Kenneth R. Skinner
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[0:00:00] I went into the service in1942. I joined the Navy in Shreveport, Louisiana. I did enlist; I wasn't drafted. I lived on a 100 acre farm in Louisiana and would not have had to go but I felt like I had to go anyway and serve.

I chose the Navy because it … being inland I haven't seen too much water, so I thought as the saying goes, "Join the Navy and see the world".
[Photo 1]
I went in in 1942 and got out in October of 1945. I served in three different squadrons VP-45, VP-61 and VP-62 all in the Aleutians; three different tours of duty, 18 months all together.

[0:00:57] My first commanding officer of VP-45 was C. J. Amme. And the Skipper of VP-61 was Captain Smith and he was killed on a landing in Kodiak coming from the States. The plane was pretty loaded. The first landing they didn't make it - the first attempt - so they came around to land again and couldn't make it. They crashed into Womans Mountain in Kodiak. Several members of the crew were killed in that crash.

[0:01:29] Being a farm boy from Louisana it was a little bit hard to get used to things in the Navy. But after I got out of boot camp I enjoyed studying and being an Aviation Radioman; learning the Morse Code. I signed up as a machinist but when they gave me the test I was good at Morse Code and they said, "Well, you're gonna be a radio man." And I said, "No, I want to be a machinist." They said, "No, you're going to be a radioman." So I wound up a radioman flying in the PBY seaplanes.

[0:02:07] We flew up to Alaska the first time in our aircraft, which was a PBY-5 seaplane. It was beautiful flying up. We got a little sunshine going up and there was some beautiful country -- Ketchikan and going up through there we sure enjoyed the scenery. It was the first time we had been to Alaska so it was pretty nice to see.

[0:02:34] We at first lived aboard ships in the Bay up at Attu. There weren't any thing … any facilities ashore. Finally, after a month or so they built … they put tents ashore and we lived in tents at Casco Cove.
[Photo 2]
And they named this Casco Cove, the bay, because the USS Casco, a seaplane tender, was anchored out in the bay there.

[0:03:04] The food wasn't bad. When we flew in the morning we had to get up about 3 o'clock in the morning and hit the chow hall. And we got powdered eggs and milk and coffee and toast usually in the morning.

[0:03:17] We had to be on the flight line about 4 o'clock and take off on patrol. And the patrols, most times were pretty uneventful, just flying through the clouds and keeping … looking for ships on the radar. And it got a little bit monotonous sitting, looking at a radar screen for several hours but we did have a second radioman that relieved us occasionally.

[0:03:42] The morale was generally pretty good. When we got on a plane in the morning to take off on patrol, you never even thought that you might not come in that evening and you might not be safe on patrol. These things hardly ever entered your head.

[0:03:58] We lost quite a few men, which was pretty hard to take up there. VP-46, the squadron that relieved us in the fall of 1943, lost about half their men. That was pretty rough because I had quite a few friends in that group.

[0:04:18] The weather was something else. You could be 10 minutes away from Attu, be sunshine, you could see the island and be just great. By the time we got there and ready to land it would be all fogged in. We'd either try to go to Shemya, which was a few miles away, and land at the field there. Sometimes we couldn't even make that at all, be fogged in. We had to fly clear to Adak in order to land.

[0:04:47] We pretty much felt in touch with the family back in the States ‘cause we had mail coming in and out. We kept in touch by mail.

[0:04:57] My most memorable experiences was sighting four Japanese ships about 400 miles off Attu in July the 10th, 1943. They wouldn’t let us bomb ‘em. They sent another crew out that sank two of the ships, the other two ships got away.

[0:05:18] After the war, I wound up shoveling coal for awhile--jobs were a little hard to get. I sold insurance on the side and real estate and I wound up going to work for the power company in 1954 in Bellingham, Washington. I went to work for them in 1954, retired in 1982 as a power engineer. I drove a line truck for 17 years and went into engineering and did, like I say, retire as a power engineer in 1982.

[0:05:51] The parts that really stayed with me in my wartime experiences was the weather, flying back and forth between the states and Attu. We lost a crew going up the second time, in VP-61, a crew crashed off Vancouver Island. They still don’t know what happened to the plane. They figured it was engine failure and we lost a whole crew the second time going up. So, these kind of things kind of stayed with you, especially the part about losing a lot of good friends.

Segment 2 of interview

Skinner: [0:00:00] Attu was really amazing. We would be 10 minutes away from landing at Attu sometimes coming in off patrol; could see Attu, the sun would be shining. By the time we got there, Attu would be closed in. Shemya, the island and the air field, a few miles from Attu would also be fogged in. And some days we had to go clear to Adak to land because there was nowhere else to land in the fog.

[Photo 3]

[0:00:27] Our squadron left Attu in October and we were relieved by Squadron VP-46. I understand that the squadron lost half of their men. They were going and bombing Paramushiro in the Japanese Kurile Islands and quite a few of them were shot down.

They were dropping 40 pound fragmentation bombs from the blisters; dropping the bombs by hand. They would take off from Attu in the bunks which were made from canvas, in the back of the plane. They would have fragmentation bombs lined up on the bunk and would pass them from hand to hand back to the blister where the fellas would drop the bombs. It was very dangerous. And the flying … a lot of them, the weather got them on the way back to Attu, and others were shot down. A couple of the crews went to Russia because they couldn't make it back to Attu and were interred in Russia for the length of the war.

[0:01:38] We left Attu, our squadron, in October, and returned to the States. We formed up, stayed at Whidbey Island during the winter and trained different crews and wound up going back to Attu, I think in June of 1944, for squadron VP-61.

[0:02:03] Our second and third trips to Attu were more or less uneventful. My third trip up, third tour of duty, was with patrol bombing squadron VP-62. We didn't get a chance to do much bombing but we did have quite a few patrols. And I got to fly over the Russian Kamchatka Peninsula. We weren't supposed to approach Russia or get too close. It was really amazing site at times. It was really some amazing country.

We would fly over log rafts that were towed by coastal freighters; would have entire Russian families on these rafts with the little kids running around on the logs. It was rather amazing to see. We couldn't believe that they would let these little kids run around these log rafts--and with the women and children on these rafts. And it was really an amazing site to see.

[0:03:06] My last squadron, VP-62, returned to the States in September of 1945. I had enough points to get out and I was discharged from the Bremerton Navy Yard in 1945 on Navy Day.

Segment 3 of interview

Skinner: [0:00:00] I was assigned as an Aviation Radioman and for Patrol Squadron VP-45.

The aircraft we used was a PBY-5--a Catalina flying boat--a very sturdy, reliable aircraft. Our crew consisted of a first pilot, a co-pilot, a navigator who most times was also a pilot. I was first Radioman and I had a second radioman that could not send or receive Morse Code. This was not too good but those in command thought that, at least, he could repair the radar if anything happened to it. We had a first mechanic named Zilakowski from Ohio and I hope I pronounced that right. We also had one ordnance man in the crew to repair the ordnance, if needed, and act as another gunner.

[0:00:53] The aircraft had twin 30 caliber machine guns in the nose turret, a 50 caliber machine gun in each aft blister on each side and a single 30 caliber gun which opened up and fired underneath. These planes had no wheels, so when we landed on the water, two crew members had to wade out, attach wheels to each side, and then a tractor pulled the plane onto the beach.

[0:01:20] When we first arrived we had to live on ships anchored in Casco Cove; a fairly sheltered bay at Attu. My crew arrived at Attu in May 1943. There were no facilities on shore. Later, tents were built and we moved ashore. I lived aboard the USS Gillis, which was an old four stacker destroyer, lord knows how old, converted into a two stacker, and then converted into a rather poor seaplane tender, we thought. But in those days you took what you could get.

[0:01:54] We went on patrol whenever weather permitted. We had some beautiful sun shiny days but few and far between.

On one of our patrols we took off with a full crew of eight, four-500 pound bombs and a full load of gas – which I believe was 1430 gallons. We were told to look for Japanese ships which might be near Attu. I estimate we were about 400 miles off Attu when the radar man informed the pilot he had four blips on the radar which appeared to be ships.

The pilot immediately told me to get on the radio and inform the base and ask for permission to attack the ships. The base informed us that in no way were we to attack the ships. We did confirm that the ships were Japanese.

Our orders were to keep the ships in site visually and on radar so we would not lose sight of them and base was sending out other planes to attack the ships. We were flying close enough to see all guns aboard the ships were firing at us and could see the shrapnel from the shells flying through the air at us but very glad that nothing came close, we thought. But the pilot told us later he had looked over the plane after landing and there were a few small scrapes on the skin of the plane from the shrapnel.

Another crew came out and sank two of the ships. We understood that the other two got away. We were in the air 14 and a half hours and I was told by Ski, the mech, when we landed back at base, that there were air bubbles in the gas gauges and he estimated we had three minutes of gas left. I said, “Why didn’t you tell the pilot we were that close to running out of fuel?” His laconic reply, “I didn’t want to scare him.”

[0:03:50] I had 34 pages of code I sent, on both sides of the paper and the whole crew was pretty tired. At that time we were living aboard the USS Casco, a large seaplane tender which resembled a light cruiser. We were taken aboard the Casco, debriefed, and were told to get some food. We got to the galley and the cooks dumped two spoons of pork and beans and one slice of bread on our mess tray. Our pilot looked at the tray and asked the cook if that was the best he could do. The cook said, “yes.” And our pilot would not take that for an answer. He told us to take those trays and dump all of that over the side of the ship-- which we did.

[Photo 4]

He then told the officer of the deck, “I want to see the Captain.” He was told he was asleep. The pilot said, “You wake him up, now.” The pilot saved his tray so he could show the Captain what we were served. The Captain got red in the face when he saw the tray and went down to the galley and the whole galley crew really got a balling out. We

wound up with all the canned ham we could eat, some canned pineapple, and cake for dessert. And the Captain made the cooks get us some fresh coffee which sure tasted good.

[0:05:04] Our crew received the air medal for that little suarez but not until two years after I was discharged in 1945. And a letter of commendation and the air medal arrived, by mail, signed by President Truman.

[0:05:20] There wasn't a whole lot for the crews to do at Attu during our off times when it was fogged in and we couldn't fly. So they had some pretty good poker games going. On sunny days we'd kind of walk around the island and look around. One day, at noon, we were going to chow--and we had about a quarter or a half a mile to go to chow. I looked up at the hills above the bay and I could see two or three shadowy shapes running and then ducking down behind the rocks. I told the fellows I was with there was some Japanese up there. And they said, "Skinner you're nuts, I don't see anybody up there."

So after chow, I got back, I went to see the Executive Officer and I told him about it. And he said, "Well, we'll send an Army, get an Army patrol to go up there. The Army patrolled and found and caught three Japanese soldiers who were up there behind the rocks and they were pretty hungry, I'm sure.

[0:06:19] One night, in VP-45, we awoke to pandemonium in the hut and somebody hollered out, "There's a Jap in here!" Dermity, an enlisted pilot who bunked above me, grabbed this 45 and was waving it around in the air. The guys were hollering, "Dermity, put that down you're gonna shoot one of our guys." And another one of the enlisted pilots reached up and grabbed the 45 out of Dermity's hands and about that time the Japanese soldier ran out the back door of the Quonset hut. He was in … I'm sure, looking for food.

[0:06:55] One other time, the Army saw a Japanese—what appeared to be a Japanese--in their chow line and the fellows clothes didn't fit him too well. So one of the Sergeants grabbed the guy and started questioning [him] and [word unclear] us. And, of course, the guys answers weren't right. So the Sergeant hauled him into headquarters and the officers

intelligence was questioning and they found out he was a Japanese soldier who got hungry and stole some American uniforms off the line where the guys had put them out to dry and tried to sneak in the chow lines to get some chow.
[Photo 5]
[0:07:37] Another time, there was not too much to do, I went down to the bay one day. There was an old leaky Jap … an old leaky boat. I don't know if it was Japanese that brought it or whether it was from one of the Aleuts up there that had left. I borrowed a fishing pole from one of the guys and found a board to kind of paddle with and went out from shore a little bit. I caught two-16 pound Halibut and come back to the hut. Traded … I went down to the cook shack and traded the cooks two beers for some lard [chuckle] and some cracker crumbs and flour and went back to the hut and fried those Halibut in a pan I borrowed from the cooks on top the old oil stove we used to heat the Quonset hut.

Guys smelled those fish cooking all around the huts there and I had a regular line-up for that fried fish. So, we really had a good fish fry and the fellows talked about that for a month afterward how good those fish were. It was a real change from the Navy chow and we really enjoyed it.

[End of interview at 0:08:48, Tape 3 of 3, Side A]