

Interview with Al and Emma Gentle

Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Program

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Grand Aleutian Hotel, Unalaska, Alaska

Interviewed by Kay Deffendall, Eye on Unalaska
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The transcript has been lightly edited.

(The recording starts out with the introduction of Kay Deffendall, interviewer.)

Female 1: Kay Deffendall gives a fascinating interview with Al and Emma Gentle, members of this year's Youth Hostel program. Al was stationed here over 50 years ago during World War II. Take it away, Kay.

Kay Deffendall: [0:00:17.5] Hi, this is Kay Deffendall here for another segment of Eye on Unalaska. It's finally good to be back, and we're here with Al and Emma Gentle, right?

Al Gentle: Correct.

Kay Deffendall: And you're from?

Al Gentle: From Hoover, Alabama, near Birmingham.

Kay Deffendall: Uh-huh. Now, people tease me.....

Al Gentle: And also Gulf Shores.

Kay Deffendall: They wonder how in the world that I got up here from Tennessee, so my goodness, you from Alabama. Now this isn't your first time being here though is it?

Al Gentle: No. [0:00:40.1] I was the guest of Uncle Sam here in 1943, '44.....

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle:until September of '45.

Kay Deffendall: My goodness. That -- that was a long time then.

Al Gentle: It was.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle: I arrived, as I recall, somewhere around July, August of '43. So many things happened here. Many stressful moments and many days of just being pure lonesome.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle: I left -- after the war I was declared essential and I worked for an Admiral and also there was a commander of a submarine squadron as well as a fleet air wing. Later on they moved them all out to Adak, but in the beginning we had the Commander of the North Pacific here as well as a General who I understand -- well, we all know was killed at Okinawa, Simon Bolivar Buckner, who was an unusual person and as you and I talked prior to this interview I could tell you an interesting anecdote of.....

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. I want you to. I want to talk about it. Now, he lived up in Unalaska.

Al Gentle: [0:01:42.8] He lived up in Unalaska or Oon-Alaska. We called it different things so.....

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. Some of them not so nice I'm sure at times.

Al Gentle: Well, that's right. So sometimes we said Oon-Alaska. Sometimes we said Unalaska, but we didn't know, and there wasn't anybody over there to tell us. He lived up this valley and I think when I was out riding around with a friend, Matthew Taylor, who kind of took me under his arm and adopted me and showed me some of the sites that I knew about since I've come back, well he pointed out the General's former home which is up on that hill. All that's left is a chimney.

Kay Deffendall: Right.

Al Gentle: The interesting thing about him, he liked fresh milk. Now the story was that maybe he had stomach ulcers. You would see this soldier walking this cow.

Kay Deffendall: Really?

Al Gentle: So we all would have to come over and you would see the soldier walking the cow in the morning.....

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle:and presume that soldier fed him and milked him for the General.

Kay Deffendall: I'm sure. Yeah.

Al Gentle: It was a very interesting, but long two years there.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah, I could imagine what that -- you know, what did you do in the war, Daddy, and this soldier has to tell his kids I walked the General's cow. I don't know..... (laughter).

Al Gentle: But much history, I think, came out of that command post. It was a joint command post. [0:03:00.0]

Kay Deffendall: Yeah, now that's another thing you were telling me, that the command post was on the Dutch Harbor side.

Al Gentle: Oh yes, uh-huh.

Kay Deffendall: Over by what is now the Delta Western and Chevron fuel dock.

Al Gentle: That's correct.

Kay Deffendall: Now, I didn't realize it. You were telling me there's a building that's still standing over there.

Al Gentle: That's correct.

Kay Deffendall: That was the actual command post there.

Al Gentle: That's right, uh-huh.

Kay Deffendall: By the fuel tanks, up on the hill.

Al Gentle: Correct. Uh-huh. Currently there are some fuel tanks. But as you scale that hill, up at the very top there's still a signal tower, which at one time had a signal light and halyards for our flags to signal the ships as they came into Dutch Harbor.

Kay Deffendall: Mm-hmm.

Al Gentle: There's quite a view straight out from there.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle: [0:03:36.3] And down through the bowels of that hill, immediately below the signal tower and adjacent underground, was a message center, two rooms about 50 feet long. We must have had as many as 15 radio operators in there at a time. It was a big hub of activity. Then from there we had an underground tunnel that went to a joint command post which was underneath a building that still stands. The building itself was

the offices of the General, the Admiral and later on the Commandant of the Naval operating base because, as I indicated, the Admirals did -- and the Generals, went to Adak. [0:04:19.3] The way that I arrived to Dutch Harbor was from Adak, as I indicated.

Kay Deffendall: You were stationed out there.

Al Gentle: I was stationed -- I came in at Attu and then after the engagement I was at Adak, as I mentioned, and I flew here. I saw them build the runway at Adak. They diverted a stream and laid a mesh -- iron mesh.

Kay Deffendall: Really?

Al Gentle: I actually flew off of that mesh while..... They really were waiting to send me until after the mesh was built, but it was there. This was quite a hub of activity. There were lots of people here. [0:04:50.7]

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. Well, I know I've heard estimates as much as 60,000 troops on this island. Is that -- you think that's correct?

Al Gentle: Well, I wasn't privy to that information, but right here where we sit now there was a Fort Mears.....

Kay Deffendall: Right.

Al Gentle:that had many barracks and there were many soldiers in the hills and there were many bunkers and Quonset huts and others buried. There was an underground hospital not too far from here and as to the numbers of people I don't know, but it was a very large number.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. Now, you were -- you were stationed here for over a year then.

Al Gentle: Two years, uh-huh.

Kay Deffendall: Okay. Two years.

Al Gentle: Actually a little over two, a little -- about..... As I say, I arrived around July or August '43 and left September the 16th I think it was.

Kay Deffendall: [0:05:38.2] So you saw some of the..... well of course we were bombed I know, in '42, but there were other scrapes and all that throughout that time.

Al Gentle: Well, we -- being in the hub of it all we were aware of what was happening, even though I did not decode the messages. We also copied press and we put out information, a little newspaper called the Dutch Harbor News. So, we collected the information and gave it to Public Relations and they in turn made a little paper. But all the news came out of that little command post.

Kay Deffendall: Right.

Al Gentle: Also, while we were in that command post we picked up a message, an Army troop ship broke in two up north of us here.

Kay Deffendall: Really?

Al Gentle: We were able to get people in and they brought both pieces back to Dutch Harbor and they didn't lose any soldiers. We received a message when the USS Comfort was kamikaze attacked. We picked up the message off Okinawa. So there were many exciting moments. We knew what was happening in the war because we were getting messages up here and it would be fed back to us and then we copied press and gave that information to Public Relations.

Kay Deffendall: Mm-hmm. [0:06:48.1] Now, what did you do on your off time?

Al Gentle: In the off time I would hike up Ballyhoo Mountain over to Unalaska and there used to be a little -- like a little flat barge that ran along a cable at the very narrowest point. You can see -- see remnants of it now. It came in by the processing plant. There are two ships out there now, but right about where that processing plant is, it was the other end of that little ferry.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle: We would come over and we would walk around and wonder who were the people that lived in these little houses because they were not there.

Kay Deffendall: They were gone then.

Al Gentle: They had evacuated them right.....

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle:as my elders told me when I got here, right after the bombing. They were actually here from what I understand.

Kay Deffendall: Right.

Al Gentle: And then right after the bombing they evacuated them like June 5th, 6th of '42, rather hurriedly from what I understand.

Kay Deffendall: Yes, they did. They sure did.

Al Gentle: They were gone. [0:07:47.4] I saw them begin to trickle back, see, before I left in the latter part of -- early spring rather, latter part of the war, early spring of '45. The very first thing I recall being open was a bar over there.

Kay Deffendall: It's probably the Elbow Room (laughter).

Al Gentle: Well, the Blue Fox, I think it was called.

Kay Deffendall: Oh, that was what it was called then?

Al Gentle: Well, that was a different bar. I thought it might be the Elbow Room. Everybody told me it was the Elbow Room, but I went in there today to look.....

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle:and I didn't remember that. I mentioned that and they said, well there was another one around the corner. It was called the Blue Fox, and I said, it was the Blue Fox.

Kay Deffendall: Oh, okay. Okay.

Al Gentle: The most remarkable thing about the Blue Fox was the only thing they had to serve was tequila (laughter).

Kay Deffendall: Oh my gosh. Oh.

Al Gentle: [0:08:29.9] Then there were some other people that came in and they opened up a restaurant and it had real eggs.

Kay Deffendall: Oh I bet that was a treat.

Al Gentle: It was.

Kay Deffendall: Real eggs?

Al Gentle: Real eggs.

Kay Deffendall: Where did they get them?

Al Gentle: I don't know. Off the merchant ships I guess. But we'd been eating powdered eggs that smelled like sulfur and were green (laughter). The food wasn't the best. They said we were eating horse meat but of course there were probably people elsewhere eating worse, so we never -- never said much about it.

Kay Deffendall: Now, you also mentioned green beer as young GIs and all these sailors here.....

Al Gentle: There was a beer hall. It's too bad it's gone but there was a mural on the wall of this sailor and his head was shaped like a wolf and a very beautiful lady in the drawing. There were quite a varied group of people here. Some of them were very artistic..... [0:09:12.4]

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. Right.

Al Gentle:and on different walls in different locations there used to be paintings where they would paint things. This was an excellent painting in the beer hall.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle: [0:09:27.0] And the powerhouse.....

Kay Deffendall: Now have you been over there yet?

Al Gentle: Well, only on the outside, but we had transmitters on the third floor of that powerhouse. That's where our power came from.

Kay Deffendall: Okay.

Al Gentle: We had two locations with transmitters. One was behind the brick building, which was the chief petty officer quarters, and later on I became a chief petty officer here and lived in that house that has brick and then there was a radio station behind there which I understand when they bombed they did hit and they killed some sailors around there.

Kay Deffendall: Oh, really?

Al Gentle: From what I understand. My elders told me. But the -- the transmitter side, we maintained that one too, so we had transmitters at the powerhouse on the top floor and transmitters there. We had antennas over on Hog Island and antennas back behind there -- transmitter. Receiving antennas were on top of the command hill.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah, there's still stuff on Hog Island.

Al Gentle: Yes.

Kay Deffendall: All the towers and stuff.

Al Gentle: Right. So..... Then we also worked with the planes off of -- out of the tower on the airstrip.

Kay Deffendall: Uh-huh. Yeah. So you left here in '45 and.....

Al Gentle: [0:10:37.3] I went back to Alabama.

Kay Deffendall: Went back to Alabama and were you married at that time.....

Al Gentle: No, no, I wasn't even.....

Kay Deffendall:or you went back home and found her?

Al Gentle: Actually I didn't even see any ladies for a long time until I did leave here. We did see some. **[0:10:49.5]** Olivia Dehaviland. We saw Joe Louis box, Errol Flynn, and Bob Hope.

Kay Deffendall: Came here?

Al Gentle: Yes, they came here.

Kay Deffendall: Really?

Al Gentle: Yes.

Kay Deffendall: I didn't know that.

Al Gentle: Yes. Uh-huh. And I sat across the table from Olivia Dehaviland. She was a beautiful little lady. She had excellent perfume (laughter).

Kay Deffendall: Yes, I'm sure you would remember that (laughter).

Al Gentle: **[0:11:06.2]** But I went back to Alabama and I studied electrical engineering at Auburn University. War Eagle.

Kay Deffendall: Yes.

Al Gentle: That was our battle call. Then I went to work for Bell South Communications and ultimately retired from Bell South on the executive staff and took an early retirement.....

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle:and began to travel. Little did I know that I would ever come back to Dutch Harbor.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. That's what I was going to ask you. How did you -- how did you find out about this Elderhostel or what -- how did you find out about coming back?

Al Gentle: **[0:11:36.9]** Well, actually one morning I was reading the Elderhostel newspaper. We had never participated in the Elderhostel, but we have traveled all over the world with a group called the Friendship Force, which is an international cultural exchange organization like Elderhostel, but you live with the people.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle: Well, I was reading the paper one morning, the Elderhostel paper, and I read Alaska, Dutch Harbor, and I said I can't believe. I've always wanted to go back and see Dutch Harbor and show Emma Dutch Harbor. So, I found out about it and I wrote in about it. I eventually even called Jara. I talked to somebody here at the hotel and I said,

hey, you know, this is what we're going to do. So I was delighted when they selected us to come. The people I have found in this town of Unalaska and Dutch Harbor are the friendliest people.

Female 1: We are aren't we? We are.

Al Gentle: Oh, they're so friendly. (Laughter).

Kay Deffendall: That's because most of us are from somewhere else, you know, and we know what it's like to be here.

Al Gentle: Well, even the ones who probably were Aleuts, Natives or whatever, born and bred. Everybody I've met is friendly.

Kay Deffendall: Yep, they are. They're -- we're all a very friendly bunch of people so.....

Al Gentle: I can see why people come back. They say that some of them come back.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. You just never hardly ever get out of here, you know (laughter).
[0:12:58.5] So when you flew in did you -- what did you think?

Al Gentle: Well, I was all excited and I wanted Emma to see. You know a lot of times you want somebody else to see what you have been always telling them about so I was looking -- I was glued to the window and I was looking for a familiar thing. Priest Rock is what I recognized.

Kay Deffendall: Yes, everybody always.....

Al Gentle: I saw Little Priest.

Kay Deffendall: Yes.

Al Gentle: I -- then I was also remembering when I left I didn't have much notice. They told me that when the war was over I could choose my own duty. By this time, as I say, I was a chief and primarily a radio operator and I wanted more technical training so I went to technician school. [0:13:42.0] I remember when I left I was looking out and so I was looking and reflecting back how I flew out. When I flew in from Adak I don't remember much about that. But I remember when I flew out.

Kay Deffendall: Why?

Al Gentle: Because I had been here all that time and I was on my way home.

Kay Deffendall: Ready. Yes. (Laughter).

Al Gentle: [0:14:01.0] And as we flew across in a DC-3..... It was a DC-3, which is a small plane and it flies low and slow, I recall the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. We

flew low enough that I could see it. So as we returned I passed a message up to the pilot of this 737 to slow down to about 150 or 200 (laughter).

Kay Deffendall: And go low.

Al Gentle: Yeah. Let's see if we can see the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. I think that's the correct name. The message came back that the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes stopped puffing about 20 years ago. (Laughter). Then he said, and by the way we just went by it.

Kay Deffendall: Oh. Well, maybe going out it will be clear and you can talk to the pilot before you start out, you know.

Al Gentle: Well, yeah, that's right.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle: So, yes, it was quite an exciting moment returning.

Kay Deffendall: I'll be it was.

Al Gentle: I looked to see if the terminal buildings looked the same. [0:14:56.5] There was one building there that looks familiar. The old tower.

Kay Deffendall: Right.

Al Gentle: Although they had taken the top off of it.

Kay Deffendall: Right. It's gone. It was there until just a few years ago, so.....

Al Gentle: Oh, really?

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. It hasn't been gone too long.

Al Gentle: Well, that tower, I was familiar with that because we had radio people in the second level and there were others up there directing traffic, but we had some receivers in there too and they would talk with the planes. And as I left here, I asked a guy who was with this Native transport command..... They flew from Adak here to pick me -- not me specifically, but others too -- did he need a relief on the radio and he said, well I wouldn't mind taking a break. So when I got on there the war was over and I didn't worry. I tuned in on the frequencies that I knew the guys would be listening and I spoke to them and told them goodbye.

Kay Deffendall: Oh, really? Never thinking that you'd ever see this place again.

Al Gentle: No. Nor have I seen them either.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah. Well that's neat. We're so glad that you could be up here and spend this time. That's neat for you to be able to come back.

Al Gentle: Thanks.

Kay Deffendall: And to bring your wife. What do you think of the whole area?

Emma Gentle: [0:16:00:0] Oh, it's been a wonderful experience and he was so excited about coming back and of course I was very excited because I heard these war stories and it was very interesting to see where he spent that time.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah, this is a.....

Emma Gentle: It's really been a pleasure and everybody's been so wonderful to us.

Kay Deffendall: Now, you're here until when? When do you go home?

Al Gentle: Well, we're actually staying an extra day. The Elderhostel ends on Friday and we're going to stay an extra day.

Kay Deffendall: Good.

Al Gentle: [0:16:28.2] Then we're going to go on a little tour of the rest of Alaska.

Kay Deffendall: Oh, are you? So where do you go from here?

Al Gentle: Well, we go back to Anchorage and then we are joining a Gray Line tour and then we'll go up to Fairbanks and we'll look around up there and then we'll come back by a dome train to Denali.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah.

Al Gentle: And to McKinley Village and be there a while and then we'll come on further down to Anchorage and then we're going to go by motor coach to Valdez and board a ship and look at some glaciers and all of this is not very long, but it sounds long.

Kay Deffendall: Oh, wonderful.

Al Gentle: We're going back to Anchorage and then fly back to Alabama.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah, and get there just as it's getting real hot. (Laughter.)

Al Gentle: Yes.

Emma Gentle: Oh, yes. It's getting hot in Alabama, that's for sure.

Kay Deffendall: It will. Yes, it will be.

Al Gentle: Well, the Elderhostel people here have done an outstanding job. I must say this. Jara and Amy, oh yes.

Kay Deffendall: They do.

Al Gentle: And the quality people. Just perfect.

Kay Deffendall: Yeah, and then this facility here, this hotel. What do you think about that?

Emma Gentle: Unbelievable.

Kay Deffendall: I know, isn't it? I know.

Al Gentle: Well, Barbara and John, just all of their people. I know that we have many more interesting programs to come because we've got several more days.

Kay Deffendall: Yes.

Al Gentle: Just -- you know, people are happy here and I like to see that.

Kay Deffendall: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Al Gentle: It's different from when I was here before.

Kay Deffendall: Oh, yes. (Laughter.) We choose to be here.

Al Gentle: When you look at the guy and say, well, he's been here a while. He has the Aleutian stare.

Kay Deffendall: We still say that (laughter). About March, you know, we get that way.

Al Gentle: You know, a guy would come in and he'd say oh this is awful weather. I said, well just wait a while, it'll be different. It'll change.

Kay Deffendall: Yes. Yes, it can always get worse. We've found that out.

Al Gentle: Then he'd say well, where are the ladies? Where are the girls? I'd say, well, they're behind every tree.

Kay Deffendall: Every tree (laughter). Same stories.

Al Gentle: Well, they've been perpetuated.

Kay Deffendall: Yes. Yes. [0:18:17.3] Okay, well thanks for spending this time with us and we hope that the rest of the week is as pleasant as what this has been and get

out and meet more people and see more things. We'll get you into the powerhouse. No problem there. Okay, well thanks again for being with us.

Al Gentle: Well, thank you.

Emma Gentle: Thank you.

Kay Deffendall: It was such a pleasure to meet you and I hope to see you in Gulf Shores sometime.

Emma Gentle: Oh, we hope so too.

Al Gentle: I anticipate that.

Kay Deffendall: Yes.

Al Gentle: Because we will keep in touch.

Kay Deffendall: Yes. We'll want to do that. Okay, thanks. And this is Kay Deffendall here for another segment of Eye on Unalaska. Good night.

End of Interview at 0:18:45.8.