

Interview with Herb Gedney
Aleutian World War II Veterans History Program
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Self Interview Program
Transcription by Janis Kozlowski, National Park Service

This oral history is part of a self interview program. Veterans are sent a digital recorder 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.

Audio files are digital and have been saved in several formats on a CD/DVD: wma, wav and mp3. The digital files and transcript are on file in the National Park Service office in Anchorage Alaska.

Herb Gedney: [0:00:00] It was not a state when he got ... was up there serving it was a Territory of the United States of America. And we had very limited resources and the Air Force was limited to one airplane at the time I arrived and that was a B-10 -- or B-18, excuse me, bomber -- which they used just for training airmen and making the life of the thing ... life up there so that we would be an air base.

[0:00:53] I was set for return to the States in, I guess it was August of 1943--I guess September--for reassignment in the Air Force world. But, I guess I was destined to be in the service. My grandfather, Captain Magnus C. Hollis was second in command in the Philippines Resurrection -- insurrection, I guess it was. I was ... my father was in World War II. He was in the cavalry. The cavalry consisted of horses. And this ... in World War II, the cavalry were consisted of heavy tanks. He was wounded or hurt in training or battle, I don't know which. But he had a 10% discount ... disability.

[0:02:14] After high school I received a convertible car with a gas card. And a year later after many run ins with my father about the use of the car and the neighbors complaining,

he took me down to the recruitment office and I enlisted. I was in the artillery at first for a year. I went in December 1938 ... I was awarded Private First Class in December 1938. I guess I went in early, probably June or July. I was in Headquarters Battery, 79th Field Artillery and we had the big guns – 179 mm cannons.

[0:03:22] [Referring to pictures and documents] And then we'd go on to landing on Amchitka ... pictures of Anchorage Chapter of the Air Force Association in there. [starting to read from prepared text or a document he is looking at] Telling about the Aleutian Campaign occurred during the early years of the war. What was accomplished there had been obscured by time and overshadowed by the more dramatic events of other war theatres. It was the only campaign fought on North American soil during the war. It was primarily an air war where young men battled not only each other, but also the terrible unforgiving elements of the storm-lashed primeval place.

The war in the Aleutians had been referred to as the forgotten war. And the terror of the air battles that were fought on the lonely skies, have not summed up to the power and the glory of other theatres of conflict as so recently expressed in the movie The Memphis Belle.

However, those who fought there remember the weather was a significant factor. It could rain and snow at the same time; there would be mud and then it would freeze ... frozen. The runways were always either frozen or mud puddles – no happy medium.

[0:04:17] The weather we worked in and worked on the planes was not ideal but it did get done. We had covers at some kind and pictures show how we lived and how the planes were taken care of.

The weather was always ... it went from, always went from bad to worse.

[Rustling of paper] In continuation of the weather: the Aleutian Islands are the only place in the world where high winds and fog occur at the same time. Another phenomenon is the williwaw, a local name given to the fierce winds that originate [phone ringing] in the mountains and gust up to 140 knots.

[0:05:07] And I was in the Aleutian Islands ... from 19 ... early 1941 to the end ... 1943 after the retaking of Kiska and Attu.

In 1938 in Atlanta, Georgia, I enlisted in the Army when I was 16 ½ years old. My father helped me reach this decision and choice as he was one who had to sign me up because of my age. I had Army experience after three years of ROTC training in high school my last three years there. After enlisting in Georgia, I was shipped to three different states and bases before volunteering for foreign duty in the Territory of Alaska. One has to remember that Alaska was not a state at that time, just a possession of the United States.

I chose the Army where I was assigned to field artillery and went into the 40th Air Force when I was transferred to the 11th Air Force in the Territory of Alaska. I was in the Headquarters of the 28th Composite Group in the 11th Air Force stationed in Alaska from early 1941 to November of '43.

My commanding officers that I remember from this time were Colonel Eareckson and Captain Jack Donahue who both were big jock pilots.

[0:07:18] My duties there in Alaska when I first arrived were in office personnel where I made out the payroll and typed the daily duty reports. Also, as an armorer and a turret specialist I would install guns and cannons in B-25s. I was sent right along with the planes down the Aleutian chain to maintain and service the planes with guns, bombs and ammos as they came back from a mission from Kiska and Attu. After that heading back to my main goal was to keep the Japanese – *our* main goal, excuse me, was to keep the

Japs from moving up the islands to the US mainland, which I am proud to say we accomplished.

[0:08:26] During the summer months and in the fall of 1941 we would at times go fishing and hunting bringing our catch back and ... our catch and deer back to the cooks to fix ... to fix fresh meat and salmon for the squadron.

Then came the fateful Sunday in December the 7th of 1941 – Pearl Harbor. Myself and three others from the squadron were out doing just that –hunting and fishing – when a rush of Army vehicles passed us. Bringing up the rear was a jeep who stopped and told us that we had better get back to our outfit because we were now at war with Japan for the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

[0:09:32] I was headed for Umnak the day the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor on June 3rd, 1942. We were getting ready to land to refuel and were told to return to Anchorage as [we were] on our approach. The next day we headed for Adak where we set up shop for servicing guns and engines coming in from our base on Adak. This was just the first stop and then we followed other islands to Amchitka so we would be closer to Kiska and Attu.

I guess I would have to say that my contribution to ousting the Japanese was in helping to maintain fighters and bombers to bomb the Japs on Kiska and Attu. For that duty I received two battle stars and two Presidential Citations – or the outfit that I was with received that presentation.

[0:10:58] Daily life in the Aleutians was miserable in many ways. Bathing was done out in one's element. We were only allowed a change of clothes when the ones we were wearing could literally stand by themselves. We didn't have barracks; tents were our housing at first, which were often blown over by the famous williwaw winds. The islands, for most part, were uninhabitable and the living conditions were almost

unbearable. I would say most ... I would say the weather was always the biggest factor regarding ... in regard to almost everything.

Of course, there were some good times too. We made our own liquor with raisins and with what we stole out of the kitchen mess tent. We would have plays where some of the guys would dress the parts of women and there was some famous Hollywood actors who came to see and entertain us and attend our beer parties which we held once a month. I remember Frances Langford, Bob Hope, and Joe E. Brown. I'm sending along a few pictures of our life in Alaska. The comedians that ... Bob Hope helped keep up our morale.

[0:12:40] And of course, mail from home would always brighten a day. I learned to stay in touch with my family after my father had a friend in the Salvation Army arrive on a dog sled from Fairbanks to find out for my father if I was still alive and if so, why I was not responding to his letters. After that I had to show my CO, my Commanding Officer, my letter was ready to go for home to my Commanding Officer.

We really didn't know a lot about what was going on in the rest of the world because we had no newspapers, no equipment for movies or news reels, and no radios with news and music playing. When the Captain would get up dates he would post them on the bulletin board from radio transmissions.

[0:13:53] Over the years I have been in touch with four of my Aleutian squadron mates. Now they are gone but I have great pictures and memories to fall back on when I dig through the old photo album. One I actually made myself from wood while I was stationed there in the Aleutians. It all stays with you somewhat: the good, the bad, you remember. We were young, we handled it.

Thank you for letting me share my thoughts and memories that I had in Alaska with you.