

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

**#376**

**WILLIAM S. COPE**

**HICKAM FIELD, SURVIVOR**

**INTERVIEWED ON**

**DECEMBER 1, 2001**

**BY JERRY GREENE &**

**ROBERT "BOB" P. CHENOWETH**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**Jerry Greene (JG):** The following oral history was conducted by Jerry Greene [and Robert “Bob” P. Chenoweth] for the National Park Service, USS Arizona Memorial at the Hilton Hawaiian Village, Tapa Tower, room 329, on December 1, 200[1] at 4:30 p.m. The person being interviewed is William S. Cope, who was a second lieutenant, 36<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, at Hickam Field on December 7, 1941. For the record, would you please state your full name, place of birth and birth date?

**William Cope (WC):** William S. Cope, Salem, Ohio, September 4, 1913.

JG: What did you consider your hometown to be in 1941?

WC: The same little old Ohio town, about 35,000 people. The same lots were in the street and hadn’t changed a whole lot but I still go back every two years for Cope reunion.

JG: What were your parents’ names?

WC: Joseph and Delpha. I was one of ten children.

JG: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

WC: I had five brothers and four sisters.

JG: Where did you go to high school?

WC: Salem High School, Salem, Ohio.

JG: Where and why did you enlist or go into the service?

WC: Well, I went onto college after—you had to have a college degree before you could join the flying cadets in 1940. I just graduated from college in ’38 and still depression. And I had a horrible job with the state of Ohio—it was uninteresting and not much pay. And a flyer came through, it said, “Join the [Army] Air [Corps].”

Well, I wasn't sure what an airplane was but it sure sounded better than what I was doing. Triple the money and glamour and travel and all that. And I thought I could do it.

JG: And that was—what year was that?

WC: Nineteen forty.

JG: Forty.

WC: September of 1940.

JG: Where did you receive your training?

WC: It was in the Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, primary and the final training in Montgomery, Alabama. Maxwell [*Field*].

JG: Any particulars of the training experience that you can recount for us?

WC: No. I had trouble doing flying formation—I don't know why, but I didn't like it and they said I was not very good. I think that's the reason I was assigned to bombers after flying school. But no, it was kind of routine and nice bunch of people. At that time about fifty percent of the classes were washing out. They couldn't do the military way, the way they wanted and you had to be careful and do it the way they wanted or they would just wash you out. But I had enough smarts and flying sense to look ahead and think ahead and know what I was supposed to do, and so I was ready for it.

JG: What were some of the other types of aircraft that you trained in?

WC: I was a Stearman [*biplane*]. Well, later, after flying school you mean? Well, over in—my first assignment was Hickam Field in Hawaii and they had B-18s and some B-17s there, but being a new pilot, I was training in the B-18s. It was an old twin engine [*Douglas bomber*]. It was about like a Model T Ford compared to the Model A at that time and compared to the B-17. But you could train in it. You could put the bombsight in and go out and drop markers in the ocean and drop practice bombs and it was good, easy to fly and good to train in.

So I have one incident if you would like to hear about it, interesting—well, Ruth probably told about it. I landed one in the ocean and it was off Bellows Field. We were flying search missions. This is right after Pearl Harbor and they tied, wired some of ‘em together and were scout out on reconnaissance. I hoped that I didn’t find anything, 140 miles an hour and no guns and no maneuverability. I’d have been a sitting duck. But so we were flying out seven or eight-hour missions on search and took off from Bellows Field. One motor quit and the other didn’t work very well, so I just pulled back and stalled it in the ocean, offshore. Floated good and in fact they brought it back up to the dismay of other pilots and they were flying it again. And I guess Ruth told—the navy ship-to-shore little boat came out and loaded us up and then they got stuck on a reef. And all of them, about six of the navy crew, all except the captain, got seasick. And I had about six crewmen on my plane, and they all got seasick also. I didn’t because the plane sitting there, wobbling.

And then our flight surgeon came out from shore to see if he could, if any of us were hurt, and he got seasick. So they finally got another boat out and took us in. In the meantime, my wife, Ruth, of sixty years, was in the Women’s Air Raid Defense [*WARD*] up at Fort Shafter, with radar monitoring all the airplanes around the island. And when I got in, I called and said, “Hey, I landed in the ocean!”

She said, “I know. I plotted you in.”

JG: Bill, what were some of the reasons that you were assigned to Hawaii and Hickam Field? And when did you arrive here?

WC: Well, I came in June of ’41. I haven’t the foggiest idea why, why I went to bombers and some others went to fighters, like [*Second Lieutenant Philip M.*] Rasmussen, with the fighters at Wheeler [*Field*]. I don’t know. But I was just happy to be here.

JG: You came directly from Alabama...

WC: Yes.

JG: ...and your advanced training?

WC: Yes.

JG: What types of operations and work performance did you conduct at Hickam prior to December 7?

WC: Well, we would go up and fly in the morning. I had an instructor pilot, a lieutenant, one of the older pilots. And what they did was, with the new pilots that came in, they'd go out and fly instruments and drop some bombs and routine missions. Maybe cut an engine and fly a little bit on one, some things like that. And we would fly in the morning and hit the beach in the afternoon. It was very pleasant. Easy, nice plane to fly and from that then, we went into the B-17s, which I could tell you a little about, if you want to hear.

Well, when the Battle of Midway was coming up, I didn't know about it. It was a real top secret that they brought in—but they knew, of course, back then, Washington, and they sent a number of B-17s over there to go down and participate in the battle for Midway. And prior to—well, prior, well, at this time, you had to have quite a few hours as a co-pilot in a B-17 before you could become a pilot, but this was emergency and I—and so they got me with an instructor pilot in the driver's seat and said, "Take off and land," which I did successfully.

Then he says, "Here, you got a B-17 crew. You're going to Midway."

That's how emergency, things you had to do. So I couldn't tell Ruth, my wife, but I said, "I'm going to be gone for a couple of days, but I can't tell you where I'm going."

And she being up there plotting us out, she knew where we were going, but she couldn't tell me she knew where I was going. So it was quite a funny thing. So you want me to go into Midway or...?

JG: Back up a little bit to June. You got here in June of '41, I believe you said, and I was wondering if you had any sense during the weeks leading up to

December 7, what the general mood was in terms of the possibility of an attack or did you even contemplate such things and the men around you?

WC: No. No, we really didn't. We knew there were arguments going on with the Japanese. We weren't happy with their moves on down in the Pacific, off the Asia coast. But that's as we were worried about it. We could whup them. We wouldn't at least worry about it. Being down where I was, in the lower ranks, we didn't hear much so I really didn't know, didn't think about it or worry about it or think that we were planning to go to battle with them. That's for sure.

JG: On December 7, can you give us an account of how the day started for you and what was going on at Hickam and as the attack developed, what was your perception of all that?

WC: Well, let me go back one day. On December 6, I was officer of the guard and my duty was that night to inspect the flight line before midnight and after midnight, to see if all the planes were lined up, wingtip to wingtip, and check the guards. They were worried about sabotage, when of course they should have been dispersed. So we never did have any sabotage at Hawaii, so that's my dubious honor. And I recall coming—well, my wife and I, Sunday morning, we were still in bed, reading the paper and I heard this loud noise down at Pearl Harbor. And I said to my wife, "The navy is sure practicing in close today," 'cause generally you can hear 'em when they're out offshore practicing shooting the targets.

And then I looked out the window, you could see all the smoke and hear all the noise and saw the *Arizona* go up and go down. We could see the harbor from our second story on our quarters. So I don't know what's happening. In the meantime, they're shooting up all the planes on the flight line at Hickam, but we don't have a window looking over there, so I'm getting dressed and Ruth told you the necktie story. (Chuckles)

So I go over to the flight line but they're all shot up. Oh, and as I get to the flight line, then there's a bunch of the Japanese light bombers coming. They're about 10,000 feet making a high-level drop. They had hit the hangars and what was left of the planes on the line. That was the end of it then, so nothing to do but sit around. We don't have any planes, guns,

bombs or you couldn't get, couldn't even find who had the key to the armory so we could get a gun out and shoot. Weren't prepared for any sort of an attack whatsoever. No foxholes, no nothing. We're air force. We don't protect property.

JG: Where did you find cover during that day?

WC: Well, they weren't hitting quarters. They were after ships and planes. This is what they were after and that's what they were shooting. They didn't go downtown. They didn't hit any of the quarters deliberately. They were after the ships and the planes. So they did—one bomb hit a barracks at Hickam and killed a few of the airmen, maybe about thirty. So it wasn't anything to hide from, just stand out and watch.

JG: Do you recall any strafing activities going on around you?

WC: No. They had already done all the strafing before I got to the flight line. The only thing there was burning planes.

JG: At the, towards the end of the day and after the attack had subsided, what were you doing and what were you involved in at that time?

WC: Nothing. I didn't have anything to get involved with. We never had any plans of any sort. I sent my wife into town because I thought she'd be safer there than on a military station. And I didn't worry about an attack because if they were going to attack, there'd have been an awful lot more ships there, supply ships, refueling ships and landing ships with troops and things, so I never did worry about landing as many others did. I think they might have spotted that, the ocean being covered with ships. Our great intelligence might have been able to spot that or somebody could have.

JG: Was there any sense of what the Japanese were going to do? Any rumors about that floated around among the officers or men that you recall?

WC: No, not really. Just didn't know enough to have any idea of what might be going on. Just surprised at the whole thing. But I don't know. I never was really worried about getting into combat with them or something. I knew we were at war and we're going to start the battle.

JG: Subsequent to December 7, say the day after, one or two days immediately following, what do you recall of activities around Pearl Harbor at that time and what were you doing?

WC: Well, of course we could see what's going on down there and all of the smoke and we didn't get involved in any way with the navy. And the only thing I knew about is [*Second Lieutenant Philip M.*] Rasmussen was one of the pilots that got up and called and said that he got one and so that's all I knew up there. Of course he said they were all shot up too. And nothing that they could do, so just wait and see what happens. There weren't any plans at the time, as everybody knows from the top on down. They're trying to get some of the ships back in operation. But we can't do anything. We don't have anything to do anything with. The nearest target was Japan so no way we can get over there.

JG: Do you recall going down to the harbor and looking at the destruction within a few days of the seventh?

WC: No, I actually didn't. I didn't see any reason to and so we could—of course we could see everything from our quarters and could imagine what was going on. I probably did later, maybe a month later, go down and take a look. All you could do is shake your head and feel sorry for all the people.

JG: Bill, in the weeks and months that followed, what were you up to here?

WC: Well, flying reconnaissance missions and patched up B-18s. Some of these B-18s were in the hangar and they didn't get completely destroyed. And so they just kind of tied 'em together. Maybe one engine wouldn't have any instruments, but you'd coordinate it with the other engine so you could fly out there and hope you got back. That's about all we did. We didn't—well, oh then we started to flying the B-17s a little bit, as they came in. I had a few, couple flights, maybe just as an observer before I actually flew one. It was a very easy airplane to fly. I don't know whether I told you the story about on down the Pacific, at Guadal—well, you don't want me to go into Guadalcanal or Midway or Guam.

JG: Talk about anything that you'd like at this point, yes.

WC: Well, this Guadalcanal, of course, that was our first offensive move in June of '42. And the reason for it was we knew that they had built an airstrip on Guadalcanal and we know that they're going on down there. They want to get Fiji and Tahiti and eventually they want to get Australia, which they were capable of doing. Because Australia had a very small military force of any sort. So we got a little cocky after Midway and so that was our first offensive move, was Guadalcanal. We went up on—and of course the Japanese were quite surprised. The Marines went up and got into our end of Guadalcanal and got the airstrip. And so the battle started there. It was about nine months, sitting there. They had half, we had half. And our Marines later were replaced by army, but they were all dug in along there and every time the enemy would charge, why they were able to stop them. But the battle went on there, air and sea.

Their fleet was quite a bit stronger than ours at this time. And they would come down and supply their end of the island and we would supply our end. And they were very good at night fighting. They'd use destroyers. They probably sunk fifteen to twenty of our carriers, our Allied cruisers there. Come down at night and zoom around and torpedo us. And the big, old cruisers sitting there and can't see anything. Didn't have radar and so they were just sinking 'em like crazy.

And I was in three different battles out there. Midway was the fourth one, where we lost a carrier. I was flying reconnaissance for the navy mostly, because they didn't. The PBYS couldn't, weren't as capable as the B-17s for going out and trying to find the enemy. And I tried to find the enemy fleet to warn our fleet whether they wanted to attack or run. And we'd go out. I'd fly nine-hour missions, but every other day. Sometimes two days in a row, on a search mission. I'm covering a certain territory for the navy. This is for the navy, to know where the enemy was and I wasn't so worried as much about the enemy shooting. They attacked us a few times, but they were kind of afraid of us because we had these machine guns all over the plane. They didn't know we couldn't hit anything.

But the worst part about it was finding that island when you came back. It had no communications. No radio or nothing. So it was strictly dead reckoning. I had a good navigator and we'd go out there and fly. No islands

for reference or anything, out over the water and come back and find that little island back there. If you didn't find it, I'd still be there. And the navigator used to send a message, show sweat coming down, he said, "If it ain't under that cloud, I don't know where it is."

Well things like that, but that was tough.

JG: In the period after that period, what, how did you conclude the war and what did you do thereafter?

WC: Well, I came back. I stayed in twenty years. I think I was a major at the end of the war. I thought I might as well stay in to twenty years. And I was in the air materiel command. I didn't particularly want to go to Europe and fly B-17s over there. And I didn't particularly want to fly anywhere for a while because nine hours a day, day after day, in enemy territory, you kinda got enough of flying and I did air materiel command, air tactical command and didn't do a whole lot of any—oh, and then I got into reserve training. I went to Hamilton Field—that's in California. And where we trained air force reservists. And had 'em come out and fly airplanes.

And then in '48, why, in 1948, the Berlin Airlift came on and so I was sent over there. Do you want me to go into the Berlin Airlift a little bit?

JG: Sure, just a bit.

WC: Well, the reason for it was we had a highway in there and the air lane into Berlin was in the eastern Germany, which was under Russian control. And they had divided Berlin into three sections, four sections—Russian, English, French and American. We each had a piece of Berlin. We had about two million people and we were supplying our part of Berlin by ground and air, mostly by ground. And Stalin wanted us out of there because our part of Berlin was living very well and the rest of Berlin was in trouble. And so they closed the highway in there and General Clay was over there and says, "Well, let's go in and play war."

But we had about 20,000 troops in Europe and the Russians had about 200,000 in Berlin with air and everything so they decided not to. But they didn't close the air quarter, so we decided to fly in supplies. So we did fly in

every three minutes, twenty-four hours a day, flying in. Started with C-47, later it was C-54. And the reason Stalin called it off, it got embarrassing, the rest of the world was frowning on him for this action, for closing off the route to Berlin. Plus we had an atomic bomb group came into England and they didn't have the atom bomb yet. And they started NATO, where they had the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Got all the allied countries organized and then the Marshall plan went in. And so here came all this money into Europe and otherwise they could've gone Communist. They were bad enough that—these allied countries, so they immediately rebuilt. And so he said, "We better get out of here or call off the airlift."

JG: And you stayed in the service until what year?

WC: Nineteen sixty. Twenty years, right on the nose.

JG: And after that, you were, went into full retirement, or...?

WC: Oh, partial. I taught school a little while, but kinda got tired of that. In the meantime, my good wife Ruth whom you met here, got into real estate, quite actively. Had a big office, a lot of women making money, so I just retired and kept her happy and sell a house and take a trip and...

JG: Now you're in Hawaii...

WC: Yes.

JG: ...and you're both volunteers at the USS [*Arizona*] Memorial.

WC: Yes, yes.

JG: *Arizona*.

WC: Yeah.

JG: And obviously you enjoy that.

WC: Yes, very much. We just travel. We go round the world on Holland America ships. Like to do that.

JG: Are there any other recollections that you have that you'd like to share regarding Pearl Harbor and...?

WC: Yeah, I can tell one for anybody that knew enough about flying to know what an artificial horizon is. That's what tells us when we're in the fog or in the clouds, you can't see, this tells us what levels you are at, that's down. You live with that thing. And this was the most scariest time in my life, when my whole life passed in front of me. We're down in Guadalcanal—no it's Espiritu [*Santo*], where we're staging out of there, flying up in the Guadalcanal area. These runways, the Seabees would carve 'em out on the coral and right in the palm trees. And palm trees wouldn't be very far off the wingtips as we took off. And it was dark. About the only thing you had was a barracks down there somewhere. There were no lights on the runway or anything. They had a jeep down at the end of the runway with the lights on. That's where you would take off, towards that light.

And I took off, was taking off this night and just as I broke ground, my artificial horizon is like that. I'm still in the palm trees. If I try to, if I'm that way, I'm in the palm trees and if I turn back this way, I'm in the palm trees here. So I have to decide whether it's the instrument or whether I'm still level. I had enough flying sense to say I'm going to hold the way I am 'til I get up out of the trees. So at least for a minute I figured what to do and I was lucky. If I followed that, the...

END OF TAPE #1

TAPE #2

JG: You had earlier introduced the matter of your involvement in the Midway operation. I'm wondering if you could take us there and discuss your recollections.

WC: Well, quick like, it's—this is '42 and the enemy is arrogant and cocky. They beat up everything down in the Pacific. They could land on any island they wanted to. They had experienced pilots, good airplanes. They wanted to fight and they were—the reason with the emperor, they said the reason they

wanted Midway is to cut off communication between Hawaii and Australia. They wanted—they're going to get Australia eventually. And what really become of it, they were very arrogant. I say they wanted to come out, they wanted to fight, they wanted—hoped the rest of our fleet that was left would come out and intercept them so they could shoot them. They had eight battleships. That's showing the uselessness of the battleships that never fired a shot. But anyhow, and the carriers, their intelligence was worse than ours. They thought we had one carrier and they didn't know where it was and we have three carriers. And of course we broke their code and we know that they're coming down there. So we get our three carriers to get down there and be sitting there waiting for 'em. They were supposed to have submarines across between Hawaii and Midway to see if we had any fleet going down there. But they got there too late and our three carriers were already down there. This all adds up to the miracle of Midway. Had they known our carriers were there, they were very capable with experienced pilots and planes to have sunk our three carriers, had they known they were there. But luckily, they didn't know.

And then of course, the miracle of their ships being sunk. They know that they caught them with their carriers full of bombers and torpedo planes. They were going, they were loading bombs. They had some planes with torpedoes and just in case we had a carrier around. So they decide to take another go and dive-bomb Midway again before they landed. And so they're on their decks, taking torpedoes off and putting on bombs. The deck is covered with bombs, torpedoes, fuel and planes. And finally—and of course there's the story of our first sixty aircraft planes went in. This is new. Our aircraft, our carriers had never been in battle before and the first sixty planes, dive-bombers and torpedo planes, lumbered along. A Zero shot down forty of 'em. And it was being quite a—and our navy fighters were supposed to escort 'em, but they never got together. So they finally got smart enough in all this battle.

And of course they had planes on Midway that were coming out. None of them ever got to the carriers because the Zeroes were shooting 'em all down before they got there. And all this battle down below with our carrier planes going in and Midway planes coming out that they finally got some dive-bombers to go up to 20,000 feet. The Japanese didn't see 'em. Zeroes didn't know they were up there, and so they came down. All they had to

drop was one 500-pound bomb on this carrier loaded with dive-bombers and torpedo planes, and pllt, you just lit a match there and it would've gone up. So that was the miracle of Midway.

(Conversation off-mike)

WC: So I went down, tried to catch someone heading for the barns, so to speak. But we dropped on someone. We found, saw some of the cruisers and destroyers, but we didn't hit any.

JG: So you were involved in that attack and trying to stop the Japanese planes. Is that correct?

WC: No. No. Their planes were gone. We're trying to hit their cruisers, 'cause they're heading for home. Of course, they—well, they had this diversionary bunch that went up to the Aleutians, to try to detract us from Midway. And they should've had those carriers down there, helping 'em at Midway. But like at Pearl Harbor, for instance, they spent all this time and bombs hitting useless battleships when they should've been hitting fuel dumps and things. And of course at that time, the battleship, that was the thing. Gotta get the battleships out there. As I said, they had eight of 'em down at Midway and never fired a gun. Their day was gone.

JG: Do you have any other questions?

**Robert "Bob" P. Chenoweth (BC):** Could you talk about your going out to Midway from Hawaii and who were you flying with? What was the squadron you were flying with at the time?

WC: It was a—oh, what was it? The 98<sup>th</sup> [*Bombardment*] Squadron [(*Heavy*)], yeah. They had the 36<sup>th</sup> in there, but it was the 98<sup>th</sup> [*Bombardment*] Squadron [(*Heavy*)].

BC: And how many B-17s did you go out with?

WC: Well, it was about a squadron worth, about fifteen. There were already some B-17s down there that were in the battle and they didn't hit anything. They were mostly reconnaissance up to 20,000 feet.

BC: Did you fly—how many days did you fly when you were out there?

WC: Well, we actually came back the next day, after the enemy had gone.

BC: Uh-huh, but I mean, before, did you only fly a single day?

WC: Yes. We went down there and landed and refueled and took off the same day to go out and try to find the fleeing enemy. But they had gone, so no use to stay there. So we came back home. So we just went overnight actually.

And it's interesting to go back. I went back to Midway a couple weeks ago. You can fly *Aloha* [Air]line down there. The change, it was nothing but a bare, a barren land there, on the coral and sand at that time. But now it's all grown up, it's beautiful grass and trees and 40 million albatross, goony birds. You should go there. It's nice to visit.

JG: Well, thank you, Bill. It's been most interesting and I think you've broadened our experience by participating.

WC: You gotta be out of gas.

JG: This has been wonderful. I thank you so much.

WC: I'm fine and happy to talk about it.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

(Conversation off-mike)

END OF INTERVIEW