

Interview with Charles Donovan

Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Program

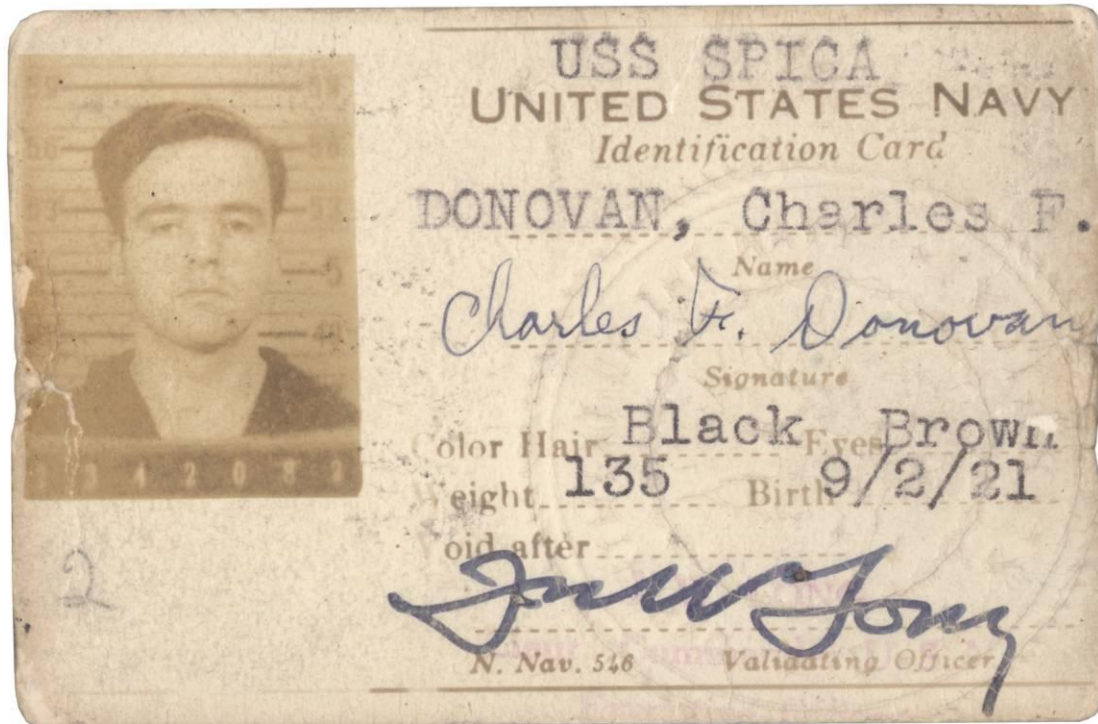
January 4, 2010, Missouri City, Texas

Interviewed by Janis Kozlowski, National Park Service
Transcribed by Greg Dixon

This interview is part of the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Project. The interview with Charles Donovan was recorded with his permission on a digital recorder. Copies of the audio file are preserved in mp3, wav and wma formats and are on file at the offices of the National Park Service in Anchorage, Alaska.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:00] I'd like to start off in finding out exactly how you got involved in World War II – what were you doing when the war broke out, and what was your thinking at the time about the whole thing?

Charles Donovan: Well, I ... let's see, when I enlisted in the Navy in 1939, before the war ... I enlisted in October of 1939 before the war. And I went to Newport, Rhode Island – did boot camp there. And then during my tour there, I heard about, well, I eventually heard about the war – later on, of course. But, I went from there - from Newport, Rhode Island - I went to the Brooklyn Navy Yard after I graduated from the training center. And after the Brooklyn Navy Yard was assigned to the USS Spica – [which] was a cargo carrier. And ... we had to re-commission the ship, because it was in mothballs. And we did the whole thing - we chipped the paint all off, and scraped it all off. And when we got it all off, we lead it, and then put the battleship gray paint on it. We re-commissioned it. And our first tour was to run cargo down to San Juan, Puerto Rico and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.



U.S. Navy service from 1939-1945. Courtesy Charles Donovan

Janis Kozlowski: What kind of cargo did you ship down there?

Charles Donovan: Well, regular cargo for the naval bases – lumber and supplies, food stuffs, and canned goods, and everything that was needed at the stations ... at the bases.

Janis Kozlowski: Was it still peace time then?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yes, yes – 1940.

Janis Kozlowski: OK.

Charles Donovan: [0:02:22] And I meant to tell you, that I was in the peace time Navy to begin with. And we made numerous trips too, from Brooklyn Navy Yard to San Juan Puerto Rico and Guantanamo Bay. And then in 1941, we went through the Panama Canal, and we went up the coast - the west coast. And I left the ship at San Diego – the destroyer base there and went to radio school. And....

Janis Kozlowski: Was that by choice, or is that something the Navy chose for you?

Charles Donovan: The Navy chose that for me. But, I liked it - I really wanted to do it. And then I graduated from there and re-joined the ship, and it had gone up to Seattle, Washington – the Bremerton Navy Yard up there. And I re-joined her and I was then a Radioman Third Class. Before, I was, of course, had been an apprentice Seaman.

I was a Radioman Third Class, and our assignments were making trips up to Sitka and Dutch Harbor and Kodiak, and up through the Aleutian Island area and taking supplies back and forth from Bremerton to there - to the naval bases.



U.S.S. Spica at Sitka, Alaska. Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you ever haul troops as well, or just cargo?

Charles Donovan: Just cargo – at that time. Later on, they did haul some troops after I had left the ship. But, while I was assigned to her, it was just cargo that we hauled. And....

Janis Kozlowski: Let me ask you, how old were you, actually, when you enlisted in 1939?

Charles Donovan: Seventeen.

Janis Kozlowski: Seventeen. OK. And the ship that you got out of mothballs - was it a World War I era ship?

Charles Donovan: No, I don't think it was World War I. Actually, I can send you a ... I have a document that I picked up out of the naval archives, or something. And it tells about the commissioning of the ship – the origination of the ship and re-commissioning, and so on and so forth – the whole thing about the ship. I'll send those along to you.

Janis Kozlowski: OK.

Charles Donovan: [0:05:03] And then we did that for, oh, let's see, that was 1941. And then in May of 1942, six of us Navy radiomen were assigned to the Aleutian Islands to set up weather reporting stations at navel air station Otter Point [Umnak Island], and at Chernofski Bay. And we didn't know the first thing about weather, but we had these cards [Chuckle] that show us cloud accumulations and so forth. And we reported the weather back to Dutch Harbor ... so that the PBY aviators and the rest of the planes had current weather as it was happening. And then, of course, at that time, the war was - had broken out. And ... we set those up and reported this weather back and forth. And I was up there for two and a half years – from May of '42 through December of '44. And I spent the two and a half years on the islands – Umnak Island and Chernofski Bay.

Janis Kozlowski: So, was your role as radioman that you relayed the weather, or did you also do some weather measurements?

Charles Donovan: No, just as I said, we had just these cards that we reported; they showed us the different cloud accumulations. And that's all we did was report the general weather conditions. We didn't relay any weather, or we didn't have any equipment, weather equipment, or anything – just the radios.



Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Charles Donovan: And we just telegraphed it back and forth.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:06:58] OK, so what were the bases like where you stayed in the Aleutians?

Charles Donovan: Well, when I got up there, when we got up – the six of us, there was a contingent of Army, Coast Guard ... Army Coast Artillery, I'm sorry, not Coast Guard - Coast Artillery unit. And I was at Chernofski Bay first, and I stayed there for, oh, I forget how long now at Chernofski. But, then went over, back over to Umnak. And they had put in a ... the engineers, had put in an airstrip there with the Marston metal matting. And they put in this airstrip that was about, oh, I guess, maybe a mile, or two miles long. And then the first aircraft – the P-40s and P-38s, and eventually, some of the bombers would land at Umnak. And we were still reporting the weather and so forth and getting the weather for the pilots that were there.

And.... Well, let's see, we stayed there for ... well, as I said, two and a half years ... and just doing that basically. It was nice up there, you know - the weather up in Alaska and in the Aleutians. It was nice during the summer and spring. But, then in the early, or in the fall and the winter, why, we'd get these williwaw storms - you know about them? And, it was a challenge, but it was a nice challenge.

Janis Kozlowski: So, it sounds like you didn't mind the weather too bad up there.

Charles Donovan: No, we got used to it. Of course, I was originally from Buffalo, New York, so, the weather there [Chuckle] was bad enough anyway.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] I imagine it was, with that lake effect snow and all.

Charles Donovan: Right. Right on the tip of Lake Erie.

Janis Kozlowski: So, what kind of ... you were a young guy then - you were probably, what 20, or 19?

Charles Donovan: I was about 19 then.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. So, did you find enough to do there ... in your spare time?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yeah – well, reading and, you know, we'd hike around. And when we were at - the three of us - when we were at Chernofski Bay, we would go on the ... well, the ones that were ... two of us that were free would go on these little walks, you know, we'd walk along the shores and.... This one time, we picked up an old Silex coffee maker – it was a metal one. They used to make them out of metal then, instead of out of glass - the coffee pot. And then, we had found this ... it was an old Sunbeam heater. It was an oval shape, and it was concave and [had] brass innards. And then it had this metal facing on it. And inside there, there was this electric element. And we decided we'd pick that up, and the coffee thing. And then we got back to the Yakutat hut that we were staying in, and we decided we'd make ourselves a coffee maker.

So we used the element from this ... Sunbeam mak... Sunbeam heater, and put it on a piece of wood. And took an old pineapple can - pineapple juice can, I guess it was and stripped the bottom out so that we could have tabs ... and tack it on this wood. And then we'd set that coffee pot on top of it, and we'd make the best coffee you'd ever had!



A bit of recreation on Umnak Island. Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Janis Kozlowski: Sounds like you guys were pretty industrious for young guys.

Charles Donovan: Well, we had to be. [Chuckle]

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. Is that something you learned as you grew up, or did the Navy teach you those skills?

Charles Donovan: No, no. I learned that as I grew up, as a ... I learned that on my own - things of that nature. The Navy taught me plenty of course, but, not things like that.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. So, it sounds like you went hiking around for some of your off-time. Did you see anything interesting on those hikes?

Charles Donovan: Well, we'd see plenty of salmon in the creeks - in the streams there. And once or twice we'd see a caribou. But, that's about it. We didn't see any bears.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you know anything about these secret bases that ... Otter Point was supposedly to be one of 'em that was disguised. Did you see any evidence of that?

Charles Donovan: Well, we were there when they made them up - when they disguised them. Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you knew all about the disguises?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yes. Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: And what kind of deceptive buildings and other things did they put up there - do you remember?

Charles Donovan: Well, there was just basically Quonset huts - mostly Quonset huts and tents. And then over at Chernofski Bay, they had the Yakutat hut - the wooden hut. But, mostly on Umnak, it was the Quonset huts. We were in a Quonset hut there.

Janis Kozlowski: They were the metal structures?

Charles Donovan: Yes, Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:12:54] OK. And how many people were there at Otter Point?

Charles Donovan: Oh well, at that time, when I got over to Otter Point, first of all there was three Navy radiomen here, and three over at Chernofski Bay. And we were the first naval personnel to go up there. There was Army personnel - plenty of Army personnel at Otter Point - at Umnak. But, we were the only Navy personnel. And then eventually we got much more, many more of the Navy personnel - pilots and their crews and so forth. And then the Seabees, they came up.

Janis Kozlowski: When did all these others start coming to the base there, do you remember when, or about when that happened?

Charles Donovan: Well it was in ... Mid-May of 1942.



Schultz in his Quonset hut 42-44. 503rd Coast Artillery. Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Charles Donovan: Of course the Army had been there when I got there. And I met quite a few of the, of this 503rd Coast Artillery unit, and became good friends with one platoon of them. And I can give you names of people there and so forth.



Sgt. L.M. Smithey, Umnak 42-44. 503rd Coast Artillery. Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Janis Kozlowski: So, are these people that you kept in contact with over time?

Charles Donovan: Many of them, yeah. Well, not many of them – quite a number of them, because [Chuckle] many of them have passed away, of course, already.



Artillery. Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Charles Donovan: Many of them, yeah. Well, not many of them – quite a number of them, because [Chuckle] many of them have passed away, of course, already.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah.

Charles Donovan: During the time that I had after I first got out of the Navy - was discharged - I didn't keep in too much contact with them then. But, then as I got older here and I picked up this computer unit – it's not really a computer - but I got on to that and I found many of them through that. And I would e-mail them, and so on and so forth ... back and forth.

Janis Kozlowski: I would be interested in hearing who some of them were – I don't know much about the 503rd Coast Guard Artillery. Some of the others are a little - there's more written about them.

Charles Donovan: Well, this, they have been disbanded for years, I understand – I found that out just this past year ... that they had been disbanded and renamed another unit. But, there was, the sergeant in charge of the platoon that I became familiar with ... and friendly with - his name was Richard "Dick" Conroy . And then let's see, there was Sergeant Smith [Smithey] – I forget his first name – I think it was William, but I'm not positive ... we use to call him "Smithey". And then there was Bill Mentka ... Menka-Miller ... Menk-Miller.... Yes, Menke Miller ...

Charles Donovan: And then there was Mazmanian ... M-A-Z-A-M ... Maz-manian – M-A-N-I-A-N – Mazmanian. He was a ... oh, I'm trying to think of his nationality ... it's right on the tip of my tongue. Anyway, I met him, of course. And then there was another fellow we called "Shorty". And there was a great number of them, of course, in the whole unit. But I was just more familiar with this one platoon.



Sgt. William Menkmiller, Sgt. L.M. Smithey, S/Sgt. Cornelius (Dick) Conroy outside their Quonset hut office. Umnak, Alaska, 503rd Coast Artillery. Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum] So it sounds like, being, just a few of you being Navy guys that didn't cause you any trouble in the base?

Charles Donovan: Oh, no, no, no. No. [Chuckle]

[0:16:46] But ... you brought something to mind there: when we left the ship at Kodiak - they put us ashore at Kodiak Island and they put us ashore with only our Dress Blue's - with our Blues and a pea coat and our watch caps, and so forth. We didn't have any boots, or anything of that nature - any foul-weather gear. And then, we got over to Umnak and they gave us all this foul-weather gear - the Jungle Cloth - blue, Jungle Cloth, foul-weather gear and boots and so forth. But, when we landed at Kodiak, there, we went up to the mess hall. And as I remember, it was up at the top of a little hill, and there was this civilian cook up there - a stocky, jolly guy. And he said, "What would you like for breakfast?" And jokingly, one of the guys said, "Steak and eggs." He says, "How do you like it?" [Chuckle] So, we [Chuckle] had steak and eggs for breakfast.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] I bet you never would have believed you were gonna eat that!

Charles Donovan: No way!

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle]

Charles Donovan: Especially not up there! [Chuckle]

Janis Kozlowski: How often did you get it after that?

Charles Donovan: Oh, never! [Laugh]

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh] Did you even have real eggs after that?

Charles Donovan: No. No. We just had the powdered eggs.

Janis Kozlowski: I bet that's not, not something you miss.

Charles Donovan: No way.

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh]

Charles Donovan: And I also remember, one time, when we were still on this Spica and we were heading up to.... No, this Spica – this ship, was coming up and delivering goods to us, and they had lost - it was a refrigerated ship, and they had lost their refrigeration. So, they had to throw the ... all the good ... their meat and everything overboard. They lost it all in this bad storm. Actually, they were almost heading back to Hawaii during this storm. But, they lost it all. And we had ... mutton - every way you could think of it. We had mutton stew, and mutton sandwiches, and mutton, mutton, mutton. So, to this day, I won't eat any mutton.

Janis Kozlowski: [Ah-uh] Where'd the mutton come from?

Charles Donovan: They had sheep ranches up there then. And they still have, I understand.



Edward Winters, 503rd Coast Artillery, Umnak and Chernofski Bay, Alaska.
Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I think, I think that's true.

Charles Donovan: AK... yeah, AKMAK Sheep Ranch, I think it is.

Janis Kozlowski: So, they killed local sheep?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: But, you didn't find it that tasty, or did you just get sick of it over time?

Charles Donovan: Well, at first it was tasty enough. But, then I had so much of it, that I just didn't like it anymore. I couldn't even think about it, let alone eat it.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, how often did you get supplies coming in there to supplement what you were, what they were ...?

Charles Donovan: Oh, well we always got supplies. Of course, they couldn't land at Umnak – they had to put them aboard, ashore on barges – the supplies. But, we got plenty of supplies, always ... there was always supplies coming up from Seattle.

Janis Kozlowski: So you didn't feel too deprived that way?

Charles Donovan: Oh, not a bit. Not a bit. No, we were well taken care of in that way and many others.

Janis Kozlowski: How about your sleeping quarters in those Quonset huts, or in the Pacific huts – how were those?

Charles Donovan: We had just cots. But they were comfortable enough, we got used to them.

Janis Kozlowski: Were they warm and dry?

Charles Donovan: Well, they were a regular cot.

Janis Kozlowski: No, I mean your huts, were they warm and dry?

Charles Donovan: Oh yeah, yeah, they were warm and dry. We had the old heaters in them, and they were very warm, of course. The Quonsets were great, and like the Yakutat hut was nice and comfy.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum]

Charles Donovan: That was wooden, of course.



Charles Donovan, Radioman 1/c, USNAAS Otter Point, Umnak Island, Alaska, May 1942 through December 1944. Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

[0:20:46] Let's see ... how about mail – you said you got supplied fairly frequently, but did you get mail very often?

Charles Donovan: When a ship would come up, we'd get the mail with it. Yes, quite often.

Janis Kozlowski: And did you have your mail censored?

Charles Donovan: Yes ... definitely. After the War - yes.

Janis Kozlowski: And did you learn a lot about what was going on in other parts of the ... the War in other ... over in Europe, or in the South Pacific, while you were there – did you hear anything about that?

Charles Donovan: Well, we heard some of it, but we didn't really learn that much about it. We heard a little bit of it – that's all.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, much closer to home, I guess, from where you were – where were you when Dutch Harbor was bombed, and what do you remember about that?

Charles Donovan: I was on Umnak Island when Dutch Harbor was bombed.

Janis Kozlowski: And did you know it was happening?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yes, yes. We saw a couple of dog fights over the island – over Umnak Island - some of the planes in a dog fight.

Janis Kozlowski: What kind of planes, and what was the end result - do you remember?

Charles Donovan: Well, they, they had, the Japanese had the Zeros, of course. And then the Navy and Army had the P-38s and the P-40s ... and their bombers. But, the Japanese had bombed Dutch Harbor before they could really get prepared, and they lost quite a number of people up there during that bombing. And there was quite a bit of damage also.

Janis Kozlowski: You saw dog fights over, when you were there, did you ...

Charles Donovan: Once or twice, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: OK.

Charles Donovan: But, none of them ... we saw the dog fights, but we didn't see any planes go down.

Janis Kozlowski: Did some of your planes that were based at [Umnak] did not return?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yes, quite often ... quite often.

Janis Kozlowski: And what was ... what were the causes of those crashes, did you ever hear, or know what happened?

Charles Donovan: Well, they used to - from Umnak, from Otter Point - they used to go out to Kiska and Attu – primarily Kiska at first, on bombing runs. And of course, the fighters would go out there too, but, mainly, the bombers, and the PBYs for observation. And I can remember this one pilot from Tennessee, I forget his name right off the top of my head, but he was a pilot of a PBY. And he was on an observation mission over Kiska, and he momentarily lost control of the plane somehow or another. But, then he brought it back, and he was so close to the island, down to the island. He says, "Well, I'm down here, I'm gonna drop these two bombs I have." So, he did he dropped them.

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh]

Charles Donovan: So [Chuckle] it was the first time that I could ever ... or I guess, that he had ever heard, also, of a PBY doing a dive bomb.

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh] Yeah, that plane wasn't necessarily made for that purpose. But ... [Chuckle]

Charles Donovan: No way.

**Lt. Athel Lee Gill
Now Listed as Dead**

Lt. (jg) Athel Lee Gill, U. S. Naval Reserve, formerly reported missing in a plane crash 70 miles from Fairbanks, Alaska, September 18, has been listed as dead, according to information from the Navy Department recently received by his wife, Mrs. Dimple Maddux Gill of 929 Montrose Avenue.



The plane, a C-47 Transport Command, was on a routine flight from Anchorage to Fairbanks at the time of the accident. Lieutenant Gill was one of 19 persons announced by the War Department as missing in the crash.

The son of Mr. and Mrs. James Napoleon Gill of Silver Point, Tenn., Lieutenant Gill served as athletic coach and instructor at Smyrna High School prior to entering the service in January, 1942. A graduate of Smithville High School at Smithville, Tenn., and of Tennessee Polytechnic Institute at Cookeville, Tenn., he had been stationed in the Aleutian Islands for 23 months prior to the crash.

Surviving, in addition to his widow and parents, are three sisters, Mrs. L. A. Jared of Buffalo Valley, Tenn., Mrs. Melvin Holland of Decherd, Tenn., and Mrs. James Craig of Silver Point; and four brothers, Alfred and Floyd Gill, both of Silver Point, and Ewell Gill of Tullahoma, Tenn., and William L. Gill, aviation ordnance man third class, U. S., Navy, serving in the Pacific area.

Janis Kozlowski: Now, did you hear stories when the people came back from these different war fronts on Attu, or Kiska – or over at Dutch, for that matter too?

Charles Donovan: We didn't hear too many stories. The pilots, you know, they'd get together with their crews, and so forth. But, we, as radio personnel with the Navy, didn't hear too much about that. We heard about it, or course, but, you know, personally, we didn't get to talk to any of them about it.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, being a radio guy, did you hear any interesting messages?

Charles Donovan: No. Just basically the weather - that's all we were concerned about.

Janis Kozlowski: So was it ... did you not hear other things because they were coded, or you were just strictly, had one function?

Charles Donovan: We had one function, and we were only on the weather channel.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. So, there wasn't really ... you couldn't hear what was happening elsewhere – you couldn't contact ... you didn't hear airplane traffic, you didn't hear ship traffic?

Charles Donovan: No. No.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:25:17] OK. Did it make you feel isolated being on Umnak and not knowing what was happening in the other islands?

Charles Donovan: No. We knew that, basically, what was happening, because we knew the planes went out, and they'd come back, and this, that and the other thing. But, that didn't bother us. We weren't isolated or anything. There was plenty of personnel around – Army and then, at that time, Navy also. The Seabee's came up, and they did their thing and there was a number of them that I became acquainted with also. Ensign Gill – he was in charge of the Seabee contingent at Otter Point ... Ensign Eugene Gill.

Janis Kozlowski: I'm sorry, I was coughing; could you tell me his name again?

Charles Donovan: Ensign Eugene Gill, U.S. Navy. He was from Tennessee. And he was killed on a plane up there on his way back to the states.

Janis Kozlowski: On a Navy plane?

Charles Donovan: Yes. He was on his way back to the states – coming home.

Janis Kozlowski: Now that's a shame.

Charles Donovan: Yep. I was in touch with his sister for quite some time – in Tennessee.

Janis Kozlowski: What did the Seabees do on Umnak?

Charles Donovan: Oh, they built structures – many structures. And they helped with the laying of this Marston matting for the runways. And they did thing – they were a construction unit.

Janis Kozlowski: So, when you started out at Umnak in '42 there, it was a pretty small contingent of people, and probably not a lot of buildings. But, you said, then they started ramping up and the Seabees came in and started building things. Before you left, what did the base look like? What kind of facilities did you have, and how large was it?

Charles Donovan: Well ... it was basically the same facilities that [as] when we went there – just the Quonset huts and some tents and wooden huts, and so forth, but, no big buildings or anything of that nature. Of course, they had oil drums - they put in these oil drums so they'd have oil, and so forth. And they had the ... they build the revetments for the planes when they'd get back. And if they had to put them in there for ... if a williwaw was expected – 'course, you never know when they're expected, anyway. But, things of that nature – they did all of that construction.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. So the ... even though it was a small, kind of a small base when you got there, it sounds like it didn't ... they didn't increase facilities all that much when the new people came in - except for maybe sleeping quarters?

Charles Donovan: Mainly sleeping quarters, eating quarters.... And they had a, well, of course, a mess-hall - had a big mess-hall - a Quonset hut, and.... But, no real construction - no buildings of any kind, of that nature. A recreation Quonset hut, but, it was mainly, as I say, just the Quonset huts, and....

Janis Kozlowski: And how many runways did they build there?

Charles Donovan: Just the one.

Janis Kozlowski: Where was your radio station, with respect to the runways ... and your sleeping quarters - where were they?

Charles Donovan: Oh, with respect to the runway, maybe a quarter of a mile away - if that.

Janis Kozlowski: So, pretty close - within walking distance?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yes, yes. Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:29:31] OK. And then, what kind of a setup did you have at Chernofski?

Charles Donovan: Well, just that one Yakutat hut. And that was our, our radio station, our sleeping quarters, our eating quarters, and everything else - it was just that one place that we lived.

Janis Kozlowski: So did you guys rotate in and out if it?

Charles Donovan: No, no, just the three of us were there. There was myself, and there was William Borkenhagen - B-O-R-K-E-N-H-A-G-EN - Borkenhagen. And then there was William Whelan, W-H-E-L-A-N, and then, myself - we were the three there at Umnak - or at Chernofski. And then there was three others at Umnak - Otter point. And of course, again, we were the first naval personnel there - the six of us.

Janis Kozlowski: [Hum]. So, you stayed ... when you went to Chernofski, you stayed there for quite a while?



William Borkehagen, Chernofski Bay, 42-44. Photo courtesy Charles Donovan.

Charles Donovan: Stayed there for maybe, oh, the better part of a year and then went over to Umnak.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you like one station better than the other?

Charles Donovan: I liked Chernofski better, because [Chuckle] we were alone. [Laugh]

Janis Kozlowski: Nobody was ordering you around, huh?

Charles Donovan: Right, right – there was just the three of us.

Janis Kozlowski: But, then, if there was just three of you, you had to do all of your own cooking and all of that kind of stuff too, right?

Charles Donovan: Yeah. But that was fun.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, you liked that?

Charles Donovan: [Chuckle] Oh, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. And then, how did they, how did you get over there, and how did they supply you there?

Charles Donovan: Just on boats.

Janis Kozlowski: Ok.

Charles Donovan: This, [was] a small, actually it was a small tug-like [boat].

Janis Kozlowski: So, when they got supplies at Otter Point, did ... then they took the tug around and resupplied you as well?

Charles Donovan: Right, exactly.

Janis Kozlowski: So, was that pretty frequent?

Charles Donovan: Well, as needed.

Janis Kozlowski: OK.

Charles Donovan: Yeah, frequent enough.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. Do you have any, any memorable experiences from Chernofski?

Charles Donovan: Well, just that one – not memorable in the sense, I think, that you're referring to, but just that one about picking up those things and making a coffee pot.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, well, that's the kind of memories that I think are good – things that you remember that happened out there.

Charles Donovan: Right.

Charles Donovan: I'm impressed that you, a bunch of young guys like that, had that figured out and were so industrious. [Chuckle]

Charles Donovan: Well, we were pretty savvy. [Laugh]

Janis Kozlowski: Yes, yes you were. [Chuckle]

Charles Donovan: [Chuckle] No, we had, we had fun doing that, too. I can remember that fool thing, and we made the best coffee that you ever tasted.

Janis Kozlowski: Now, did you guys, being there for so long, did that generate friction between you 'cause you were kind of just stuck there by yourselves, or did you get along pretty well?

Charles Donovan: We got along great – the three of us.

Janis Kozlowski: Were you all about the same...?

Charles Donovan: Yes. I cannot remember once that we really had any arguments, or anything.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, that's pretty amazing.

Charles Donovan: Yeah. Well, we were up there to do a job and we did it. And we enjoyed doing it.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum] So, what happened after you ... when did you....

Charles Donovan: [0:33:00] That's where I learned to ... and on Umnak Island, I learned how to drive a Jeep – a 1940's Jeep.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh really.

Charles Donovan: That's where I learned to drive.

Janis Kozlowski: You mean, drive at all, or just to drive a Jeep?

Charles Donovan: Drive at all.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, really!

Charles Donovan: Yep.

Janis Kozlowski: So, who taught you?

Charles Donovan: I did. [Chuckle]

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, you just got in and figured it out, huh?

Charles Donovan: Got in [Chuckle], figured it out, and away we went.

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh] So, did they not allow, or was there no opportunity to drive before then?

Charles Donovan: No.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, I guess you joined the Navy at 17, so....

Charles Donovan: Yes, right. Well, at that time, as I said, we lived in Buffalo, New York and my dad never had a car – never in his life had a car. My oldest brother bought a, oh, a 19 ... 30, 36, or '33 Ford. And I can remember my dad getting out in the backyard - my brother headed out there one time - my dad getting into it and he backed into a fence.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, oh!

Charles Donovan: But, that was his first driving experience - and his last. But, anyway, I had never had occasion to have access to a car.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, that's pretty amazing. So, that was a, was that a pretty big deal for you?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was great.

Janis Kozlowski: So, then did you get to drive that Jeep around?

Charles Donovan: Oh, I'm telling you, I drove it all over the island.

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh]

Charles Donovan: [Chuckle]

Janis Kozlowski: How many roads were there?

Charles Donovan: [Chuckle] There weren't many ...

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh]

Charles Donovan: ... but I'd make roads.

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh]

Charles Donovan: We'd go over that tundra grass like a, well again, we'd make a road.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] That must have been kind of a bumpy ride.

Charles Donovan: It was.

Janis Kozlowski: Didn't care though, right? [Laugh]

Charles Donovan: No. Not a bit ... had fun doing it.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:35:01] Oh. Well, so when did, how long did you end up staying in the Aleutians, then - when did you leave?

Charles Donovan: As I said, I left in December of 1944.

Janis Kozlowski: And, well, let me, before we move on, um, before you left, did you ... what did you know about what was going on in Kiska and Attu?

Charles Donovan: Just what we would hear from the pilots when they'd come back.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum]

Charles Donovan: And from the ... what radio we would hear – not our radio that we would use as weather reporting, but, radio communication.

Janis Kozlowski: Did it make you ... were you nervous at all - that you thought maybe Umnak might be invaded, or that you were at risk there at either Chernofski, or at Otter Point?

Charles Donovan: I don't remember ever giving it a thought, really, about being [Chuckle] invaded.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you felt pretty safe there?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, to that extent, you know ... we knew that the enemy could come over in their planes, or could come with a ship and bomb the place. But, it didn't ... as I remember, it didn't bother me at all. I was there ... what could I do? I just had to be there. So, it was my job.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you see enemy planes come over? Did you see ships out in the water that you weren't sure whether they were allied forces, or the enemy?

Charles Donovan: A couple of times we saw ships out there. And we knew that they were Japanese ships. And, oh, maybe half dozen different times, we would see aircraft – enemy aircraft going across.

Janis Kozlowski: But they didn't seem too interested in your base there?

Janis Kozlowski: No, no.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:36:54] OK. So, in December of '44, when you left, where did you go then?

Charles Donovan: OK, then I went down ... I was assigned to Naval District Headquarters - 13th District Headquarters, in Seattle, in the communications office. And we, again, being a radioman, I was in the communications office. And they had teletype machines, mainly ... used the teletype machines, to get messages back and forth. And I was stationed there for eight months. And at that time, I had ... they would pay sub... what did we call it? - Subsistence in quarters. And I had my little apartment up on the, on a hill in Seattle. And I was there for eight months.

Janis Kozlowski: Was that a good assignment?

Charles Donovan: Oh, that was terrific, that was terrific. On my time off, I'd go in to Seattle, and go down First Avenue and enjoy "Bill's Light Ship" – a little tavern down there. And First Avenue's not there any more, I'm sure. But ... and then there was a music hall – I think that was also on First Avenue, somewhere. They called it, "The Music Hall." That was another entertainment center – it was more than just a little tavern. And we'd sit there and have a few beers. And there was this great organist – he used to play the organ, to "fare-thee well." We'd love sitting there listening to him.

Janis Kozlowski: So, that was kind of a fun assignment, compared to some of the others, 'cause you had access to everything Seattle had to offer at the time?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yes, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: And, so was that place where you ... did you just transmit weather there as well, or did you get into some different kinds of radio communications?

Charles Donovan: Well it was mainly naval communication, but not just weather – it was all kinds, all types of naval communications – information.

Janis Kozlowski: So, was it more ... was the job more interesting in that respect, that you got to hear more about what was happening?

Charles Donovan: Oh, in that respect, sure - yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: And ... so then, did you finish out December of '44, or did you pretty much finish out the war there in Seattle?

Charles Donovan: Oh, no, no, no.

Janis Kozlowski: What did you do then?

Charles Donovan: [0:39:28] I left Seattle and was transferred down to Mare Island Navy Yard in San Francisco and picked up a troop ship from there and we went to Guam. And then I was assigned at Guam. I stayed there for, oh, maybe three or four weeks - in the jungles there in a tent. And then was assigned to a mine sweeper - the USS Concise - C-O-N-C-I-S-E ... AM-63. Oh, and by the way, the [USS] Spica was AK-16.

Janis Kozlowski: AK-16, OK.

Charles Donovan: And I was assigned to the Concise and was the senior radioman aboard. I forget, I had three or four radiomen underneath me - radio operators. And then we swept mines in the Lower Honshu Island in Japan. And of course, the mine sweepers would have what they called "Paravanes" - like a, it looked like a small float-like, at the end of a cable - one on each side of the ship. And those would extend out into the water for, oh, I don't know, maybe 50 or 100 feet. And they would sweep the mines. They'd catch a hold of the cables that held the mines into the bottom of the ocean, or the harbor where they were settled, and they'd sweep up the mines.

And a couple of times, I can remember, we would try to shoot the ... blow up the mines with a rifle. Because they had these, like, spikes on them - that was the detonator - they'd hit whatever it was - a ship, or something, and blow it up. And I can remember we'd try to hit those spikes. And a couple of times, we blew a couple up. And then I can remember being in port in Wakayama - W-A-K ... waka ... W-A-K-A-Y-A-M-A - Wakayama, Japan.

And I can remember being there and going ashore, and ... it's just a little town, but, quaint little town - of Japanese ... that was interesting.

Janis Kozlowski: And were you there after the war - after the Japanese surrendered?

Charles Donovan: No. On the way home, I was ... in 1945 ... I was on that Concise - from 1944 through December of 1945. I was discharged in 1945 and on the way home to the states - then the Japanese had surrendered while we were in route.

Janis Kozlowski: So, when you were in Wakayama, that was, that was still during war time then?

Charles Donovan: Yes. Because, we were sweeping the mines.

Janis Kozlowski: That mine sweeping sounds like a dangerous activity.

Charles Donovan: It could be, but it wasn't for us, fortunately. It could be if you, you know, you hit one of these mines. But, basically, you ... most of the time, you'd never hit any of them, because the Paravanes were out on their cables and if they would, if they would explode, they'd explode far enough away from the ship that it wouldn't bother the ship.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum] And how close into Japan did you go to sweep? Was it; was it actually in the harbors?

Charles Donovan: Just in the harbor – Wakayama, or Lower Honshu Island Harbor.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. Well, weren't they after you - trying ... when you ... in so close?

Charles Donovan: No. I'm sorry, the war was over when we were sweeping the mines.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh. OK.

Charles Donovan: Over, in that area. But, the Japanese had not surrendered.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I see. So, that was just maybe more of a, a bit of a neutral zone?

Charles Donovan: Right, right.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:44:08] OK. So, were you on board the Concise when the war ended?

Charles Donovan: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: And how did you find out?

Charles Donovan: Well, as I said, we found out by radio on the way home.

Janis Kozlowski: So, were you guys pretty happy?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yes! Yeah - elated.

Janis Kozlowski: Were you anxious by that point to go home?

Charles Donovan: Yes and no. I really enjoyed being in the Navy. As a matter of fact, I wish I had stayed. But I didn't – I only served the six years.

Janis Kozlowski: Was that what you signed up for?

Charles Donovan: I signed up for six years – 1939 through 1945.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. Was that standard – six years?

Charles Donovan: Yes. When I enlisted.... Oh, first, when I started to be interested in the Navy, this friend of the family had to visit the house quite often. And he was a Navy personnel – as I remember, he played in the naval band. And I became interested in the Navy talking to him. And when I first tried to join in, oh, May, or something of 1939, I was rejected, because I had.... At that time, you could only have so many teeth being filled, and so many teeth out. And I had ... I think it was two teeth that I had out ... or one – I forget which. And I was rejected, because I could only have.... Or, no, I had two - and then they would have had to take out another one, because it was bad. So, my dad took me to our local dentist, and he fixed this tooth and put a filling in it. And today, even today, that filling is still there. I'm feeling it right now. And then I went back in October and I was accepted. So, I was in from October 3rd 1940, or 1939, through December 5th, or 6th, 1945.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow. That's a long, long stint for a young guy.

Charles Donovan: But, Yeah, I regressed ... got away from it there – the enlistment. Just before that, [it] was for three years. But, then they extended it for some reason – I forget why. But they extended it to six years.

So, I had to enlist for the six years - which was great. The peacetime Navy was really fun. Oh, we enjoyed it. We get down to Puerto Rico and Guantanamo Bay there. And we'd pull into these harbors and these bum boats would come out and with the Native people there. And they'd have fruits and souvenirs and everything, and we'd be able to buy them. They'd come up along side the ship and we'd be able to buy these things from them. And then we'd go ashore and oh, the place was beautiful then.

Janis Kozlowski: Have you ever been back?

Charles Donovan: No, unfortunately ... unable to get back. I'd love to get back to Umnak.

Janis Kozlowski: [47:23] Now, you were trained as a radio operator in the war, so did that help you when you got out of the military to get a job, or were those skills ever used again?

Charles Donovan: Well, the skills were never used again. But I did apply, when I first got back to. I had gotten married during the war – I got married June of 1945. And when I'd gotten back, I moved to my wife's home in Waltham, Massachusetts. And I applied for the State police, as a position in the communications office and eventually was accepted, but, it took so long to be accepted, that my wife ... we had become pregnant, and we had born a son. So, I couldn't afford to take the job. I was accepted, as a communications officer with the State police, but I couldn't accept it because they were only offering \$3,200 a year.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh-h, [Chuckle] that's not much money.

Charles Donovan: So, that's the only time that I had any further communication endeavors after the service.

Janis Kozlowski: So, what did you end up doing as a profession?

Charles Donovan: I ended up [Chuckle] eventually with department stores. I ended up as a, in a small department store in Massachusetts – the Enterprise Department Store, as Manager Trainee.

Janis Kozlowski: And did you spend your career in that position?

Charles Donovan: I spent my career, not with that store, but as a salesperson, as a salesman. I was a salesman in pots and pans with the Enterprise. Then I was a salesman with a big department store in Massachusetts – Jordan Marsh, and sold furniture with them. And then I moved to Texas and sold furniture with Joske's and Foley's and I finally retired in 1989.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:49:47] Well, now let me go back a bit. You said you got married in June of '45 before you were discharged. How did you end up courting your wife while you were gone so much? Did you have some leave?

Charles Donovan: That's, that's another interesting story ... I forgot to tell you that one. While I was up there and became friends with Sergeant Conroy, he used to get mail from this girl in Waltham, Massachusetts that he used to go out with. And she sent him a photograph of five different girls - three of four of them were sisters. And he showed me the photograph and we got to talking, and he say's, "Why don't you write to one of them?" And I said, "Well, OK, why not." I said, "Let's write to this one," and I pointed out to her. And I started writing to her. And we're writing back and forth for two and a

half years, or for two years, I guess. And I finally got out of there and got home on leave. I got home, picked up the phone and asked her marry me.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you really?

Charles Donovan: Yeah. I got home to Buffalo, New York, picked up the phone, and asked her to marry me. She accepted, and her father and mother and one of her sisters drove her from Massachusetts to Buffalo, New York, and we got married there.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you'd seen a picture of her, but had you actually met her?

Charles Donovan: No.

Janis Kozlowski: And had she seen a picture of you?

Charles Donovan: Yes. I had sent her one, of course.

Janis Kozlowski: And so, you two just thought you were - with all the writing and all - you felt you were very compatible and ...

Charles Donovan: Evidently. [Chuckle] It's lasted for 64 years.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow. So, did she immediately accept your ... your proposal?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: And then, you said you got married right away – how soon after that proposal did you get married?

Charles Donovan: Oh, it ... well, as I said, I was home on leave.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum]

Charles Donovan: And I was home on a 30 day leave. So she come [sic] out there and we got married.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, boy. And then she knew you had to go back, and for some amount of time?

Charles Donovan: Oh, yeah. That was June of 1945 and I had to go back. And then I was sent down to Guam, to pick up the Concise.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did she go back to her family's home in Waltham?

Charles Donovan: She went to ... she stayed with my folks - at my sister's for a while, out in Appleton, New York, outside of Buffalo. Stayed with them, and ... she stayed there for awhile, and then she went back to Waltham. And then after I got out of the service, I moved back to Waltham.



Four generations of Donovans, May 2010



Charles Donovan holding his great-granddaughter, August 2009



At the World War II Memorial in Washington DC in 2010 with great grandson Logan.



Charles Donovan at the World War II Memorial, Pacific Pillar, in Washington DC with Chaplain Jackson, May 2010.