

**Interview with Robert W. Davis  
Aleutian World War II Veterans History Program  
March 8, 2008**

**Self Interview Program  
Transcription by Janis Kozlowski, National Park Service**

*This oral history is part of a self interview program. Veterans are sent a tape recorder and tapes and given a set of questions that they may use to guide their interview but are encouraged to tell the stories that are most meaningful to them. Mr. Davis recorded both a tape and digital interview. What follows is a transcript of the cassette tape interview. The digital file is not significantly different from the cassette interview and was not transcribed.*

*The tape, digital file, and transcript are on file in the National Park Service office in Anchorage Alaska.*

**Robert Davis:** My name is Robert W. Davis.

**[0:00:00]** I enlisted in the United States Army Air Force Enlisted Reserve Corp while still in high school at age 17. I passed the initial examinations for the aviation cadet program which required that I wait until I was 18 and a half years of age before being called to active duty. I entered active duty in March of 1945 reporting for basic training at Shepard Field, Texas. Upon completion of basic training I was given a final physical examination prior to entry into the air cadet program. I failed to pass the eye exam for color blindness and was dropped from the program. Several days later, however, the Air Cadet program was terminated as the war in Europe was ending and air crews from there would be available for transfer to the Pacific Theatre of operations.

Having completed basic training I requested assignment to aerial gunnery school. Instead, I was assigned to aircraft and engine maintenance training at Keesler Field, Biloxi, Mississippi. The training there was on B-24 bombers. While still in training at Keesler Field, the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ending the war with Japan.

I completed my training at Keesler Field in late October 1945 and was given a 10 day delay en route before reporting to Langley Field, Virginia for overseas assignment presumably to Europe. I went home to Great Falls, Montana and became engaged to my girlfriend.

**[0:01:45]** Upon reporting to Langley Field, Virginia I was made aware of a one year enlistment program in the regular army which would assure me of a definite date of release from active duty. So, I re-enlisted in the regular Army for one year. Prior to re-enlisting I was uncertain as to when I would be released from active duty as we were still under the policy of "serving for the duration plus six months." A provision of re-enlisting was a 14 day delay en route to Fort Lewis, Washington for reassignment overseas. This

meant I would be home for Christmas and gave me the opportunity to marry the girl I was engaged to.

After reporting to Fort Lewis, Washington shortly after Christmas in 1945 it was not until February 15<sup>th</sup> 1946 that I boarded the troop ship *George Washington Carver*, a converted hospital ship heading for assignment to the 344<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron of the 343<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group stationed on Shemya in the Aleutian Islands. En route to Shemya the ship stopped at Seward, Alaska and Adak to disembark personnel and equipment.

As we entered the North Pacific we encountered rough seas and stormy weather for a few days. I was assigned to guard duty at night aboard ship which proved to be a blessing for me because the Merchant Marine Sailor would take me to their galley and feed me cinnamon toast, tea, and soda crackers which aided my battle with seasickness. One night the sea was so rough, a large refrigerator in the galley toppled over.

**[0:03:30]** During the voyage from Seattle to Shemya a number of cases of mumps broke out aboard ship. Days at sea in close quarters aggravated the spread of the illness. On February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1946 we finally disembarked on Attu. We were told that the docking facilities had been washed away on Shemya and we would be transported to Shemya on a tug boat. Being Air Force personnel we wondered why a C-47 was not available to fly us to Shemya.

Our baggage was loaded in the hold of the tug boat with us on top of it. The sea was rough between Attu and Shemya and most of us were seasick and vomiting. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning we landed at Shemya. We gathered our baggage and were taken to a mess hall and fed fried Spam sandwiches.

The next morning I was feeling quite ill and went on sick hall and was taken to the infirmary. The weather was wet and the wind was blowing a gale. There was a wooden walk way about 30 yards long from the roadway to the infirmary. It was covered with sleet and I was unable to walk upright as the wind would blow me off the icy walkway. So, I crawled part way on my hands and knees. Welcome to Shemya!

At the infirmary I was diagnosed with the mumps. It had been five days since the last reported case on board ship. Consequently the entire group of us from the ship were placed in quarantine and I was not a popular fellow.

**[0:05:12]** Captain William Lee Jacobson assumed command of the 344<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1946. He had previously served sixteen months in the European Theatre in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. He covered all the major beach heads and landings and he was sent home on a recuperation leave and 30 days later returned to command the 94<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. During his tour of duty he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with nine clusters and the European Theatre Campaign Medal with four battle stars. He had a wife and two sons in Glendale, California.

Several events come to mind relative to my stay on Shemya. On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1946 a USO show came to Shemya starring Ronnie Russell and dancer June Rumsey. Their group stayed on the island until May 18<sup>th</sup>. On one occasion they were our guests at the squadron mess. It was quite a scramble to see who of us would sit at June Rumsey's table. I can only imagine that bad flying weather kept them on Shemya for almost four days.

**[0:06:27]** One day I was in a line hut on the flight line where we on the line crew stayed during flight line duty. A P-38 landed and the pilot taxied the plane toward the line hut and as he taxied toward the hut he applied the airplane brakes prior to turning the plane to face the runway for parking. As he did this, the nose of the plane dipped down and then rose up. As it rose up a burst of 50 caliber machine gun bullets flew over the top of the line hut. Apparently the gun switch had been activated during the flight and the pilot had inadvertently pressed the firing button on the control column during the braking procedure. Fortunately for us, the guns went off when the nose of the plane was rising and not dipping. My notes name the errant pilot as a Lieutenant T. S. Brown.

On June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1946 [correction made per Mr. Davis, May 23, 2008] a B-24 from the 404<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron crashed on Shemya. The bomber was returning from a week long mission. It had stopped at Naknek for fuel and as it approached Shemya at 0100 hours it was confronted with a dense fog and medium wind. It circled over Shemya for two and a half hours attempting to locate the runway. At approximately 0328 the aircraft plunged into the quartermaster area of Shemya after most, if not all, of the crew had bailed out.

There were three survivors of the eight man crew: the First Lieutenant Herbert Augustine suffered a sprained ankle; Sergeant John Croan was released from the hospital having had no injuries; and PFC Henry Earll received burns about the arms and face. Killed in the crash were the 404<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel John Lawson, Lieutenant Philip Holtusky, First Lieutenant Hilger, Staff Sergeant Throop, and PFC Ellerbee.

Lieutenant Augustine reported they had made a half a dozen passes at the field and came down to 200 feet where they saw lights but they couldn't safely come lower. The overcast began at 2500 feet and they jumped between 3000 and 4000 feet. One crew member reported seeing the pilot don his parachute and saw three men in the waist with their chutes on. Lieutenant Augustine said that he landed on the shore on the west end of the island about 10 feet from the water. Sergeant Crone landed in Hillside Cemetery.

Soon after it was learned that the crew was going to bail out, all available on the island were summoned to watch for parachutists. A glare which reddened the fog over the quartermaster area told where the aircraft crashed. The plane disintegrated over many hundred yards and burned down a large warehouse. The nearest hut to the warehouse was 40 feet away. The largest part of the B-24 found was a section of a wing tip less than 12 feet long which dwarfed the remaining wreckage. A human hand with a ring on it and a foot were found near the airplane. A pair of flight gloves was found in the water and a part of a chest parachute was found near the main runway.

The next day after the crash I went to the crash site, the smoldering ruins of the warehouse contained the islands supply of coca-cola and beer. Around the foundation of the warehouse standing shoulder to shoulder were soldiers with broom handles fitted with nooses attempting to snare whatever was left of the libations.

The body of PFC Ellerby was found in the water on June 16<sup>th</sup>. Apparently he landed some distance out to sea and was washed ashore as the area where his body was found was searched soon after the crew bailed out. The tiny islands of Alaid and Niski were also searched. A GCA ground controlled approach system was in place on Shemya but was inoperative at the time. Several P-38 pilots reportedly volunteered to take off and attempt to lead the B-24 down but their request was denied.

**[0:10:58]** On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1946 a P-38 fighter from the 343<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group crashed into the sea three miles south of the east tip of Niski Island. I understand that the pilot had completed his tour of duty and was to leave for home the next day. He apparently received permission to take a last flight in his P-38 with another aircraft for the purpose of filming him flying the P-38. For some unknown reason he lost control of the aircraft and crashed into the sea and his body was not recovered.

In August of 1946 I was included in a cadre of personnel being sent to the Alaskan mainland to an air base known then as 26 Mile. It later became designated as Eielson Air Force Base. It is located about 26 miles from Fairbanks.

We were assigned to the 65<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron and were to transition pilots and maintenance personnel from P-38 aircraft to P-51 Mustangs. Once trained the pilots would ferry the P-51s to Shemya. It was said that some pilots were reluctant to convert to P-51s because they liked the security of the twin engine P-38 out over the North Pacific. Engine failure took on a new meaning with the P-51 Mustang.

**[0:12:22]** One morning I was upstairs in the operations office in the hangar while the crew chiefs and radio men were readying the aircraft for the days flying. The P-51s were lined up alongside the hangar and the Merlin engines were roaring as they were being checked out. Suddenly there was a terrific noise outside and as I looked out the window I saw a piece of propeller fly by and a P-51 turn around and crash into another P-51. Apparently the brakes had not been set before run up and the plane jumped the wheel chocks and swung into the other airplane. A radio man crouching on the wing of the second plane escaped injury.

On another occasion several P-51s were sent out on a training mission when one radioed the base tower reporting an emergency. He soon landed with the tip of a pine tree jammed into the air scoop. I imagine he had some explaining to do to Captain Jacobson.

Another pilot had trouble lowering his landing gear to the locked position. He was known in the squadron as a hot pilot. And as he made several passes past the tower so they could check the position of the landing gear we could see him in the cockpit wearing his 50 mission flight cap with a cigar clamped between his teeth. After several dives and barrel rolls the landing gear locked into place and all was well.

**[0:13:46]** Our quarters at 26 Mile were a big improvement over those we had on Shemya. The only disadvantage was that we had coal stoves. We finally learned how to bank them to hold the heat through the night so we did not have to get up in the morning being cold. We also appreciated being back to civilization with Fairbanks close by.

In the fall of 1946 paratroops participating in an operation called Task Force Frigid arrived in Fairbanks and soon let us fly boys know who was boss.

**[0:14:20]** I had no complaints about the food on Shemya or at 26 Mile. Our mess halls were very small compared to those at the training bases. Our squadron cooks were more attentive to keeping up well fed.

On Shemya the most disagreeable thing, besides the weather, was having to walk some distance through the mud, snow, wind, and rain to get to the latrine area. After a shower we had to go back out into the elements to our quarters. At least at 26 Mile everything was much closer and the weather was much more agreeable.

I will always remember how miserable it was to clear the snow from the P-38s on some of those cold, windy mornings on Shemya. I have some pictures of that in my files along with one of an auxiliary power plant sitting in the snow beside a P-38. They were often very hard to start in the cold.

**[0:15:13]** While on Shemya I did not feel close to my family. I wrote and received letters almost daily but as I recall it seemed like it wasn't the real world out there. After I arrived on the Alaskan mainland and visited Fairbanks and civilization my mood changed back to a more normal feeling. We had a mimeograph news sheet almost daily on Shemya, but national and international news was quite sketchy.

There was a small post library on Shemya attended to by a Red Cross lady, as I recall, and, of course, weekly church services. Weather permitting we would play a little baseball on the flight line or take a walk exploring the island. Other than that and reading there was little to do for recreation.

**[0:16:00]** After the war I stayed active in the Army Reserve and later transferred to the Montana Air National Guard. In April of 1951, during the Korean War, we were called to active duty with the Air Guard units from Idaho and California. We were stationed at Moody Air Force Base at Valdosta, Georgia and later at Georgia Air Force Base near Victorville, California. We gave up a P-51 aircraft and converted to F-86 Sabre jets.

Prior to being recalled to active duty I had been working for the telephone company. Upon return from active duty I returned to the telephone company and served in various management and state headquarters staff positions retiring in 1987 with over 39 years of company service.

**[0:16:49]** My military service served me well. It taught me many things that I apply to my civilian life as a manager: things such as leadership, responsibility, dealing with superiors and subordinates, and dealing with unexpected problems and perhaps most of all, discipline. These are the things that have stayed with me throughout my lifetime.

**[0:17:13]** I am a lifelong Indian Wars history buff and I often reflect back on the lives of soldiers of that era. The conditions of living through the terrible winters on the western plains and the living conditions of the frontier forts were not too different from those we experienced on Shemya in 1946.

Through it all I am proud to have served on Shemya and even now for some strange reason, there is a warm spot in my heart for that barren, windy, lonely, isolated piece of rock.