this, I agree to go into the service.' In effect, they were paying for my education by doing that. That was voluntary, but there was this contract that had to be signed.

Interviewer: Did your family support you when you enlisted?

Veteran: Yeah. My mother was supportive. Actually, back earlier in my camp training work, I had been offered a scholarship to West Point, and that, of course, was a military school and all of that, but my mother said, "No, I don't want you to do that. That's going too far, but going to A&M is OK."

Interviewer: It's good that you had family support. Where did you train at?

Veteran: Let's just start out saying I training at A&M, and I became a student captain at A&M and had my own field artillery battery there. We trained hard at A&M.

Then, from A&M I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and took what you might call firing guns and learning how to do the actual running of a field artillery battery.

Interviewer: So, I know now in the military they go for six weeks of basic training, and then after that they go on into a certain field of what they'll do. Is that what you did at Fort Sill?

Veteran: That was field artillery school. One thing that the United States does is they do train their soldiers well. Every officer and enlisted man is trained very well.

Interviewer: How long were you at Fort Sill?

Veteran: That was what we called during the war a 90-day wonder. They had an intense wonder-type training for 90 days. If you could cut the mustard, you were given a commission of 2nd Lieutenant, so having been at A&M for four years, we didn't have any basic training. We went on right away to the advanced level.

Interviewer: So you started out in the field artillery. When did you eventually come in the Air Force?

Veteran: I received orders to go into the Air Force in December of 1943, and those orders transferred me from my field artillery organization or battery in Augusta, Georgia, to Yale University. I never dreamed that I'd ever go to Yale University, but in order to become an engineering officer in the Air Force, you had to have about six months of training. A lot longer than 90-day wonder-type training.

Interviewer: After you trained for the field artillery, where did they send you?

Veteran: They sent me on maneuvers to Nashville, Tennessee, and we did nothing but practice crossing a huge river in Nashville to get ready to be able to cross the Rhine River in Germany. We worked hard at that for two months. During that two months, I was "killed" three times. I ran over land mines once, I was caught in an artillery barrage once, and one time I was shot right straight in the face with an anti-tank gun. {Laughter} After that experience, I decided I wasn't coming back. I was expendable. You got that feeling that you're not really ever coming back.

Interviewer: When you eventually went overseas, did you have any contact with civilians?

Veteran: Yeah. When I went overseas, I was in the Air Force by that time. It's kind of funny. We left San Francisco, and 33 days later—we didn't know where we were going—we were unloaded offshore in New Guinea. This is a way far away from anywhere, and the natives down there were still—and many of them still are—they call them Aborigines. Those people are uneducated—they're natives—and their whole life is tribal, and we were told not to have any communication with them. I'd found a cat that had come off of an aircraft carrier, and she was my tent pet, and one day she disappeared, and I found out later that these Aborigines eat cats. No, we didn't have any contact with them?

Interviewer: Did you have any contact with civilians when you were in the United States?

Veteran: Not really. We were more or less kept busy, and were kept in military organizations and so forth. Our contacts were not high. When I was in Manila in the Philippines later—we were stationed in New Guinea for one year and in the Philippines for about nine months—we had some contact with the Filipino people. I had a Filipino houseboy, and we had Filipino cooks, and I had Filipino airplane mechanics. Some of them were pretty good. We did have that kind of contact with Filipino civilians.

Interviewer: Where else were you stationed at overseas besides New Guinea and the Philippines?

Veteran: That's it. That was about twenty-two months.

Interviewer: When you did you have contact with the Aborigines and the Filipinos, how did they treat you when they saw you?

Veteran: They knew that the Americans would not hurt them. They were very afraid of the Japanese, and they went way back into the jungles and hid and stayed as far away from the Japanese as they could. My houseboy had a large wound on his thigh where a Japanese soldier had bayoneted him, so they were cruel.

Interviewer: When you were traveling overseas, were you on one of the aircraft carriers or on a battleship?

Veteran: No, in the Air Force you were basically operating from land based airports. The airport that I operated from in New Guinea was Finchhaven.

Interviewer: When you were going to these bases overseas, how did you get there? Were you on a battleship or aircraft carrier?

Veteran: We were taken overseas by a troop ship. There were 500 officers and about 3,000 enlisted men. {Veteran shows items to Interviewer at various times from this point on.} This is a pretty good booklet that I got that shows how they dressed down in New Guinea and shows those grass huts that they lived in up on stilts. Girls wore no tops, which was just their culture. Here's some actual photographs that I took along with some other guys. These people were up in the mountainous part of New Guinea. They had 50,000 foot high mountains there, and they were living up in those higher places, and there was good farming. They grew wonderful garden vegetables. We would go up there—there was a landing strip that the Australians had made—and we would land in our aircraft, and we would trade them canned meat, canned milk, and items like that for their tomatoes, lettuce, and things of that kind—fresh food. It was really a wonderful way to supplement our diet. We had NO fresh meat, NO fresh vegetables, NO fresh milk. Everything was dried. This is a little boy that has a can of ham that we traded him, and they gave us some nice things that they had made by hand—some jewelry and stuff.

Interviewer: That's really interesting to see all of that.

Veteran: Because I was a good mechanic, taking care of the airplane was my job, but we found an abandoned LST, one of these landing trips that our infantry had used on an earlier invasion to get the Japs out of there. This thing had two diesel engines in it, and it was just sitting there on the beach, and had been sitting there for maybe six months. We went down and looked at it and decided that we could take two diesel engines and maybe get one of them to run, so we did that. We built a deck of wood in here to get up to where you could see out of this—it was about eight feet deep. It had a door that opened, and it was in bad shape, so we welded that together and got it tight. We got one diesel engine running, and we would go out and go fishing. You know how we fished? We'd take hand

grenades and throw it out there, and by the time it got down about twenty feet, it would go off, and all of these fish would come up, and we found out what was down there. Beautiful fish! Some had good meat on them, but others were just real pretty colors of blue and yellow, and assorted things like that. Somebody said, “Oh, you cruel thing!” These are some of the natives and one of my friends that was a staff sergeant that went along. We all had a good time.

Interviewer: How many people were on the base with you in New Guinea?

Veteran: 800.

Interviewer: Was that the same number you had in the Philippines?

Veteran: We separated from that larger group when we got to the Philippines, and so we were basically by ourselves as a squadron, and a squadron has about 400 people.

Interviewer: That’s interesting.

Veteran: We were self-sufficient. We had to do all our own cooking. We had a doctor with us that took care of the health of the men. We had contacts so we could always get our laundry. We always had the ability to go down to Australia and take up a collection of money and buy beer and mostly gin. When we would get back, we could take that beer that we’d bought and trade that for laundry and all kinds of supplies that we needed—services like that.

Interviewer: How did you get letters back and forth?

Veteran: We had what they called an APO service, and this was a mail service that would take letters. They would be air mailed on planes that would go from the Continental U.S. to where we were. Mailbags would be put onboard those ships. They would bring supplies over here and then they’d load up with mail and go back to San Francisco, and then they’d just dump it into the U.S. mail.

Interviewer: What time did you wake up every day at bases in the U.S. and also overseas?

Veteran: Daylight. Everything began at daylight, and so everybody had to be out. Once I was in charge of the airport in Finchhaven, and we never did fall in like you did on an Army post. Once we got out there on our own, we had the sergeants just

get everybody up. They'd yell, "Get up!" "Rouse out! "Hit the deck!" That kind of stuff, and the guys would get up, and you always had breakfast ready. We'd march on in and eat, and then you'd go do your job.

Interviewer: What time was lights out?

Veteran: Overseas, we had no organized bedtime. We worked hard. The pilots would come in dog-tired, the mechanics would end up the day dog-tired. Everybody just put in twelve-hour days.

Interviewer: What were your daily duties?

Veteran: This was what the airport looked like at the time I was running the airport. {Showing photo to Interviewer} We had mail pouches. This is the way we kept track of flights, and so our whole effort was designed to bring in freight, and that would come in off of ships or other aircraft, break those down into individual plane loads, get them all going to one destination, and get those loaded and ready for takeoff. These guys worked like dogs. Didn't have a lot of fancy loading equipment. A lot of the stuff had to be loaded by hand, and they would come in tired. As officers running this thing, we had to do all kinds of scheduling, communications with other airports and squadrons, how many ships do you have, how many can we plan on, and so there's a whole gang {END OF SIDE A}

{SIDE B BEGINS }

Here's the airport facilities that I built by hand in Manila. We were told to operate there until the end of the war, so I would go around Manila and collect abandoned sheet metal and two by fours (lumber) and load it all up in a truck. This is a parachute drying tower, and tire maintenance was in here, everything it took to operate a squadron. This was my office right here. This was my houseboy, and here I am again. This is one of our planes—a C-46. We brought those ships in, changed the engines, rebuilt the stripe structure and so on if they go hit.

Interviewer: What was your rank?

Veteran: Captain. I was a squadron engineering officer.

Interviewer: How long did it take you to get to the rank of captain?

Veteran: About six months. I was brought in to fill a captain's job that was going home, and they put me in there when they found out I was OK to do the job.

Interviewer: How many people in your squadron were actually helping you service the planes and rebuild them.

Veteran: We had about 150. This included sheet metal men, engine mechanics, instrument mechanics, tire maintenance men, fire maintenance mechanics, parachute mechanics, and each one of those groups were probably 7 to 18 men.

Interviewer: How much free time did you have overseas?

Veteran: In the beginning, when the war was really going, the first free time I had was after I had been there about eight months, and they let me have a three-day vacation in Australia, and then I had to come back. We really didn't have any free time. A three day vacation in one year, and they called that R&R—rest and recreation, or re-creation. {Laughter}

Interviewer: How much free time did you have in the U.S. when you were at A&M and Yale?

Veteran: That was just the normal student kind of life at A&M. You had no free time while I was at Yale, and also at Fort Sill. You were just totally involved. You might have Sunday off.

Interviewer: You serviced the C-46 planes?

Veteran: Yeah, I had sixteen of them, and that's a squadron. We were known as the 22nd Troop Carrier Squadron.

Interviewer: What were the bases like overseas? I see some of the pictures that you have.

Veteran: Crude. This thing right here is one of those Quonset huts, and we traded beer. The Navy always had a lot of good stuff, and they never had any beer, and so they knew the Air Force always had beer, so they would come and say, "Boy you sure could use a place for your office out here." I said, "Yeah, whatta you got?" And they said, "Well, we got some Quonset huts that we don't need." "How much do you want for that?" He said, "Well, you got much beer?" I said,

“Yeah.” He said, “Well, how about five cases for a house?” I’d say, “O.K.” So, that way we were able to get some things to upgrade our base. We were just on our own. Later on, by doing that same thing, we were able to trade around, and we got some plywood and some bathroom fixtures, and we traded beer for that. We even found a guy that had a refrigerator, and after we got that, we were later able to build this little house right here. It was just an 8x8 or 10x10—here it is right here. Guess it was 10x10. We had three officers from Texas that lived here, and we flew a Texas flag up on top of this little building that we built. Here again, see that corrugated iron? I’d send my trucks out, and the boys would bring back that and the plywood that we could trade the Navy for. We managed to put together some stuff like that to live in.

Interviewer: Did the Air Force send you anything to help with the base?

Veteran: No. They didn’t have anything. We were just on our own. As I look back on it, it was kind of funny. The Seabees—do you know what they are? C-B means Construction Battalion. They were Navy people, and they had all paving equipment, like bulldozers, tractors, and so forth, and they liked beer. So, we would say, “Hey, you know what? We sure need a road up to the house.” “Aw sure—you need anything else, Captain?” {Laughter} So, we became ‘scroungers.’ That was a word in our vocabulary. We were going out to ‘scrounge,’ and that meant we would trade what we had for what we needed.

Interviewer: Were you scared during in of those times?

Veteran: When we got there in New Guinea in that jungle, I’m telling you, it was forbidding, in the sense that we didn’t know what was in that jungle. I didn’t know if there was lions and tigers or what back there, but they told us there wasn’t anything like that. We worried about malaria. They had the Anopheles mosquito, and we took a tablet that turned us all yellow, because it was a yellow dye. We worried about our water, about our sanitary conditions, but if we didn’t bathe, we’d get what they called ‘jungle rot,’ and it was a bad fungus on your feet. It became an officer’s duty to inspect feet. I’d walk down to where the men were walking, and I’d say, “Fellas, I need to look at your feet. Take your shoes and socks off.” Some of them were in need of having attention, and we’d get

them loaded up and take them to the doctor. They wouldn't just volunteer to go, and we knew that. An officer really had the welfare of those men in your hands. They sensed whether you cared for them or not, and if you took care of them, they would do what had to be done. I never had a man say, "I'm not going to do that." In Vietnam, some of those boys shot their officers in the back. I never experienced that. We didn't treat the men that way. We were very considerate of them, and they shared the beer, and shared the cigars or whatever we had, we shared it with them. This is my engine change crew—this crew right here. They could take one of these big engines off, and these engines were 3,000 horsepower, and they could pull those off. Sixteen cylinders, take another one and put it on in a day.

Interviewer: How often did ya'll get a chance to bathe when you were in the jungles in New Guinea?

Veteran: At first, we could only bathe with water brought into us in what they called water bags, and then you would get from that water bag enough water to fill your helmet, and you actually bathed out of your combat helmet. That was your bathtub. We had five-gallon cans, so we'd get five gallons of water and bring it to where you lived, and then you would pour water out of that into a helmet and wash. Then later, we finally got enough pipe and stuff and had a little plumbing system going after about four months, or something like that, and so we began to be able to shower then. When that happened, we could shower every day, but this business of washing out of a helmet, that was sort of hard to do, so we didn't get but maybe two or three baths a weeks. But we had to bathe—that was essential.

Interviewer: What made you decided to become an engineer?

Veteran: I just lived and breathed engines, and that really was my career out at Exxon. I was a guy that could figure out how to make anything run or work and install it, and so forth. So I guess I was just born with it.

Interviewer: Were you in favor of the war when you first started?

Veteran: Yeah. I knew that we had to kill Hitler. He was BAD. He was just like the Arafat's and these Saddam Hussein's. We've got to kill them. It's just a matter of going over there and doing it, but Hitler was a bad man. This Hirihito from Japan, he was a madman, and they intended to kill us. We just decided, by George, we were going to get them. That was my whole goal was to get rid of those people, and here we've got another batch of them.

Interviewer: Did you receive any type of newspaper or hear anything on the radio about what was going on with the war in Europe and also in Pacific?

Veteran: Yeah. For about a year down in New Guinea we heard very little, and finally I traded the Australians—I think when I was on that leave—and got a radio and brought it back up to Finchhaven, and I began to listen a little bit. Actually, we didn't get day-to-day news. This is the way were informed. You remember I told you we had a Teletype? We were in Finchhaven, and that's the way we'd get our big news. We were on the official MacArthur communication system.

Interviewer: Were you overseas when the war in Europe ended?

Veteran: Yeah.

Interviewer: When you heard that the war with Europe ended and Hitler gave up, how did everybody on the base react when they heard it?

Veteran: We were in Manila when the VE (Victory in Europe) occurred, and what it meant to us was was that we could now get more supplies and more aircraft to concentrate on Japan, and we thought that that would speed up the VJ Day, which was the Victory over Japan Day. Of course, the atom bomb was being put together and hastened along, and we were all just so deathly afraid that if we had to invade Japan like they had to invade Europe, that the casualties would be horrible.

Interviewer: Because in Japan they fight to the death.

Veteran: Oh, yeah, they were prepared to fight to the death. And then those two atom bombs hit and just shook up the whole population of Japan from the emperor on down. In fact, after the war I went over there and we visited in these cities and

what not, and there was this mother that looked at me and said, “You fly airplane?” I said, “Yes.” “You drop bomb on Nagasaki?” And I said, “No, not me myself.” And she said, “You no worry.” I was apologizing, but she said, “No, no—no apology.” The women knew that this was a bad thing that they were doing.

Interviewer: Did you receive any special awards or recognition while you were in the service?

Veteran: Our squadron got three Presidential citations for extremely efficient work under combat, and I got three battle stars personally—Bronze battle stars. Got these combat ribbons for various liberations of New Guinea, the Philippines, the liberation of the Pacific Rim islands, and the liberation of Japan.

Interviewer: Were you overseas when the war with Japan ended also?

Veteran: Yeah. In fact, I had two airplanes sitting on the runway in Tokyo, and the arrangement was that the Battleship *Missouri* would NOT come into Tokyo Bay unless we were radioing constantly to them that there was no Jap aircraft taking off from Tokyo. MacArthur made this as a strict rule, that there would be treachery, so we were sitting there for a week prior to the Battleship *Missouri* coming in to sign the declaration.

Interviewer: When they signed the declaration, how long after before you were allowed to go home?

Veteran: That was the disappointing thing. They signed the thing on November 5th, I think it was. I didn't get to come home until April. That was the longest time in my life, but they thought something could happen—something could backfire—and they wanted to get enough people into Japan and get them set up, and get the population more or less under control so there wouldn't be any backfire, and so we had to stay there until that was done.

Interviewer: Did you leave a fiancé or girlfriend or wife at home?

Veteran: I'll tell you what. I married my high school sweetheart, and she went with me all around to Yale, and so forth. We left on good terms, and she never wrote me to say she wouldn't be there when I got back, but when I wrote and told her that I

was coming home—I had enough points to come home—she wrote back and said, “I won’t be there for you. I’ve already found someone else.” So, the moral to this is being gone twenty-two months is too long. I thought we had a good marriage, but that war just busted that up, so I had to start over when I got here.

Interviewer: Were there any women working on the bases in the U.S.?

Veteran: I was stationed just for a month at Kelly Field in San Antonio, and they had a LOT of women doing work there. As a matter of fact, my mother was in the engineering department there. This is her—she had a job where she was the gal that pulled all of the blueprints and everything for their craftsmen to do their work. They worked on fifty different kinds of planes there, and she could go to the files and find the right prints.

Interviewer: When you returned home, how did the people at home treat you, or what was the reaction of people?

Veteran: You know we dribbled in. There would be a troop train with maybe 1,000 guys on it and they’d get off, and there wouldn’t be nobody there—no bands. Family would meet you or something like that. There wasn’t all this hoopla like when a battleship comes in. We came home in dribbles. This is a picture of my first wife here, and this is my mother and sister here, and this is me when I came back home to San Antonio. There was this “Glad you’re back,” and all that kind of thing, but no big deal.

Interviewer: I have one last question. How did the people on the base treat you? Were there any pranks, or was it like serious all of the time between the officers and everybody else?

Veteran: It was all business. There weren’t any pranks. We lived so close together that any mischief was generally taken as bad. I actually would say that we were a military atmosphere. Now the men didn’t jump up and stand at attention and salute and all of that, but they called you “Sir”; you called them “Sergeant,” or “Private So and So.” It was a military atmosphere.

Interviewer: That's all of the questions I have sir. {TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}