

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#412

JESSE DURWARD GAINES

17th AIR BASE SQUADRON, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 6, 2001

BY JERRY GREENE AND DAVID JARVIS

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

NOVEMBER 7, 2002

USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Jerry Greene (JG): The following oral history interview was conducted by Jerry Greene for the National Park Service and Chief Petty Officer Dave Jarvis, for the Naval Historical Center, for the USS *Arizona* Memorial at Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, on December 6, 2001 at 2:30 p.m. The person being interviewed is Jesse D. Gaines. Jesse Gaines was a specialist second class at the 17th, with the 17th Air Base Squadron on December 7, 1941. For the record, please state your full name, place of birth and birth date.

Jesse Durward Gaines (JDG): Jesse Durward Gaines, Coldwater, Mississippi, 10-7-17 [October 7, 1917].

JG: What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

JDG: Coldwater, Mississippi.

JG: What were your parents' names?

JDG: Jesse Gaines, Ethel Lee Gaines.

JG: How many brothers and sisters did or do you have?

JDG: I had three brothers and one sister.

JG: Where did you go to high school?

JDG: Green Leaf High School.

JG: Where did you enlist?

JDG: Memphis, Tennessee.

JG: And why did you enlist?

JDG: Well, things wasn't too good after the depression. I had finished high school in 1936 and I worked in a cotton gin and a sawmill and drove a truck and I said, "This won't get it."

So one of my buddies said, "Let's join the service," so we went to Memphis.

Went into the post office and joined up! And the recruiter says, “You want to go home?”

I said, “No, sir. I come to join.”

So they give me money, put me on a train to Anderson, Alabama.

JG: Do you have anything else to say about your military background before coming to Hawaii, training-wise?

JDG: I had none.

JG: What were the circumstances that brought you to Hawaii when you came here?

JDG: I had an uncle that was in Hawaii and I wanted to come over and see him.

As I got to California and Angel Island, he was on his way back so I didn't get to see him in Hawaii.

JG: But you came over at that time?

JDG: Yeah.

JG: And what was the date? Do you remember?

JDG: I was in, I left California in January 2 or 3, or something like that, in 1940.

JG: Where were you assigned in the days before the attack at Pearl Harbor?

JDG: You mean my duty?

JG: Yes.

JDG: I had several duties. I was a meat cutter, that was on my record. And then I didn't like the meat cutting so they trained me to be a cook. I joined the army air corps to be an airplane mechanic, but it took me three years to get to that stage.

JG: Where were you on December 7, 1941?

JDG: I was east of the operation building at Hickam Field, about 100 yards east on some railroad tracks there. My buddy and I were there to see the B-17s come in from the States.

JG: Can you tell us about your day that day in some detail? What you were doing and what you saw on December 7.

JDG: Well, we went out there to see the airplanes come in and we were standing there chatting and I heard some airplanes roaring. So we looked up and we saw a V formation of about fifty or sixty airplanes coming in from the, I guess you _____ right, which might have been west. And I made a remark to my friend, I said, "Hmm, the navy's out there, going to escort us in like that?"

And he laughed and says, "Yeah."

So once they peeled off, started peeling off, I said, “Oh, we’re going to have a show.”

Well, they came on down. I said, “Uh-oh, he dropped a wheel!”

And my buddy said, “That ain’t no wheel,” boom!

And that’s when it started.

JG: What else did you see?

JDG: Well, when they started dropping, the airplanes, I looked around and they were hitting Pearl Harbor. And we started running and then they started hitting Hickam there. And we was just like rabbits. We’re just running here and yonder. Look up, look down, scared as hell, like anybody else would be. Anybody tell me they’re not scared in that, then they’re full of bull.

And I said, “Well, I must go to my squadron to get me a gun.”

I was trained on a pistol, forty-five automatic. So as we were crossing the parade ground, they were coming over, dropping bombs. And you could see 'em come out of the airplane. Well, we'd run this way and we'd run that way. Some guy said, "Fall down by the curb."

Well, we'd fall down by the curb and it'd slack up for a few minutes and then we'd get up, start across the parade ground. As we crossed the parade ground, somebody had come out and set up a machine gun over close to the barracks. So we went inside to my supply room. I said, "I'd like to check out my pistol."

"We don't have 'em. They locked up down at the ammunition dump."

And I said, "Hmm." In my mind, I said, well, I'm going to the mess hall and get me some sandwiches and I'm headed for the mountains! I don't have nothing to fight with, I'm going to run!

So as I was fixing to go up the steps in the mess hall about three steps up, the bomb hit, hit the mess hall. And when I came to, I was covered up in all the

cinderblocks and it was smoke and you could smell—I thought I was gassed. It was phosphorous, I guess. So I lay there and I tried to twist a little bit and found I could make a little movement. And then I finally got on up to look around and I could see a little light back there. So I started wiggling, I crawled and eventually I crawled myself out of the building. And got outside the building, I found one of my buddies. He come out and he didn't have a stitch of clothes on! He had—sucked his clothes off. Then another one of my buddies come out. So we grabbed the one that didn't have any clothes, because there's blood all over his back and of course his blood in my face running down. I couldn't see because I had cinders or shrapnel in my eyes.

We proceeded to go to the hospital, which was a couple of blocks over. As we crossed the street, here come the Japs down strafing. And he was treetop level and you could see him setting right in the thing. Bap-bap-bap-bap. See his goggles, you know. But luckily we didn't get hit. So we proceeded towards the hospital.

As we neared the hospital, the flagpole was standing up out there at Hickam and it was shot and shredded. I stood there and saluted that flag and cried like a baby. And then I proceeded on, we all went into the hospital. As we got inside the hospital, they had 'em lined up inside with wounds and legs and blood. I said, "I'm in pretty good shape. I'm going to get out of here."

So I exit out of there and went to the officers' quarters behind the hospital and found me a fishpond. And I was setting down trying to clean out my eyes, because every time I winked my eyes, they were cut. It was something sticking in there and it was shrapnel and cinderblocks.

So this officer comes up and says, "Son, what are you doing here?"

I said, "I'm trying to clean my eyes."

He said, "Come on, you're going to the hospital."

So it was a truck came by, he put me in there and they went and picked up two or three more guys. And so we headed on to Tripler General Hospital.

And at the Tripler General Hospital, that night, oh, about six or seven o'clock they had an air raid. And of course, they comes running through there and they said, "Everybody get under the bed! Get under the bed!"

And not me. I got caught in one building. I'm not going to _____. So I went outside. And what it was, it was the Marines or what have you, shooting anti-aircraft and they were coming and dropping down because the fuse was too long or something like that. And eventually it was over and I got back in the hospital. And I stayed in the hospital some three weeks.

They come by and they said, "You're in pretty good shape. We'll take care of the worst ones."

So I lay there four or five days before they ever got me to do any prepare, you know. So they had to, took some while to get my eyes. They claim that they had to use a magnet to pull out some of the shrapnel out of my eyes.

And then I went on back to Hickam Field then and went to duty and they had—since the mess hall had been bombed, they had opened up another one. I went down there and they says, “You’re going to be mess sergeant.”

I said, “What? Mess sergeant?”

So they said, “You’ve got three or four cooks and you got two Chinese. You run this.”

I took over and fed 200 men. (Coughs)

JG: Now you said you were in the hospital for three weeks. How did your family find out about what had happened to you?

JDG: (Coughs) They sent a telegram to my family that I was missing in action.

And then while I was in the hospital, I sent a letter to my family with a Red Cross letter that I was okay. Now they only told them very little, you know. And about a month ago my niece came to my house from Mississippi and

she brought me the letter that I had written my mother. She had found it in the house somewhere. Red Cross letter that I sent.

Then my parents, about a couple of months from that, I had sent a letter home but they had wanted to collect, put in for the insurance, 'cause I was missing, you know. And they said, "No, we know where he's at," and it took a while for them to clear that up.

(Coughs) Then again when they had the Battle of Midway, they got another telegram that I was missing. So things was screwed up a little bit.

JG: What did you do at Midway?

JDG: I didn't go to Midway. I don't know how it happened. I lost my squadron commander in Midway, but I didn't go.

JG: Can you tell us something about the activities you were involved in after the attack, after the three weeks in the hospital?

JDG: Yeah, I came back to Hickam Field and opened this mess hall up and I become a mess sergeant.

JG: Stayed there?

JDG: Fed the troops.

JG: Jesse, can you tell us something about your subsequent career, until you got out, very briefly.

JDG: Well, about six months after that I became with ulcers, I had a hemorrhage and they put me back in Tripler General and I stayed there about three months and they shipped me back to the States to LED-VER General Hospital. Tripler General—oh, I'm getting 'em missed up. Anyhow, I came back there and they wanted to discharge me. I said, "I don't want to be discharged."

(Coughs) Excuse me. So they said, "We'll go send you back to duty."

So they sent me back to duty and I wound up at Paine Field, Washington. I asked them, I told them I wanted to go to school so they sent me to school in Amarillo, Texas on B-17 aircraft. I spent six months there in school and came back to Paine Field about a month. I went to school on B-17s but they made me work on P-38s, fighter aircraft, what I enjoy. And then they got orders to send me to Europe and I went to Europe in October of '43.

(Coughs)

I was in the 8th Air Force 'til the war was over. I was, my job was riding inspector with the 8th Air Force to go around and check airplanes, see whether they were repairable or we should turn 'em over to _____ . And .the war was over in '45 then they sent me back to the States and put me in the squadron to go send me into the Pacific Command again. And while I was home, war was over.

And then I re-enlisted and for six years and I went to Oklahoma City. From there to Garden City, Kansas. From there to Albuquerque, New Mexico and I was in the Atomic Energy Commission. We were flying for six years.

And we flew the mock A-bombs for ballistics 'til 1952. Then they sent me

to KEE-SLER Field and School in order to go to Europe and open up the depots. They had people over at the depots and didn't know how to run 'em. So I got assigned to England again, to Burntwood, England. I went over there and we opened a production line to repair the aircraft for the Berlin Airlift. I stayed there three years. I had my family over there. I stayed there three years and came back to Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. Stayed there six years and I retired. I was _____ chief of seamaster sergeant and chief master sergeant. I had eighty-two airplanes, 200 airmen. And in my whole career I have never had an airplane lost for maintenance. I have had airplanes lost for pilot error or material deficient. I have got recommendations to secure that. I've got an army recommendation, an air force recommendation and I have a Purple Heart.

JG: And you retired in 1962?

JDG: Nineteen-sixty-two, September.

JG: Chief, do you have anything to ask?

David Jarvis (DJ): Oh, yes sir. When you had your eye injury on December 7, did you have to wear bandages over your eyes? Was that part of the treatment?

JDG: Yeah.

DJ: So for a period of time, you weren't even able to see.

JDG: That's correct.

DJ: How long was that period?

JDG: Oh, ten days I guess. Something like that. Not sure. I only have one eye now but it wasn't 'cause of that. It was cataract surgery and I went to an eye doctor once to Memphis and I told him about my having shrapnel. He took a picture and found the shrapnel in my right eye.

JG: Well, thank you Jesse for your contribution today. I really appreciate you're coming up and giving us your time. Appreciate it very much.

JDG: Well, I hope I've done something that's good for you.

JG: You sure have. Thanks a lot.

DJ: I have one...

JDG: Okay.

DJ: ...question, just a few seconds. When you started out on the (inaudible) with your buddy? How did he, did he survive the war?

JDG: Yeah, he survived.

DJ: Okay, good.

JDG: And then he became a gunner and flew down in the Pacific. And he survived that and came back to Memphis and he became an alcoholic. Yeah, too bad. Too bad, he was a fine fellow.

DJ: You're from Mississippi, so...

JDG: I grew up on a cotton farm in the Depression days.

DJ: Did you ever see him after the war?

JDG: Yes. Yeah. Yup. We were, we knew what hard times were and ninety percent of the people here today grew up in the depression, these survivors. Most of 'em were farm boys. We were hard workers. We wasn't scared of work. A lot different today.

DJ: That's all. (Inaudible)

JG: Thanks a lot.

JDG: Thank you!

END OF INTERVIEW