

Interview with William Nouris Thies

Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Program

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Interviewed by Janis Kozlowski, National Park Service
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This interview is part of the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Project. The interview with Captain Bill Thies 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.

The transcript has been lightly edited.

(The dictation starts out with dialogue after all attendees arrived.)

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, so it's September 15, 2010, and we're in Gig Harbor, Washington talking with Lieutenant Bill Thies. [0:00:32.0]

Captain Bill Thies: I was Lieutenant back in 1942. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: What was your end rank? I'm off to a bad start.

Captain Bill Thies: I ended up as a Captain.

Janis Kozlowski: Captain.

Captain Bill Thies: You didn't know that?

Janis Kozlowski: You know what, I did know that because you went on to be a commanding officer of VPB-144, right?

Captain Bill Thies: I was Lieutenant Commander then. I retired as a Captain.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. My apologies.

Captain Bill Thies: That's the bird – birds on each side.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay, there. The silver ones?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. [0:01:22.1] And I'm Janis Kozlowski with the National Park Service, and Janet Clemens is also here with the National Park Service. Could we – could you say who you are -- both are too?

Don Reed: Yes, Don – Don Reed. I'm the son-in-law to Bill Thies.

Nola Reed: I'm Nola Reed, Bill Thies' daughter.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Thank you. Okay, let's start from a bit of the beginning of your military service. I think you were born in 1917, right?

Captain Bill Thies: Right.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:01:58.0] When did you actually enter military service?

Captain Bill Thies: 1938.

Janis Kozlowski: And what compelled you to enter at that point?

Captain Bill Thies: Good story. My hero back in those days was Charles Lindbergh and I decided after hearing all about him that I wanted to learn how to fly. So, I went to the University of Maryland to get a degree in Engineering, which you had to have back in those days to go to flight school. So, one day at the University, this airplane lands on the football field (laughing) and a good friend of mine that used to be on the track team with me, got out in his whites, his wings. He says Bill, I'm recruiting. He says why don't you join the Navy or Air For – Air. I said I never knew the Navy had Air. I was pointing towards the Army Air Corps at that time. So I signed up. That's the way I went to Pensacola, Florida, and got my wings.

Janis Kozlowski: So he convinced you to – to switch over to the Navy.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you think you might have an opportunity to fly a certain type of airplane that you.....

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, I had no idea then. [0:03:41.3] In fact, when I finished flight training I wanted to be a fighter pilot and they said, no, you're going to seaplanes. Don't have much choice (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Well, that explains why you ended up being – using the PBY as sort of like a fighter airplane. (Laughing.)

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, right. Probably saved my life.

Janis Kozlowski: So, were you happy that you chose the Navy?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:04:16.8] So, where were you assigned first? Where did you go?

Captain Bill Thies: Sand Point Naval Air Station, Seattle. You ever – have you ever seen it up there?

Janis Kozlowski: No.

Captain Bill Thies: It used to be a seaplane base. That's where I learned to fly the PBYS.

Janis Kozlowski: Did – what kind of – well, first of all, what kind of training did they give you? [0:04:40.3]

Captain Bill Thies: In the PBY?

Janis Kozlowski: Even before that, because you didn't have your pilot's license, right?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, well, in Pensacola where we went to flight school we trained in everything.

Janis Kozlowski: Was it good enough training to transition easily to a PBY or another airplane?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, sure. Yeah, we trained in seaplanes down there.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm. How about instrument training and flying in inclement weather?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, we didn't get to that until later on.

Janis Kozlowski: Not 'til you hit the Aleutians, right?

Captain Bill Thies: Amen. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: And then you were on your own. Did you actually – did they actually train you in the Aleutians, in the airplane you flew?

Captain Bill Thies: Our training was done before we went up there. We – we were instrument qualified when we went up there. Praise the Lord.

Janis Kozlowski: So did you feel very qualified for the type of conditions you encountered? [0:05:41.0]

Captain Bill Thies: Never. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: So, some of your flights might have been a bit frightening.

Captain Bill Thies: Oh. I don't know how to explain that. As you have heard probably, the Aleutian weather to fly in is the worst in the world. [0:06:12.1] As an example, we take off one night and we get up to around 2000 feet and I told the radar operator – I said, let me know when we pass a certain point. After about ten minutes I said, Harvey why – why haven't you given me a call. He says, I don't know Bill. He says, we're standing still (laughter) over the land. The air – the air – there was an air current which was 110 knots and we were flying right into it and that made the plane stay right here. (Laughter.) I said, well, I'll find out. I told my copilot – I said, do a 180, and we went off the scope (laughter) at 200 miles an hour. That was some God awful weather.

Janis Kozlowski: You probably didn't know when you took off on any given day what you would encounter because.....

Captain Bill Thies: Well, we had a fair idea. We had a good aerologist in the squadron and he – he was pretty good. We – we had some reports that would come in from – there were two or three guys on Kiska at the time, which was way west of Dutch Harbor, and they would radio us what the weather was like.

Janis Kozlowski: So you had a little bit of an idea.

Captain Bill Thies: A little bit, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:07:47.0] Do you remember who your aerologist was?

Captain Bill Thies: John Tatum.

Janis Kozlowski: John Tatum?

Captain Bill Thies: Mm-hmm.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:08:07.1] So, when you – where did you go when you first went to Alaska? Did you take your aircraft up from Sand Point?

Captain Bill Thies: Yes. We – our first duty actually in the Aleutians was Kodiak. In fact, when we went up there I took my wife with me.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Captain Bill Thies: She was in Kodiak with me.

Janis Kozlowski: Did they have housing for both of you?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, we had quarters, uh-huh.

Janis Kozlowski: How did she like Kodiak?

Captain Bill Thies: I don't think I know the answer to that. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Were you actually on Kodiak very much or that was just the base?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, yeah, quite a bit. When the war started, we went back to the States because we had an idea that the Japanese would attack somewhere on the West Coast, so we flew patrols out of Tillamook, Oregon, and then we went back to the Aleutians. That's when I went out to Dutch Harbor.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. So, when you were on Kodiak, what kind of missions were you flying? [0:09:26.0]

Captain Bill Thies: We were looking for the Japanese fleet.

Janis Kozlowski: So you – you flew sectors each day looking to find them.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, uh-huh.

Janis Kozlowski: And what did you find?

Captain Bill Thies: (Laughter.) You really want to know this story? (Laughter.) [0:09:46.0] We were about, I don't know, 200-300 miles south of Kodiak and I see this big ship and I look and holy cow there's a Japanese battleship (laughter). I called that in to Kodiak. They all went to general quarters (laughter) and there was a Lieutenant JG flying alongside of me. He was a Naval Academy graduate and I wasn't. He called me up and says Bill – I said, we're gonna bomb that big Japanese cruiser. I started up to 10,000 feet and I was on my run to bomb it, and the guy on the wing says, Bill don't drop, don't drop. That's one of our destroyers! (Laughter.) They had left Pearl Harbor without the codes because every time I'd query them or send a "Z" message light signal they wouldn't answer, so I suspected they were Japanese. Later on the skipper of that destroyer and I met in Kodiak and he said, Bill you just had the shit scared out of me. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Your life would've been a lot different if that had happened, right? (Laughter.)

Captain Bill Thies: I felt pretty sheepish. Couldn't tell the difference between a little destroyer and a Japanese battle cruiser. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: [0:11:42.6] Well, did you actually encounter Japanese ships or aircraft in any of these patrols?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, when we were flying patrols to Kiska out of Dutch Harbor; in fact, we weren't in Dutch Harbor. We were on another island out there where we were taking off from. That's when I got attacked a few times by Zeros.

Janis Kozlowski: The float-type Zeros, or.....

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, that must have been a little frightening in a slow, lumbering PBY with a plane like that coming after you.

Captain Bill Thies: Well, as the Lord would have it, he blessed me with a tactic (laughter). The Japanese Zero float plane would get on our tail to attack, okay. Well, there was a little island, maybe 200-300 feet tall, couple miles in diameter. So what I did, I went and got right down close to the water, like 10 feet off the water and started to circle that island. The Japanese Zero would come in to make an attack and just about the time he was ready to fire, I was in a turn and he had to break off or hit the water. He did that two or three times and went home. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: So was that something you learned, or did you just – it was instinctual.

Captain Bill Thies: Survival of the fittest. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: [0:13:29.5] So was the PBY a good airplane for what you were trying to do?

Captain Bill Thies: The best.

Janis Kozlowski: Were you happy you got assigned to that airplane?

Captain Bill Thies: As long as I had to fly something, that was the best airplane to fly. It was very, very reliable. It had two Pratt and Whitney R-1830 engines, which all you ever had to do every couple hundred hours was change the spark plugs and off we go. Great airplane.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you pretty well fly the same one all of the time?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, I had one assigned to me, yeah. If it was flyable, not in for maintenance or something like that.

Janis Kozlowski: Did it have any bad characteristics?

Captain Bill Thies: I can't think of any. It was just a marvelous airplane.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:14:24.0] Now, what about all of the activities that you ended up doing in a PBY which weren't really what that plane was designed to do, like bombing and.....

Captain Bill Thies: Well, yeah. It was designed for reconnaissance and we ended up using it for bombing and hanging torpedoes on the wings (laughter). Thank goodness I never had an occasion to do that. Some of my buddies weren't so fortunate.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:15:02.4] How many missions did you end up flying? Do you remember?

Captain Bill Thies: In the Aleutians?

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, goodness. That would be hard to guess, but I'd say we put in oh 500 hours, maybe so, something like that.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm. That's a lot flying hours in some pretty.....

Captain Bill Thies: Well, the airplane flew 18 hours on a mission.

Janis Kozlowski: Without refueling?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow. I didn't realize it had that long of a range.

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: That's more than a person can handle really. What did you do?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, we never actually went the 18 hours. Most of them ended up like 14-15, but it could stay up for 18 hours.

Janis Kozlowski: That's still a very long mission.

Captain Bill Thies: What we'd do is throttle back, just run about 90 miles an hour just hanging on the propellers (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Kind of minimum control of all air speed.

Captain Bill Thies: That would stretch the fuel out, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Uh-huh. So didn't that get boring flying up there?

Captain Bill Thies: Hmm?

Janis Kozlowski: Didn't it get boring all of those hours?

Captain Bill Thies: All the time. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Especially for a young guy. That must've gotten a little old. What did you do to pass the time?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, that wasn't hard to do. I mean, you know, we were constantly watching the radar. If we could see the water, we'd have our binoculars out and looking. It wasn't easy to pass time – it was real easy to pass the time.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:17:01.0] So you were in the Aleutians when Dutch Harbor was bombed, right?

Captain Bill Thies: Yes, ma'am.

Janis Kozlowski: Were you anywhere near Dutch Harbor when that.....

Captain Bill Thies: I was in a foxhole (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: On Kodiak?

Captain Bill Thies: Dutch Harbor.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, you were?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, yeah. I was there during the first – first attack.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I didn't realize that.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: So, where were you holed up in your foxhole and where was your airplane at the time?

Captain Bill Thies: It was sitting on a ramp someplace getting shot up. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Do you remember where your foxhole was, what part of town?

Captain Bill Thies: No idea. No idea.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:17:44.6] How much time did you spend at Dutch Harbor?

Captain Bill Thies: I don't know the answer to that. We weren't there too long when things really began to get hot. We moved out to – I can't remember the name of that island.

Janis Kozlowski: Was it Atka?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, Atka. Yeah. That's it. That's where we were refueling and taking off. It was much closer to Kiska than Dutch Harbor.

Janis Kozlowski: So, Dutch Harbor was never really your base. You were just in and out of there.

Captain Bill Thies: Not really, no.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:18:25.8] I was curious about whether you ever had any contact with or any recollection of the Native people that lived at Dutch Harbor at the time.

Captain Bill Thies: No.

Janis Kozlowski: Or Atka, or anywhere.

Captain Bill Thies: No.

Janis Kozlowski: They never came around.

Captain Bill Thies: The closest I ever came to that, we did some rescue missions of the Aleuts to get them away from the Japanese.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, which isl – do you remember which islands you took them off of?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, it was – it was about 40 miles east of Kiska. I can't remember the name of it.

Janis Kozlowski: Not Amchitka. There weren't.....

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, I think it was Amchitka, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Amchitka? Okay.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, that's it.

Janis Kozlowski: So you – you took some of them off there and brought them back to Dutch Harbor.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Captain Bill Thies: [0:19:25.0] We had an American submarine go aground at Amchitka. Do you remember that? Hear about that?

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Captain Bill Thies: The chief engineer on the submarine ended up living close to me when I was in California. He had an egg farm. (Laughter.) I was – we were assigned to go out and destroy the submarine. We didn't want it to fall into Japanese hands, only 40 miles from where they were, you know. We had a – it was about 10 gallon jar – glass jar of nitroglycerin aboard the PBY and it was in a cradle with bungee cords so it wouldn't explode (laughter). We landed at Amchitka and just after we landed and I put the party aboard a little rubber raft to go and blow up the submarine, this Japanese four-engine

flying boat came over (laughter) and I left the party there that was going to blow up the submarine and got the hell out of there (laughter) as fast as I could go. Somebody else had to come back the next day and pick up the party. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Did the Japanese airplane actually come in and do any damage on that run?

Captain Bill Thies: No. It was real foggy and it couldn't see like that. It only could see straight down. It just didn't see us, so we were lucky.

Janis Kozlowski: It sounds like you had a lot of luck on your side.

Captain Bill Thies: We did.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:21:32.3] Let me – let me ask you about the bombing of Dutch Harbor again before we get too far away. What was it like to be there at that point? Did you recognize that the Japanese were coming in? Where were you when you found out?

Captain Bill Thies: That's pretty hard to try to remember.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. So one of the – it sounds like you were involved in the bombing of Kiska to try to get the Japanese off.

Captain Bill Thies: That's right.

Janis Kozlowski: Were you also involved in any of the Attu.....

Captain Bill Thies: No, no. Never did the Attu thing.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. [0:22:22.6] Can you tell me about what happened – what was your experience on Kiska?

Captain Bill Thies: Well (laughter), the commanding officer of the squadron said, Bill, we think there's Japanese on Kiska but we're not sure, so go out there and take a look. So we get out there. I duck in out of the fog bank and look down there and there was a whole Japanese fleet. Two Japanese cruisers, about 12 destroyers and a whole bunch of transport ships. So I go back up in the clouds and radio Kodiak, the wing commander. Contact. Japanese enemy ships in Kiska harbor. I thought, I've done my job. I'm gonna get the hell outta here and get back. I turned around and started off. About five minutes into the flight, plain language message comes over the radio, very unheard of. We were supposed to keep radio silence, you know, or in code. This was plain language from Commodore Gehres. You've heard of Gehres.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Captain Bill Thies: Personal call sign to my personal call sign. Bomb enemy ship in Kiska Harbor. The radioman came up with that message where I was sitting in the cockpit. He had a 45. I said, Harvey, put the damn gun away. What are you gonna do? He says, look at this message. You aren't gonna do this, are ya? I say, Harvey (laughter)..... So, I got with Bob Larson, the navigator, and I said, we've gotta figure out some way to save our necks before we carry this order out. (Laughter.) Bob thought for a while and he says, I have a good idea. He says, we'll duck down out of the clouds, and there was a big spit, which was very predominant on Kiska. He says, I'll find out exactly how far it is from that spit to where the fleet is. When we passed over that with the radar, knowing where we were, he says I'll time it, and when we get over the main body of the fleet I'll tell ya – I'll call you up and we'll drop the bombs manually. That's what we did. That was the first radar bombing ever carried out.

Janis Kozlowski: Do you have any idea if you were successful?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, yeah. I got a picture of the ship we sunk. It was a Japanese transport. That's when Gehres awarded me the Navy Cross.

Janis Kozlowski: And you got back safely from that.

Captain Bill Thies: Yes, ma'am.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:25:42.8] Did you – did they train you to do that? I mean did you know what to do that day?

Captain Bill Thies: No, we had no idea what we were doing.

Janis Kozlowski: You just had to figure it out.

Captain Bill Thies: Larson came through. He was the greatest.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you were only what, 21 or 22 years old at the time when you were doing that?

Captain Bill Thies: What, 1942 from 1917. How old was I? 22?

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, you were a pretty young guy to be making all of those decisions and figuring out those tactics. That's pretty amazing. Do you think – you know you had a lot of hours in that PBY. You were doing bombing runs, things that were unprecedented. Many people I'm sure – you lost a lot of crews down there. [0:26:36.0] Do you know – what do you attribute your successes to?

Captain Bill Thies: Just dumb luck. (Laughter.) When you're that age you don't – don't think much about saving your own life. We lost nine crews out of 12 airplanes in the first 30 days, mostly due to weather. I was one of the lucky ones to come through. One of the reasons for that is I – I defied orders. When we would come in to Dutch Harbor or wherever, we were supposed to send an in-report, so that it would let the people on the ground know that we are friendly. The PBY generators would not carry

the radar and the radio transmitter at the same time. Just too much current. So what I would do – I would turn off the radio so I could have my radar man tell me how to get through the pass. When I would do that, not send an in-report to identify myself, the whole base would go to alert (laughter). I get on the ground and the commanding officer called me up and said, damn it Bill, you did it again. (Laughter.) Next time I'll court-martial you. I said, thank you, I can go back to the States. (Laughter.) That never happened. But the guys that would send the in-report, two or three of them had crashed into the mountains coming into Dutch Harbor. They turned off the radar, which was stupid.

Janis Kozlowski: Too many mountains and obstacles in there.

Captain Bill Thies: You've seen the area.

Janis Kozlowski: Yep.

Captain Bill Thies: Ballyhoo was one of them.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm. Yeah. That would be dangerous to do, to lose your navigation at that critical time.

Captain Bill Thies: That was another piece of dumb luck. Just young and foolish.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:29:16.8] How about some of the other places that you landed. Dutch Harbor was a pretty tricky place to get into in bad weather, right? But what about some of the other places you went?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, what was the name of the.....

Janis Kozlowski: Atka?

Captain Bill Thies: Atka.

Janis Kozlowski: Nazan Bay?

Captain Bill Thies: Nazan Bay. Oh, man. That was one of the most – oh, excuse me. I shudder now to think about it. We came in from a run on Kiska into Nazan Bay and we were totally on radar right down on the deck. The radar man could pick out the big rocks. He'd guide me around. Finally we got into Nazan Bay and landed and we couldn't see anything. Norm Garton was on a destroyer. He was the same skipper that I almost bombed out of Kodiak.

Janis Kozlowski: On the Gillis?

Captain Bill Thies: Norm Garton was the commanding officer of a destroyer in there, and I knew that. I got on the radio and said, hey Norm, turn on the search plates.

Where am I at? (Laughter.) He called back and said, Bill we just had a submarine – Japanese submarine torpedo the Casco, which was a.....

Janis Kozlowski: Tender?

Captain Bill Thies: Tender, yeah. He says, I'm gonna turn on the search light for about two seconds. You better damn well find your way. (Laughter.) He did. I knew where I was and I could see the Casco up on the beach.

Janis Kozlowski: How else would you have found a mooring buoy in that.....

Captain Bill Thies: No way.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah.

Captain Bill Thies: But what we did – we came up the stern of the Casco to refuel and put in new torpedoes. It was on the beach so..... Gehres came down with his megaphone and, Bill what are you doing with those torpedoes hanging on your wings? I said, I didn't feel like dropping them and reloading tonight. Give the crew a rest. Good thinking, Bill. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Because that wasn't the practice, right? You were supposed to drop them before you landed?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah. [0:31:49.0] You probably might of heard the story, he gave me a box of cigars for bringing the torpedoes back.

Janis Kozlowski: I've heard a little bit about that. What – so he was pretty proud of you making that decision.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, he was, yeah. Gave the crew a rest. We got some sleep that night, took off the next morning. We had the torpedoes already aboard.

Janis Kozlowski: A slightly easier day than another, right? You had a little less to do. Did you fly with the same guys all of the time?

Captain Bill Thies: The what?

Janis Kozlowski: [0:32:27.8] Did you fly with the same crew all of the time?

Captain Bill Thies: Mostly. Sometimes it changed a little bit, but mostly.

Janis Kozlowski: Do you remember who the guys were, or some of the more memorable ones?

Captain Bill Thies: Can you cut that thing off for a minute? I'll show you the crew. I think I can find it. (Background discussion takes place.) There we are. (More background discussion takes place.)

Janis Kozlowski: What do you have? You scanned your flight logs, huh? Oh, are those on – are your flight logs online?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, I haven't seen those. That's okay.

Captain Bill Thies: I can't find them now.

Janis Kozlowski: That's okay. Did any of them turn out to be kind of life-long friends? Did you keep in touch with any of them?

Captain Bill Thies: Of course Bob Larson was the main one I kept in touch with, and George Raptis, who was one of the enlisted men that actually saw the Zero for the first time. You've heard that story.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, I would like to hear it again.

Captain Bill Thies: [0:35:57.0] Well, we were flying over Akutan. We had gotten lost that night and we had no idea where we were. It was real rough, real rough air. George got sick. The PBYS have those blisters, you know, that they open up to fire the machine guns. So, he opened up the blister to heave over the side. He was heaving over the side. He picked up a microphone and he says, Bill, back hard left. There was the Zero.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow.

Captain Bill Thies: Dumb luck, we felt.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you know what it was when you saw it?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, yeah. It had big – great big red balls on the wings. It was upsidedown. We could see the insignia.

Janis Kozlowski: But you didn't land immediately, right?

Captain Bill Thies: We couldn't land there, no. No way. So, I went back to Dutch Harbor and I told Skipper Foley – you've probably heard of Paul Foley. Okay, Bill, that's good. There's a crashed airplane on Akutan, so what? I said, Paul – almost got court martialled for calling him by his first name. I said, that plane is salvageable. Let's – let me take a party and go over there and see what we can do. We argued and argued and argued. He said, you're due for flying tomorrow morning. I said, I know, but I think this is more important. [0:37:39.0] He finally gave in and he let us take a party over to Akutan. We hiked in and there was the Zero. All we were able to do was get the body out of the airplane. You've seen pictures of the Koga.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Captain Bill Thies: A real salvage party came in later to get the plane off the beach and back to Dutch Harbor.

Janis Kozlowski: Did – when did you recognize the significance of your find?

Captain Bill Thies: Not really until we finally after several months when it was put together and flown, you know, that we heard about the fact that – its incapability of doing certain maneuvers. Just by word of mouth. We didn't know how – how important it was.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm. But word did get back to the Aleutians about.....

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, we – we heard about it later on, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm. You must've felt pretty good about your involvement in that.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, we did. [0:39:00.0] I think the most – there was a quotation from a Japanese Admiral, Japanese Strategic Air Defense Forces, which said the find of the Japanese Zero, you've probably seen that on my web page, was as significant as the defeat of the Japanese at the battle of Midway.

Janis Kozlowski: Mm-hmm.

Captain Bill Thies: Because it was after they found out what the Zero would not do. The word went out to the fleet and it turned their war right around. We were starting to shoot them down. What happened was, the Zero could not make a high-speed diving left hand turn. It had something to do with the torque of the propeller. So, when a Japanese Zero got on the tail of one of our fighters, our fighter would peel off and make a high-speed diving left hand turn and the Japanese couldn't follow him. It went on this way and then it would come up behind and shoot him down.

Janis Kozlowski: And we didn't know that before, so that.....

Captain Bill Thies: Nope, not before we found the Zero. That was pretty lucky.

Janis Kozlowski: So is that one of your prouder moments of your time in the Aleutians? Is that one of the things that you.....

Captain Bill Thies: I've been proud of that from the day we found it until today.
(Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: For good reason.

Captain Bill Thies: And the Navy department never even said thank you.

Janis Kozlowski: So none of these medals were for that?

Captain Bill Thies: No.

Janis Kozlowski: No. [0:40:54.4] Well, could we talk about your medals and decorations here?

Captain Bill Thies: Sure. Sure.

Janis Kozlowski: What did you get them for?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, of course the main one is the Navy Cross. That's the blue and white, top left.

Janis Kozlowski: This one?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, uh-huh. And that's – that's what Gehres awarded me for bombing the transport in Kiska Harbor. The rest of them are just – oh, Distinguished Flying Cross and Air medals.

Janis Kozlowski: Is that this one? Distinguished Flying Cross?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: And then these are your – your Air medals?

Captain Bill Thies: No the Air medal is third from the right, on top.

Janis Kozlowski: This one?

Captain Bill Thies: Nope. Keep going. All of the way – all of the way up to the top.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh here.

Captain Bill Thies: That's the Air medal.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay. And – so what are you.....

Captain Bill Thies: There's a legend down there.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay.

Captain Bill Thies: The rest of them are just nothing meritorious, just various campaigns.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, that's the most decorations I've ever seen. (Laughter.)

Captain Bill Thies: Well, evidently you haven't seen some of the four-star Admirals.

Janis Kozlowski: Nope, I haven't. It's a pretty impressive collection. I'm sure well deserved. [0:42:32.2] So what – did the fact that you lost friends and crews in the Aleutians – did that have an effect on you as a young man? Did it make you fearful?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh yeah. When you lose good friends you can't help but shed a tear.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. Did it make you fearful about what you were doing in the Aleutians?

Captain Bill Thies: You're damn right it did! (Laughter.) I'm next.

Janis Kozlowski: You know the kids today have these signs that say no fear, but they weren't doing what you were.

Captain Bill Thies: No.

Janis Kozlowski: The kinds of things you were doing. Do you think your experiences in the Aleutians changed you as a person or had an effect on your life in the long term?

Captain Bill Thies: Couldn't help but, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Do you know how so?

Captain Bill Thies: I have nightmares every now and then still.

Janis Kozlowski: About flying?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, of the experiences up in the Aleutians, yeah. It was real hairy.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, it hardly seemed fair that some of the guys in the European Theater after a certain number of missions were sent home, but in the Aleutians, you guys just had to stay and stay (laughter). It didn't matter how many hours you flew.

Captain Bill Thies: I tried a couple of times to get court martialed and sent home. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: They must've seen right through that (laughter). [0:44:07.8] Let me ask you just about kind of daily life in the Aleutians. What was it like? What were your – you know, in terms of sleeping, eating, any kind of recreation.

Captain Bill Thies: As far as eating was concerned, all I remember is we lived on Spam and apples (laughter). We camped out, anchored out someplace away from the main base. A Yippie boat would come along side and all it had was Spam and apples (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: So you were pretty skinny in those days, right?

Captain Bill Thies: I think I was about 160.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh my.

Captain Bill Thies: That's what I am today.

Janis Kozlowski: Young guys have to eat quite a bit though to keep their – keep them going. Did you sleep aboard the tenders?

Captain Bill Thies: Never did, no.

Janis Kozlowski: Never did? Where did you – where did you stay?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, if we were on – on shore we'd – there were Quonset huts, tents, or the airplanes. Never was aboard the tender.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Captain Bill Thies: Only time I was aboard the tender was when the Casco was beached after getting the torpedo hit in Amchitka. Nazan Bay, yeah. Gehres called me aboard to have a cup of coffee with him. I found out at that time; when the torpedo hit the Casco, Gehres was in the wardroom having a cup of coffee and the shock of the torpedo wave knocked him off the wardroom table, and as he was sliding off the table he cut his hand and he bled. He awarded himself the Purple Heart for that. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: I didn't know you could award yourself a Purple Heart. (Laughter.)

Captain Bill Thies: That was one I never got, thank the Lord.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, that's not one you want to try and get. [0:46:33.0] What kind of a guy was Gehres?

Captain Bill Thies: You'd better turn that thing off. (Laughter.) A real asshole.

Janis Kozlowski: Was he?

Captain Bill Thies: He had a horrible reputation. He and I got along real well, but he was tough, real tough. Later on, you know, he was the Commanding Officer of the – I forget the name of the carrier. It was attacked by Kamikazes.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, yeah. I don't remember the name.

Captain Bill Thies: He had an Admiral aboard and the Admiral said, I'm getting off. Gehres says, you're not. The Admiral says, who the hell do you think you are? I'm gettin' off this damn ship. (Laughter.) Gehres stayed aboard with a firefighting crew and he did save the ship. The Navy Department couldn't figure out whether to court martial him or award him a Navy Cross. They awarded him the Navy Cross. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: So, your wife was in Kodiak at least for a while when you were there? Where did – did she stick around?

Captain Bill Thies: [0:48:05.9] When we learned about Pearl Harbor, they – they evacuated all of the women. She went aboard the USS Grant.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Captain Bill Thies: It was a troop transport.

Janis Kozlowski: Luxury ship. (Laughter.)

Captain Bill Thies: And on the way out – I was flying patrol on the ship. I went up alongside and I could see my wife standing up there waving.

Janis Kozlowski: So did she head back to Seattle then?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Were you able to be in contact with her and let her know how you were doing?

Captain Bill Thies: No. No way.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did – how much time went by before you ever got to see her or talk with her.

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, December 7th was the attack. It wasn't until the fall of next year before I ever got home.

Janis Kozlowski: So almost a year after.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, it was late in '42.

Janis Kozlowski: She had no idea if you were okay or not.

Captain Bill Thies: No way. That's her picture.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, she's a beautiful lady. So did she wait for you in Seattle until you were finished?

Captain Bill Thies: Mm-hmm.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:49:46.8] But you went on – after the Aleutians you went on to the South Pacific or Central.....

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski:Pacific, right?

Captain Bill Thies: They made me the commanding officer of a PV Lockheed twin-engine medium bomber. Made me the skipper.

Janis Kozlowski: PV-1 or 2?

Captain Bill Thies: We started off with the 1s and eventually switched over to the 2s. I was the youngest commanding officer ever assigned.

Janis Kozlowski: Really? How old were you?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, this was in '43 or '44, so how old was I?

Don Reed: 26.

Janis Kozlowski: 26, yeah. So you must've left the Aleutians somewhere around late '43, early '44 or something like that?

Captain Bill Thies: I think it was late '42 or early '43.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay. Okay. All right. Okay. Were you happy to get out of Alaska?

Captain Bill Thies: Amen. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: But given where you were going, was that a good.....

Captain Bill Thies: Hmm?

Janis Kozlowski: Given where you were going, was that.....

Captain Bill Thies: Well, that's another story. [0:51:14.8] I'm in Seattle and I get a call from a skipper that says you're going to San Diego. Now what am I going to do down there. He says, it's top secret. You will find out. So I went to San Diego and here is a relief map on the table with, you know, Kiska Island. I said, what's this all about. Well, you're gonna be assigned to Colonel Frederick's special service forces and go ashore in Kiska. Hey come on..... (Laughter.) Anyway, we get to Kiska. I'm in charge of a radio communication outfit, which is supposed to go ashore and radio for air support. So we're sitting on the – out in the harbor outside of Kiska and there's a destroyer about 100 yards away that blew up all of a sudden. We thought, oh man, the Japs hit him with a 5-inch shore battery. That was a little scary. Anyway, we go ashore at H minus five hours or something like that. It's still dark. Hit the beach. Hand grenades, carbine .45, you name it. We hit the beach. The orders were to proceed east on Kiska Island until you meet the enemy. Well, before we got off the ship reports were coming in that the people that had gone ashore ahead of us were having a fixed battle. It turned out what

we found out later the two sides like this of our own men had met each other and in the dark they were shooting at each other. We killed about 40 of our own men.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow.

Captain Bill Thies: Of course we thought, man we're in for real hell. So I get ashore at Kiska, follow orders to proceed east until we meet the enemy. About five or six hours later we were over in Kiska Harbor in the Japanese camp. I called the Admiral. I say, there ain't nobody here. (Laughter.) They're all gone.

Janis Kozlowski: So they didn't ever fly over and notice that there were no people there.

Captain Bill Thies: Nah.

Janis Kozlowski: Didn't know until they hit the beach.

Captain Bill Thies: You heard that story. They all got out in a submarine. Took 5,000 on the submarine.

Janis Kozlowski: So I guess you long since stopped patrolling there and trying to soften them up, so they just went undetected.

Captain Bill Thies: Well they carried that softening up exercise for quite a while just before the invasion.

Janis Kozlowski: But they were just softening up the one lone dog that got left behind, huh? (Laughter.) [0:54:54.0] So did you spend much time on Kiska on the ground then?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, probably a week before I could get out.

Janis Kozlowski: That's about how much time we spent there last year (laughter).

Captain Bill Thies: Godforsaken island.

Janis Kozlowski: It's pretty chilly and windy there. Did you take any souvenirs home with you?

Captain Bill Thies: Hmm?

Janis Kozlowski: Did you take any souvenirs home with you?

Captain Bill Thies: No, I don't..... Well, sort of. I stole the .45 that they issued to me and the carbine (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Did you want me to turn that off and delete that part? (Laughter.) We won't send any marshals after you. Statue of limitations I think ran out. So you went on, after you left the Aleutians, you went down to – where did you end up there?

Captain Bill Thies: Whidbey Island.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh you went back to Whidbey.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, that's where I put my squadron together.

Janis Kozlowski: Uh-huh. The VPB-144?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: And then – then where did you head off to?

Captain Bill Thies: [0:56:09.9] Enewetak.

Janis Kozlowski: What did you do there? Were you part of a battle there? Or the aftermath?

Captain Bill Thies: We were flying patrols.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Captain Bill Thies: And bombing Wake – Wake Island.

Janis Kozlowski: Was that in the PV-1 and 2.

Captain Bill Thies: That was in PVs.

Janis Kozlowski: PVs.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: So you left your PBY back in Whidbey?

Captain Bill Thies: I don't know what ever happened to my PBYs. (Laughter.) I could care less. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: [0:56:49.8] You know we have a PBY in Anchorage at the Aviation History Museum. It's really only a shell of one. It was found on the Alaska Peninsula, but it's an impressive airplane, you know, due to its size and shape and, you know, what it did. It's – Alaskans really like it.

Captain Bill Thies: I think that was probably the one that a great big helicopter picked it up from someplace?

Janis Kozlowski: Dago Lake.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, yeah that's it.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. I don't know whose airplane that was, but, yeah it's a very prominent feature at the Anchorage Airport there. So, okay, then you went to Enewetak and then did – were you discharged after that?

Captain Bill Thies: [0:57:39.3] No, after Enewetak the war ended and we went out to Tinian.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Captain Bill Thies: That's where I abandoned the squadron. In fact, what we did, we started up – the end of the runway at Tinian went off of about a 300-foot cliff into the ocean and the orders were to start the engines up, get out of the cockpit and let the airplanes all go in the water. (Laughter.) One by one, 15 PV-2s went into the sea, then we went home.

Janis Kozlowski: And then they flew you out some other way or took you by ship probably, right?

Captain Bill Thies: I flew out somewhere or other. I don't remember how.

Janis Kozlowski: So, how did you feel about doing that, you know, dumping those airplanes over the side?

Captain Bill Thies: [0:58:37.4] Well, that airplane wasn't the best one in the world. I wasn't too unhappy to see them go. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Do you remember what the problems were with it?

Captain Bill Thies: In a high-speed diving turn, the skin would peel off the wings. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Well, that's a problem.

Captain Bill Thies: That's another story. When we were stationed at Enewetak we went down to bomb a Japanese-held island called Pohnpei. We were starting to make a run on a water tower, which I was ready to destroy to stop their water supply. As we got close to that, the water tower opened up with 40 mm right at us. I had to get the hell out of there. I made this real steep pass, going about 350 miles an hour. The skin on the left-hand wing just peeled off (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Geez.

Captain Bill Thies: We had to throw everything out of the airplane to get home (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: So seeing that airplane go over the side of the cliff didn't break your heart at all (laughter). **[1:00:12.9]** So did you spend a four-year – no, you were more than four years in the Navy.

Captain Bill Thies: I was.....

Janis Kozlowski: How many years did you spend in the Navy?

Captain Bill Thies: Twenty-two.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, you spent 22 in there. Oh, that's right, you went – what did you – what did you end up doing after World War II?

Captain Bill Thies: Went to work.

Janis Kozlowski: You went to work? **[1:00:31.0]** What kind of work did you do?

Captain Bill Thies: I ended up at a glass and glazing business with a friend of mine in Monterey, California.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Don Reed: That was in '58.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, in '58.

Don Reed: He retired around '58.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay. So what were you doing with the Navy after you – after World War II ended?

Captain Bill Thies: Come again?

Janis Kozlowski: What – what were you doing with the Navy after World War II ended?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh. I went to school in Rhode Island for training stupid reserve officers (laughter). Ex-reserve officers. We had to go through training to learn how to be a Naval Academy Graduate (laughter) so to speak.

Janis Kozlowski: So that must've been pretty boring after all you'd been through in World War II.

Captain Bill Thies: Well, it was something to do. After that, I went to the Pentagon and spent three years in Intelligence. Then I went with a squadron which carried atomic

weapons. Went to Albuquerque, New Mexico, for training in the atomic bomb. I think that was about the end of it. Oh, I went into – I did end up as an Executive Officer of a training base in Florida. Then I went to Anti-Submarine Defense Forces, Atlantic Fleet in Norfolk. That's where I retired.

Janet Clemens: Can we pause there?

Captain Bill Thies: Run out of tape?

Janis Kozlowski: You used up the tape, yeah. Are you tired out? Should we give you a break?

Captain Bill Thies: I'm fine.

Janis Kozlowski: I won't keep at you too long here.

Captain Bill Thies: No problem.

Janet Clemens: Janis, you put the tape in?

Captain Bill Thies: I'm going to grab my daughter out of the house. I've got to light up. Open the back door.

Nola Reed: Yeah, and then the smoke comes over here.

Janis Kozlowski: (Whispering regarding new tape.) All right, whenever you want to resume. **[1:04:12.9]** So I was curious, after all that flying you did in World War II, did you continue to fly?

Captain Bill Thies: You sure pick the good stories. (Laughter.) We came to Seattle and I decided I should have a private pilot's license. So I go to the Federal Aeronautics Administration and I had my log book. Oh, Bill, you don't have to take a flight examination. Your log book will take care of that. But, you do have to take a 50-question multiple choice examination. Okay. So I go in the room and sit down. Fifty questions. I get through and I hand it to the inspector. He said, Bill, you got two right out of the 50. (Laughter.) He said, I don't think you'd better fly until you learn the rules. Forget it (laughter). Military flying and private flying, you know, is entirely different. That's why I never got a license.

Janis Kozlowski: Obviously you knew how to fly (laughter).

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, I rented a little seaplane on Lake Union and took my wife in it.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, did you?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Did – did you miss it?

Captain Bill Thies: Not really.

Janis Kozlowski: You probably went on and had a family and kind of hard to keep – keep flying anyway. Oh, a couple of things I'd like to ask you about. [1:06:33.0] One was, I kind of wanted to hear about this – where this flight happened when you were in a Hellcat?

Captain Bill Thies: Whidbey Island.

Janis Kozlowski: That's where it was.

Captain Bill Thies: Friend of mine flew in with a Hellcat. I asked if I could take it out for a little spin. Sure, go ahead. So he said, Bill, you'd better read the handbook before you take it out. I said, they all fly the same. So I got up to 5000 feet. I told my wife I was going to give her a demonstration in aerobatics. So she was standing on the bank up at Whidbey Island outside of our house. I waved to her and I went up. I did loops and spins and rolls. Well, to get rid of some altitude I decided to put it into a spin, which gets you down real fast. I'm looking at the altimeter unwind, 4000, 3000, 2000, 1000. Well it's about time to pull out Bill. So I kick and pull and nothing happens. Just kept on spinning. I got up, undid the safety belt, got up and let the canopy come back. I was going to jump. I stood up and just then the airplane stopped its spin and came out by itself. I reached down, pulled the stick, and came out about ten feet above the water and I could see my wife waving. Later she says, honey, that was sure a good show (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Did you ever tell her about the terror in your heart when you were dropping? (Laughter.)

Captain Bill Thies: Well, I would have found that if I'd have read the handbook. It said don't put the Hellcat in a left-hand turn spin. It won't come out.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, if she'd only known, she probably would've been terrified the whole time you were gone, wondering what was happening with you. [1:09:14.5] Did I understand that you actually got qualified for carrier landings?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, that's sort of a stupid thing. We were – I was – I was executive officer of the student carrier training field and one night a whole bunch of pilots were all having a big party. They said, Bill, you tell these students how to do this and how to do that, but you never taught us yourself. Come on, no way. Aw, come on. So, okay. So they put me in a SNJ, a low weight model plane, to go out and make five landings on the carrier, which qualifies you. After the tenth – tenth attempt (laughter), the Captain calls me up and says, Bill, I'll give you one more chance (laughter). On the tenth landing I was able to catch a wire. That was my carrier training. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: That's not an easy thing to do, is it?

Captain Bill Thies: Huh?

Janis Kozlowski: That's obviously not an easy thing to do.

Captain Bill Thies: No, it isn't. I have a little card up there someplace. Carrier qualified. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Well, I won't – I don't want to keep you any longer. I've been having you talk for quite a long time, but I wondered if there were any other things that – any other memories about the Aleutians.

Captain Bill Thies: You've got a hell of a job. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: I do. I really do. Do you have any other memories of the Aleutians that you want to share with us today?

Captain Bill Thies: You've covered them all.

Janis Kozlowski: Although I know you – you said you never want to go back to the Aleutians again, were you happy you had an opportunity to be there and make a contribution?

Captain Bill Thies: Happy to be there? Would you?

Janis Kozlowski: No, I mean, happy that you were able to be part of that – that portion of World War II and that portion of history.

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, yeah. What else is there to die for? (Laughter.)

Don Reed: There's another experience he had on (background noise – coughing) Sitka Island.

Janis Kozlowski: On Sitka?

Don Reed: Yeah, where he tried to hike across the island. [1:11:36.7]

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Captain Bill Thies: Huh?

Don Reed: Is that in the Aleutians?

Janis Kozlowski: No, bit Sitka – I know where Sitka is. It was one of the bases there too. You were on Sitka?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, we were – we went up for advanced base operations at one time.

Janis Kozlowski: What – what happened there?

Captain Bill Thies: Boy, you're in for a good story (laughter). You've heard of Baranof Island?

Janis Kozlowski: Yes.

Captain Bill Thies: That's where Sitka is on. Nobody had ever crossed Baranof Island. All the parties that started out either were never heard from again or they turned back. So, one Memorial Day weekend, one of my copilots was a mountain climber. He said, Bill, you and Doc Jones and I are going to figure out a way to cross Baranof Island. So we went up and did an aerial survey. We saw a likely passage, which had what they call a saddle in it, which went down to Baranof Lake on the east side. That's where we're going to go. So we pull in to the access to the trail. To make a long story short, at the end of the first day we had just traveled to the base of the mountains. Muskeg, Devil's Claw, mosquitos, deer flies. Okay, so we camped there that night and started to climb the next morning. After about half the day we were about halfway up the mountain. We spent the night on a ledge of the mountain. The next day we start to climb and we get up to the top. To go down the other side was all glacier, ice. Jack the mountain climber said, Bill, we'll put you in the center and don't – whatever you do, don't ever lean back. Keep perpendicular to the ice. About halfway down the glacier I lost my nerve (laughter), my pack came off, Jack played out the line, saved my life, but my pack and the rifles just tumbled down the mountain. We get down to the bottom of the glacier and to make a long story short, the PBY was supposed to land over on Baranof Lake and pick us up in two days. A week later they were sending search parties out for us. There were two ways to make the trip. You either stand in the water and follow the stream – glacier stream, which froze your feet off, or hit the land, fight the Devil's Claw and alder wood with machetes. I think it was probably close to a week. We saw the PBY still looking for us. Doc Jones, the other guy, and I laid down to die. We had it. Our arms and legs were swollen up with bites. Jack, the mountain climber, went down to the edge of the lake where he saw the PBY land. He flashed them with a mirror. They came ashore, picked him up, sent stretchers for the other guy and me, and we spent a week in the hospital.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh no. Oh wow.

Captain Bill Thies: Anyway, it was written up in the Sitka Sentinel as the first party to ever cross Baranof Island. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Well, at least you can – you got – you are in the annals of history there. How much food did you take with you on that hike? Certainly not enough, right?

Captain Bill Thies: There wasn't enough, because I lost most of it when I fell.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did that count as leave?

Captain Bill Thies: Hmm?

Janis Kozlowski: Did that count as leave?

Captain Bill Thies: I guess. (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Probably would've traded that out, wouldn't you?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, we were so late. I was absent over leave (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Are there any other stories you think we missed? I'm sure there are lots of them really.

Janet Clemens: [1:17:06.8] What did you do for adventure after you left the service?

Captain Bill Thies: Hmm?

Janet Clemens: What did you do for adventure? You had so many of them. It seems like that was a part of your life. Or were you happy to have things quiet for you?

Captain Bill Thies: Things are pretty dull around here now. (Laughter.) I keep busy just foolin' with this thing. I built that computer.

Janet Clemens: Really? Wow! That's impressive. Well, your nickname in the service must've been Lucky. It couldn't have been anything else.

Captain Bill Thies: Nothing else.

Nora Reed: Wild Bill.

Janet Clemens: Wild Bill.

Don Reed: He did put together – learn how to put together an atomic bomb.

Janis Kozlowski: Really?

Don Reed: Yeah. By memory I think. They had to learn how to do it.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow.

Don Reed: When he was in New Mexico on assignment.

Janis Kozlowski: [1:18:04.0] So you learned to put together an atomic bomb as part of.....

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, that was part of my training, down in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I have – in fact, that lower left picture there, that's the certificate for qualifying as a bomb commander.

Janis Kozlowski: The special weapons project?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, mm-hmm. We were supposed to learn how to take the thing apart and put it together in case it got hit by anti-aircraft fire or something like that.

Janis Kozlowski: We should go look at that. Are those some of your licenses up there above that?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: And is that your PBY over on the right?

Captain Bill Thies: Well, that's a PBY, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: That's one of them. Is that you as a little boy? Or who's that?

Captain Bill Thies: That's my son.

Janis Kozlowski: That's your son.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, I lost him when he was 6 years old.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, really.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: He looks a lot like you.

Nola Reed: He was smart too.

Janis Kozlowski: Really? What happened to him?

Captain Bill Thies: Some sort of a brain tumor.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Captain Bill Thies: They never actually found out what it was.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, that's a shame. Cute little guy. [1:19:37.5] So, it looks like fishing became one of your passions later on.

Captain Bill Thies: Well, just don't bring that up. After I first came out here I did a lot of fishing. Four or five trip to Yakutat, out the Olympic Peninsula, rivers. I gave all my gear away. I can't get around on the rivers anymore (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Really?

Captain Bill Thies: I can't get in and out of the boats (laughter).

Janis Kozlowski: Oh. It looks like you weren't – it wasn't too long ago you were out fishing?

Captain Bill Thies: Hmm?

Janis Kozlowski: It looks like you weren't – it wasn't too long ago you were out fishing?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, that's probably back four or five years.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Captain Bill Thies: That's on the Cowlitz River down in Southern Washington.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay. [1:20:29.5] Have you – have they enlisted you to give presentations now and again, other than your History Channel contribution? Have you done other kinds of presentations?

Captain Bill Thies: Oh, a few of them around Gig Harbor here.

Janis Kozlowski: Uh-huh. Yeah, I would think you'd be a real celebrity around here, be in big demand. If you were in Alaska they'd have you booked up every day.

Captain Bill Thies: [1:20:53.9] One of the things that happened while I was stationed in Seattle before the squadron went north, I was flying over the Tacoma Narrows Bridge one day and I had the radio on just listening to the news. All of the sudden it says news bulletin, Tacoma Narrows Bridge is falling down. I bent over and I watched the thing fall in the water.

Janis Kozlowski: That was that harmonic motion.....

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, yeah.

Janis Kozlowski:that tore it up.

Captain Bill Thies: Gallopin' Gertie. I watched that.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow. When was that?

Don Reed: 1940.

Janis Kozlowski: Was it that long ago? I re – the only reason I knew about it was physics classes. You know, they went over it.

Don Reed: That was something.

Janis Kozlowski: Wow. Yeah, she told me to keep my speed up going over it. She was afraid we'd have trouble here (laughter).

Janet Clemens: Don't need to recreate some history.

Captain Bill Thies: That new bridge you came across.....

Don Reed: Well, you will go across it when you go back.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.

Don Reed: The new one.

Janis Kozlowski: The new span.

Don Reed: The old one you came on was 1950. Then the new one is 2007.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay.

Captain Bill Thies: That new bridge is the greatest thing that ever happened to this town.

Janis Kozlowski: Really? Because then you had two-way traffic both ways, more lanes.

Captain Bill Thies: It used to be backed up for hours.

Don Reed: Or if there was an accident it would shut down for an hour.

Janis Kozlowski: [1:22:29.3] Is there – is there anything else you can think of that I forgot to ask you?

Captain Bill Thies: Boy you sure do a good job (laughter). I can't think of a thing.

Janis Kozlowski: I'm letting you off the hook because I probably have about 80 more questions, but I'll let you go. I really appreciate you spending the time with – with us today.

Captain Bill Thies: I'm more interested – are in any pictures here at all that you might be interested in. If so, holler. Anything there?

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, yeah. This is a nice one. I – both of those are nice pictures.

Captain Bill Thies: Do you want them?

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah.

Captain Bill Thies: You got a few minutes?

Janis Kozlowski: Sure. This is – this is Bill Thies day. We've got nothing but time.

Janet Clemens: I have a flash drive, Janis.....

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, you do?

Janet Clemens: Yeah. If it's okay to put copies on it then that would be the easiest way to do it.

Janis Kozlowski: Would that be okay?

Janet Clemens: Make a copy – to put a copy on?

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, if we could get him up to Alaska we'd have an auditorium packed to hear him.

Don Reed: Was it the airplane organization – They flew him down to Portland and he spoke.

Janis Kozlowski: Where was that? In Portland, did you say?

Don Reed: Yeah, they picked him up and flew him down there.

Nola Reed: To speak. That was several years ago.

Don Reed: Had him there at the airport and flew him down there. That was – he also spoke at the Rotary Club.

Nola Reed: He spoke at the high school here – or no, middle school.

Don Reed: A few school visits down. Remember when they invited them out and they had your dad.....

Nola Reed: Oh, well that was – no that was.....

Don Reed: Yeah, that was Christian Men's Club.

Nola Reed: Yeah, so he's done a lot.

Don Reed: There were a couple of years where he's doing a lot. '99?

Janis Kozlowski: Would it just be easier just to put a copy on here? On a flash drive? To put a copy on? Thumb drive?

Captain Bill Thies: What do you want to do?

Janis Kozlowski: To put a copy of the photo on the – on the thumb drive.

Janet Clemens: That would save printing paper. He wouldn't have to print it.

Don Reed: [1:25:38.0] In – we have a weekly newspaper here called The Gateway. Isn't it still The Gateway? I think it's still The Gateway. Anyway, they had a couple of articles, full-feature articles of him.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, really? I can check that.

Don Reed: You might check with them. I think they have lengthy piece and.....

Janis Kozlowski: Are there – they have offices here in Gig Harbor?

Don Reed: Yeah, they have offices over by Kimball Drive. If you go back up Pioneer you could turn – the last street before you get to the freeway is Kimball Drive. Not too far from Burger King. Across the street from it I guess.

Nola Reed: They probably don't know where any of that is.

Don Reed: Yeah, I know.

Captain Bill Thies: Which one would this be?

Janis Kozlowski: We do have an iPhone though, so we can..... (Laughter.)

Don Reed: But it's the Peninsula Gateway. Every Wednesday they come out with a paper.

Captain Bill Thies: This is the thumb drive, but I don't understand these.

Janet Clemens: Oh, those are what's on the thumb drive.

Captain Bill Thies: Hmm?

Janet Clemens: Those are what's on the thumb drive already.

Janis Kozlowski: Maybe we'll stop by there to see. We can buy a copy.

Captain Bill Thies: Oh.

Janet Clemens: So, you don't have to do anything with those of course.

Captain Bill Thies: Well, maybe it didn't come through.

Don Reed: I think it was around '99 when they had.....

Janet Clemens: Did you already copy?

Captain Bill Thies: I thought I did. (Multiple background conversations.) Maybe I didn't. There it is. So that's all you need, huh?

Janet Clemens: I don't know. You have any more pictures? (Laughter.)

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, that's really nice.

Captain Bill Thies: Okay?

Janis Kozlowski: Yep, excellent. Thank you.

Don Reed: I tried to send those photos yesterday of Bob Larson and him. All kinds of stuff at Boeing, and he was in an interview that was posted on the History Channel. I don't know if it is anymore, but he's since died. He looked healthy as a horse to me. It's amazing when people die or don't die.

Janis Kozlowski: He did in the videos, yeah, that I saw where the two of them were together.

Don Reed: Yeah, that was funny. I was there. That was 2005 at the airport hangar. I forget what county it was.

Captain Bill Thies: [1:28:16.7] Is there anything here you want?

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, so where did these pictures come from?

Captain Bill Thies: I don't know.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, those are great.

Captain Bill Thies: That's Umnak.

Janis Kozlowski: That's Umnak?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Landing in the mud, huh?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: There wasn't even – it doesn't even look like there was any Marston mat there.

Captain Bill Thies: Well, there was a Marston mat there.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, there was.

Captain Bill Thies: Yes, it's all covered with mud.

Janis Kozlowski: Spraying up between..... Oh, man. Can we get copies of these too?

Captain Bill Thies: Sure, if you got time.

Janis Kozlowski: That – that's a beautiful picture.

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah. There's my crew.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, that's – oh, that's a great picture.

Captain Bill Thies: Larson isn't in there.

Janis Kozlowski: So that was pre Larson, huh?

Captain Bill Thies: That's the guy that got sick and found the Zero.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, um, Raptis?

Captain Bill Thies: George Raptis, yeah. This is Harvey, the guy that was always drunk.

Janis Kozlowski: This guy here?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, came up with a .45..... That's him.

Janis Kozlowski: So, he's in the lower middle. Okay. Can you stick this back in there in one of those ports?

Captain Bill Thies: Which one of these do you want?

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. I want to write myself a note about the guys in that one photo. So, let's see. (Phone conversation in the background.)

Captain Bill Thies: You want to go back or.....

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Captain Bill Thies: You want a copy of that?

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I would love to have a copy of that. So there's – let's see there's you and then an unknown guy, and then – oh, thank you. Oh these come out really nice. Now, this one's Raptis, right?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Hold on. Let me catch up with you. Then, tell me this fella's name again.

Captain Bill Thies: Harvey.

Janis Kozlowski: Harvey.

Captain Bill Thies: I don't remember the names of the other ones.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. Is this Gehres?

Captain Bill Thies: That's Gehres, yep.

Janis Kozlowski: Which commendation were you getting at that point?

Captain Bill Thies: Navy Cross.

Janis Kozlowski: Navy Cross, okay. Let me see here.

Captain Bill Thies: Nola?

Nola Reed: Oh, my dad wants me. Just a minute.

Don Reed: She's here.

Nola Reed: Yeah, I'm right here dad.

Captain Bill Thies: Could you get me a hot cup of coffee, please.

Nola Reed: Mm-hmm.

Janis Kozlowski: Were you able to – were you able to put that one on the drive?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah, she has it on the thumb drive.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, okay. This is – I think this is hers right here. Can I just pull it out?

Captain Bill Thies: Not yet.

Janis Kozlowski: Not yet, okay.

Captain Bill Thies: We'll have to do it down here.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay.

Captain Bill Thies: Now you can take it out.

Janis Kozlowski: Okay. [1:32:38.8] So you're on email?

Captain Bill Thies: Yeah.

Janis Kozlowski: Can I – can we get hooked up on email?

End Interview at 1:32:45.9