

Oliver: Thomas Woodson Oliver

Interviewer: When were you born?

Oliver: 1921 October 7th

Interviewer: Where were you born?

Oliver: I'd say Clarksville Tennessee.

Interviewer: Is that your home town?

Oliver: Yes

Interviewer: How would you describe your home town?

Oliver: Well you can probably do a better job of that one than I can. When I left here going to the service there was 13,000 people. And now it's like 125,000. That's as well as I can describe it. It was blown away during the tornado was built back and looks great.

Interviewer: What branch of service were you in?

Oliver: I was in Naval Aviation.

Interviewer: Did you have a preference for this branch?

Oliver: I volunteered in 1942 that's when I joined the Navy.

Interviewer: What unit did you serve with?

Oliver: I served in the naval aviation unit in various parts of it all over the country, world.

Interviewer: What did your parents do for a living?

Oliver: Farmer

Interviewer: What did they farm?

Oliver: Close by here in the Kirkwood community and a meager existence as all other farmers were during that time.

Interviewer: And what did they farm what kind of crops?

Oliver: Tobacco, corn and orchards that type stuff.

Interviewer: Did you help work on the farm?

Oliver: Oh yes that's another reason I joined the Navy.

Interviewer: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Oliver: Two sisters.

Interviewer: Where did your grandparents live?

Oliver: Well they lived in Clarksville Tennessee.

Interviewer: Did you get to see them often?

Oliver: Well part of them was deceased and I don't remember seeing any of them. But my one side of the family I would see quite often.

Interviewer: What did your grandparents do for a living?

Oliver: One was a tobacco buyer for American Holland Clarksville.

Interviewer: Where did you attend school?

Oliver: Austin Peay

Interviewer: Before that

Oliver: Clarksville High School.

Interviewer: What was your high school like?

Oliver: It was like high school.

Interviewer: Well I mean do you remember a lot of your teachers and students you

Oliver: I remember some of the teachers yeah. I played on the football team at Clarksville High School. And I guess I graduated from that place in what 39 I guess it was.

Interviewer: And when you went to Austin Peay what did you major in?

Oliver: I a botanist in Agriculture.

Interviewer: Did you finish?

Oliver: Yes, I had to come back after WWII and take one quarter to finish.

Interviewer: What do you remember about the great depression?

Oliver: More than I would like to know.

Interviewer: Can you expand on that?

Oliver: Well if you know how it feels not to have any money but plenty to eat and wear ragged clothes that's how it felt.

Interviewer: Was your family or you helped by any of the New Deal Programs the WPA, CCC?

Oliver: I can't really say that they helped me no.

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

Oliver: I guess I was 20, 21 I guess, 20.

Interviewer: And did you have a job before you entered the service other than farming?

Oliver: No

Interviewer: Before Pearl Harbor did you think the Nazis and the Japanese were a threat to the United States?

Oliver: I didn't think enough about it we didn't have radios out in here. I didn't know too much about it, it was something I didn't think would happen to the U.S.A. Never gave it much thought.

Interviewer: Where were you when you heard the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

Oliver: I guess standing on the steps at Austin Peay.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt?

Oliver: Well here again as I said we didn't have, I just had come from my parents place out in the Kirkwood community I hadn't heard anything about Pearl Harbor. But when I got to Austin Peay the boys were talking about Pearl Harbor being bombed and so forth and I really didn't give it much thought.

Interviewer: What did you think of Roosevelt?

Oliver: I was a big admirer of Roosevelt yes.

Interviewer: Why

Oliver: Well we thought he did more for the South, furnished jobs and helped the economy strengthen and so we thought he was great.

Interviewer: Did you believe he was leading the country in the right direction?

Oliver: If it showed any kind of improvement I'd have to answer that and say yes.

Interviewer: Do you remember the day Roosevelt died?

Oliver: Yes

Interviewer: Where were you?

Oliver: I was in the Tangle Island.

Interviewer: What were you doing?

Oliver: Taking flag training enemy flag training.

Interviewer: How did you hear the news? Who told you?

Oliver: I have no idea how we heard the news, I don't know.

Interviewer: Do you remember your reaction?

Oliver: Yeah we were startled of course that Roosevelt had died.

Interviewer: What did you think of Truman?

Oliver: I liked Truman very much.

Interviewer: So you volunteered and you enlisted. Did you go to an induction center?

Oliver: No I volunteered to the Navy I had to go to Atlanta to take some tests to see if I could pass the eye exams and all of these various tests they gave us. See if I was coordinated enough to pass the flight test and I did. And I was called up and my first stop was Columbia South Carolina what they called prep flight. You want more?

Interviewer: Sure

Oliver: Then for the flight training we went to many different places took various stages of flight training. Next stop we went to St. Petersburg Florida where we started flying little piper cubs and that type airplane. After serving time there we came to Athens Georgia to what they called preflight where there was no flying there was only ground school where they figured they'd see if you could work navigation and all that type problem. Then the rest of the day we spent with the boot type physical training.

Interviewer: What did your physical training involve?

Oliver: Oh boy everything you can think of. It was like a, it was a Marine boot camp is what it really was. There were obstacle courses and played football, basketball and a world and world of swimming. That's when I caught up on my swimming and I thought I'd never put on a wetsuit again swimming in the Navy. Taking five mile swims was not my cup of tea. Then from there well another strange thing happened about that time. When we got to that stage the navy decided they had too many pilots and so they were washing them out sending them to boot camp for any reason what so ever. What they offered anybody that had two years of college training they could try for mid shipman's school. So several of us that had two years of college transferred to mid shipman's school. We went from there to oh where was that in New Jersey, Desiree Park New Jersey. Went from there to Fort Skylar New York where I was commissioned as a regular naval officer in the regular navy.

Interviewer: What year were you commissioned?

Oliver: Oh Lord that was 45. By that time they killed off so many pilots they got permission the regular navy they killed off so many pilots down there in Midway and Wake Island and some of those places that my first orders were to report back to flight training. So I went right back to flight training where I left off, same place I would have been if I would have stayed the only difference was I was an officer and got officer pay at that time. So then from there I went to I was at Platonio when the President died. Then I went from there to Corpus Christy where we was flying a little higher horse power planes. Then from there I went to Pensacola Florida where I had advanced training and all that stuff gunnery and.

Interviewer: What did your advanced training involve?

Oliver: Oh Lord everything formation flying, gunnery, target practice, bombing practice all that kind of stuff. Aerobatic, combat aerobatics in fact I stayed and they transferred me out and I taught combat aerobatics for some time. And then from there we went to Hawaii and was making up a final squadron of fight pilots fighter bomber when that war ended in Japan. And so from that point on when the war was over a lot of these boys that had a lot of points, had been fighting over in Europe and Asia and so forth were going home. So then I got a new set of orders to report to advanced base training there in Honolulu. And I would up being in charge of all of the small boats in the Pacific which was quite a job. I got froze on that job for seven months out there before it was combat time and the reason I said I'm certainly no hero but I spend enough time training and training other people. I spent 4 years and 22 days in there.

Interviewer: What was your family's reaction when you went into the military?

Oliver: Well I wasn't here to see their reaction but I know that my Momma would be scared to death if she knew I was somewhere in an airplane. My dad he probably wouldn't have given it much

Interviewer: Do you remember any of your recruits that you trained with?

Oliver: Oh I remember a lot of yeah a few of them but most of them are dead by now. I just got the message last year that one of my friends that transferred back to Hawaii with me was a judge I forget what judge he was in North Carolina. In fact I was his best man at his wedding in Hawaii, he died. And I have another one who's Federal Judge down in Miami Beach now I think he's still living. But I have a few that's still living. One of my buddies that flew in the same unit with me died last summer. But other than that I don't know too many.

Interviewer: Did you participate in state side maneuvers?

Oliver: In what?

Interviewer: State side maneuvers.

Oliver: State side what?

Interviewer: Maneuvers

Oliver: I don't know what you mean by state side maneuvers. If you're thinking about the army we were not in any kind of convoy or anything like that. We just moved from one place to another like I told you I went to a lot of different places in this country. And we took airplanes to a lot of cross country folks. Momma you want to join this?

Interviewer: Did you ever travel overseas?

Oliver: Yes we had to go overseas to get to Hawaii.

Interviewer: But to another country?

Oliver: Well at that time it was not a part of the United States but I did for your information there was a lot of different islands over there. Midway, Wake, Okinawa, Philippines, Indonesia many of them you know.

Interviewer: How did you travel over on troop ships?

Oliver: Well I made one trip well I made two trips. I rode over on a hospital ship that brought a load of wounded back from Japan and I rode back over there. And I thought this is great living this hospital ship with all of these nurses and about four or five of us men on there. But I came back when they brought the first Marine division back out of Japan on the troop ships all of the other time I was in an airplane flying.

Interviewer: What airplane what kind? What kind of airplane?

Oliver: Well on these other islands we was taking which was a constellation type thing. What we called C-54s that type airplanes. Before any jets were jets were not in the service at that time.

Interviewer: What kind of planes did you fly?

Oliver: I would up the last thing I was flying was a FOU Course Air fighter plane. And one of the planes that they used on oh what was the name of that TV program that lasted so long? Oh Black Sheep can you remember Colonel Black Sheep on TV? Well they were flying the kind of planes that I was flying.

Interviewer: Do you remember any of your supervisors or officers that were with you? What did you think of them?

Oliver: Well yeah I remember a few yeah. Some of them I liked very much some of them I didn't. I used to see Admiral Nimitz in Hawaii quite often. And I've seen Bull Halzie but one I didn't like was a fellow named Welch Admiral Welch. He was well he just didn't have any regard for a small naval officer with lesser rank. But I don't know what your question is leading up to but.

Interviewer: It was just what was your impression of them.

Oliver: And some of my training I had as a navy pilot I liked them. In fact my first guy that taught me flying was an ex crop duster from Mississippi. And he could really bring that thing out he knew how to fly that bugger.

Interviewer: What equipment did you train with?

Oliver: What?

Interviewer: What equipment did you train with?

Oliver: Go get my helmet back there. We had a helmet and goggles and flight suit we called it parachute on your back.

Interviewer: Did you ever have to use it?

Oliver: No but I've been in a place where I almost did have to use it. One time we were down in Texas and we were flying in six plane formation and this boy's plane caught on fire. And he called and said he was going to have to bail out and so he bailed out and of course none of us ever had any training on how to bail out of an airplane and he said he was coming down and he saw these big giant cactus up there and railroad track. Said he heard about spinning your sheet and he tried to spin his sheet and here came a train down that track. He didn't know if he wasn't going to ride on that railroad track and that train run over him so he said instead he spanned his shoot and wound up in one of those weak cactus. And had prickly needles in him all over and he spend about two months in the hospital cutting those things out of him. I didn't have much desire to jump out of an airplane with a parachute after that never did have any as far as that goes.

Interviewer: But you didn't have any training in case you did have to jump out?

Oliver: Oh yeah you know in the classroom they would say this is what you do you pull this button and if that don't work you've got one more chance pull that other one.

Interviewer: You didn't actually

Oliver: No no but what they do to make sure those shoots would work they'd make whoever packed those shoots fly with us at least once every three months at random so they had to take the shoots. Riding with you take one up and you'd go pick one out for them they were riding with you. Same thing was true with the mechanics.

Interviewer: They rode with you from time to time?

Oliver: Yeah some of them would ride I had one boy up in the Highlands and he could fly better than I could. He could do anything some of those boys were afraid to fly those mechanics but he would sign up with one of their names and he flew all day long every day.

Interviewer: Did you feel close to your fellow soldiers?

Oliver: I didn't stay close to any soldier there were sailors out there I was very close to and I liked them very much.

Interviewer: What did you do in your free time?

Oliver: Oh gosh well in our free time I don't know what you'd say we did we built a lot of model airplanes we could talk about that. If we happened to be some place in the city if we could get off and had liberty we probably spent our time chasing women up and down the streets you know.

Interviewer: What did you usually eat?

Oliver: Food

Interviewer: C-rations?

Oliver: I never ate any c-rations except on a forced hike they would make you go on just for survival purposes. And this is what you're going to eat if you have to bail out of this plane somewhere and this is the only food you're going to have so you might as well get used to it now. And so you maybe ate it one day of the year but that's the main reason I joined the navy because I knew that cook was close by.

Interviewer: Where did you sleep?

Oliver: Where did I sleep?

Interviewer: Yes

Oliver: We had bunks that we set that sometimes may be six deep.

Interviewer: What were the living conditions like?

Oliver: After being on a farm and working and all that kind of stuff I can't complain about my sleeping conditions.

Interviewer: Describe a typical day. What did you encounter what did you do?

Oliver: After all my training that all you want to talk about we did a lot of different things every day. We didn't fly all day every day. Some days we'd have a lot of ground school. We had all kind of training on ordinances different kind of guns even guns there was no way that we could ever use. But we had to know something about it them how to field strip them and all of that sort of thing. But we didn't have to do any, we had a lot of oh I guess forced marches and showed all of what you could eat if you got shot down someplace you could eat frog, snakes and all of that kind of stuff. If they didn't eat you, you could eat them.

Interviewer: Were you promoted during your service time?

Oliver: Yeah I guess you would say I was probably promoted three times. I used to be a cadet and then got to be a what did they call something else I've done forgot the title of that. And I came out as a JG.

Interviewer: Did you think the promotions were deserved by the ones who received them?

Oliver: Well certainly since I received one I probably deserved it.

Interviewer: Were the people you were surrounded by were they pre-navy were they career?

Oliver: No at that time being war time we had most of the people were just like me they gathered up off the farm out of the drug store or just out of school or whatever. I can only recall about three or four people that I remember that was military people. We had one boy in Columbia South Carolina his daddy was a general. But I don't remember many former military people in there.

Interviewer: How long were you in the Pacific?

Oliver: Oh I would say about almost a year.

Interviewer: You include Hawaii and what else in there?

Oliver: Well that's all just fooling around some of those little islands. I thought the war would still be going on if I had went.

Interviewer: Have you gone to any reunions?

Oliver: No

Interviewer: Do you have a most memorable moment?

Oliver: Well I've got several that's memorable to me but for nobody else.

Interviewer: Would you like to tell me about them?

Oliver: Well the most remember able that I remember was when we was in Hawaii we had to fly since I went back to the regular navy and we could keep up with our flight time by flying four hours and one off. So then during the four hour month you'd go out and check out an airplane and take it out and fly for an hour and sign in that you took it for time. Well I went out there and signed me a plane one day and went out and there was something wrong with it form the time we got off the ground till we came back. And every time you'd give it gas the prop would over speed so we had to call somebody on the radio. And he said well hang it on the prop and said maybe you can make it change over into other gears like the gear in the car. You could do it at 5,000 feet you could make it change props. When I got ready to land I had to throttle back and give it power to come in gave it the power and the prop would over speed and you'd have 500 feet and you couldn't hang it on the prop. You had to come in and the last landing I made was under full throttle position just wide open and I cut some fellow out of the traffic pattern. And I went out the back side one eye open and my feet on the brakes and finally got it stopped before the fence and I was shaking so I could hardly get my feet off the rutters. I got back and grounded that airplane I said this is the last plane I'm ever going to fly in my whole life. But since that time I guess I've put in more hours in the air than most people in ten lifetimes. Of course my job in civilian life required me to fly to all of these foreign countries and do all of these different things. I've made more than 50 trips to Japan and China, Indonesia, Europe on many occasions South America all over. So I put in lots and lots of time in an airplane.

Interviewer: Who did you work for in your civilian?

Oliver: I worked for US Steel. USS Agrajones a division of USS Steel.

Interviewer: Do you remember the day that WWII was declared over?

Oliver: Yeah

Interviewer: Where were you?

Oliver: In Corpus Christy.

Interviewer: What were you doing?

Oliver: Flight training.

Interviewer: Did you have any major reaction?

Oliver: The best I can remember we went down town and walked and talked and drank beer with the rest of them.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Oliver: No I think you rung me out for all I'm worth already.

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