

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
STEPHEN S. STUCZYNSKI
Aircraft Mechanic, Marine Corps, World War II.

1999

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Stuczynski, Stephen S., (1925-2000). Oral History Interview, 1999.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 65 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 65 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 65 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Stephen S. Stuczynski, a Buena Vista, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as an aircraft mechanic with the Marine Corps 2nd Marine Wing, Marine Air Group 33 serving in the Pacific theater. Stuczynski details enlisting in the Marine Corps right out of high school and recalls when they changed the words in the “Marine Corps Hymn” to include battles in the air. He mentions attending boot camp at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar (California) and aviation machinist school at Norman (Oklahoma). He explains that, due to lack of airplanes to work on, he was given duty as a personnel clerk at Bogue Auxiliary Field near Cherry Point (North Carolina). Stuczynski highlights the role of his office job in getting him attached to the Marine Air Group 33 (MAG 33) and being sent overseas before the war ended. After zig-zagging across the Pacific on an Army transport ship, he touches upon arriving at Peleliu late and missing the battle. Stuczynski discusses stopping at other Pacific islands and transferring back to mechanic at Espirito Santo (New Hebrides). Stationed on Okinawa for seven months, he talks about life at Kadena Airfield and Awase Airfield and repairing and installing Corsair aircraft engines. Stuczynski comments on the success rate of MAG 33, the improvements of aircraft design throughout the war, high fatality rates during operational testing, the durability of radial engines, and airplane gasoline consumption. He portrays the mechanics and metal smiths fixing up a plane that was supposed to be scrapped but having it confiscated during an inspection. Stuczynski describes getting a delayed care package, the food, living conditions under artillery attacks, and low casualty rates among the ground crews. He mentions volunteering with a buddy for duty at Midway, but changing his mind when his buddy was not accepted. Stuczynski states he is a member of the VFW and American Legion. He comments on using the GI Bill for 52-20 Club money and automobile mechanics training, and he talks about his civilian career in automobile maintenance. Stuczynski touches upon fundraising to place a T-33 Aircraft at Truax Field, being inspired by an Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) convention, and opening a museum at his house. He describes some of the materials he has collected and talks about a couple pilots from VMF 323 who earned “ace in a day” titles.

Biographical Sketch:

Stuczynski (1925-2000) served in the Marine Corps from 1943 to 1946 and was discharged at the rank of sergeant. Returning to Wisconsin after the war, he married Dolores Zeleski in 1946, raised two children, and worked as an automobile parts manager for seven years in Stevens Point. After moving to Madison, he continued to work for Kayser Ford and built an addition onto his home to house the Gallery of Aviation, a collection of military aviation memorabilia.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999

Transcribed by Joshua Goldstein, 2010

Corrected by Channing Welch, 2010

Corrections typed by Michelle Marion, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

- Jim: We're underway. "Stuzniski," is that correct?
- Steve: "Stu-chin-ski" [phonetically; spelled "Stuczynski"].
- Jim: "Stu-chin-ski."
- Steve: Yup.
- Jim: There's no "t." You use the "z" for a "t."
- Steve: Let me see that. Maybe I—did I type them in? No, it is "Stu-chin-ski."
- Jim: "Chin-ski."
- Steve: "Stu-chin-ski," yeah.
- Jim: Right. Where were you born?
- Steve: I was born Buena Vista Township, Portage County, maybe 18, 17, 18 miles out of Stevens Point, Wisconsin.
- Jim: In 1925.
- Steve: January 1, of 1925.
- Jim: And you went in the service in 1943?
- Steve: Yes, I did.
- Jim: Tell me how that went.
- Steve: Well, to begin with, I wanted in when I was still 17 years old, and my mother, she wouldn't sign for me. My father, being the more adventurous type being as he came from Poland, he was an immigrant of Poland, he would have signed for me but I didn't want to put him on the spot and make it bad for him with my mother saying he shouldn't have done it perhaps. So I waited till I was 18 on January 1 of 1943. Went over to the music store, didn't have money back in those days. We didn't have any McDonalds and Arby's and all those things where we could work to get some money working. I sold my guitar for \$5 and I think the store owner was a bit generous when he asked me what I wanted the money for and I told him I wanted to get bus fare to go thirty-three miles north up to Wausau. So he was a little generous and gave me \$5. Well, I did go up there, and would you believe, here we are engaged in war, and the Marines

Corps tells me they have their quota filled. And they said, “Well, you go back home, continue going to school, and we’ll give you a call when we have an opening.” Here I am waiting, lo and behold, and I know immediately when June comes around the school year is going to be over, and the draft is going to get me. Well, lo and behold, I did get the draft notice. I went to Milwaukee, and I got in the Marine Corps in Milwaukee, and I came home at 4 o’clock in the morning on a train because they told me to go home for two weeks and then report back for a detail to go to San Diego for basic training. Well, when I got home that morning my mother had a card on the table from the Wausau Recruiting Station. They said, “You can come, and we have an opening now.” That’s why you will notice on there I have combination volunteer/conscription indication on my induction.

Jim: You went out to San Diego?

Steve: So, yup. Two weeks later I went to San Diego and took my basic training at a recruit depot there. It was kind of interesting because by then the Marine ace [a fighter pilot credited with destroying five or more enemy aircraft] Joe Foss had done his tour of duty at Guadalcanal already, which was the first operation that the Marines took place in—in the Pacific. In fact, it was the first operation in the Pacific of World War II. And he had already shot down twenty-six enemy aircraft flying the F4F Grumman Wildcat. I happened to participate in a radio broadcast that they did out of San Diego. And he being aviation, they told us, “Now, you be sure when you sing that line in the Marine Corps Hymn which used to be always sung as ‘We’ll fight our country’s battles on the land and on the sea,’” they said, “Be sure you sing that ‘We’ll fight our country’s battles in the air, on land and sea’ [laughs]. Make sure you get that air feature in there,” being as he was a Medal of Honor winner. In fact President Roosevelt pinned the Medal of Honor, and I have the *Life Magazine* showing him on the cover of that era with the medal.

Jim: Tell me about your basic. Was that anything special? How long did it last?

Steve: Basic, I think, was nine weeks at that time. Nine or eleven, I think nine at that time. I had no trouble whatsoever in basic training keeping up and doing things. As a matter of fact, I marvel about the fact that when they weighed me in—I still have my ID card from that era—and I weighed 148 pounds. I was discharged after the war was over. In fact, on February 5th of 1946, and they weighed [laughs] me up, and my discharge papers read I weigh 148 pounds. So I always take pride in the fact that I was in shape when I went in there and had no trouble physically with anything. And I went through the whole ordeal, and I weighed [laughs] exactly the same. They never took any weight off or put any on.

- Jim: So where'd you go from San Diego?
- Steve: Ah, San Diego—we did get a ten day leave, and at that particular time train transportation was close to three and a half days in each direction, but I did come home, and I was home like two and a half days and went back to Miramar. In fact, that is where *Top Gun* was filmed in much later years, and that was the Marine Corps Air Station at Miramar, and from there I shipped out to Aviation Machinist School at Norman, Oklahoma, and that was a seven month course, and it covered every phase of aircraft maintenance.
- Jim: So what would you be called then?
- Steve: In Naval Aviation the term is aviation machinist mate. You might say a glorified name for aircraft mechanic [laughs].
- Jim: Just for my edification, what does this include? Maintenance of engines only, or the aircraft entirely?
- Steve: No, we had so many weeks on engines. We had so many weeks on propellers, hydraulics systems, electrical systems, airframes. Every phase that's on an aircraft for maintenance was covered in that seven month period.
- Jim: So you were qualified to deal with any of those.
- Steve: With any of those, right. But it as it turned out later on when I went— in fact, I did graduate in the top some 14 or 15, and those people were going to a specialty school and specialize in one specific area on the aircraft. And I was designated to go to Chicago, which had a prop school, propeller school. And I waited around there for a better part of three weeks, and they had such a backlog of people filling in, coming in there, that they decided to send us directly to Cherry Point, North Carolina. And from there I was shipped out to a small auxiliary field, Bogue Auxiliary Field, and actually, in as much as my specialty was aircraft mechanic, me and a friend of mine from Omaha, Nebraska, are working in a first sergeant's office one day doing a little clean up work because there were no aircraft there yet to be maintained. And First Sergeant, Sergeant Teal (I remember his name), was in there and he had several desks in a huge double Quonset hut, you might say, and stacks of papers piled up on every desk. And I see him talking to my friend Tom in one corner of the building, and later on he comes over to me and he asked me if I knew anybody that could type. And I told him I was new in the squadron so I didn't know too many people. And he says, "Well, Tom tells me you can type". He had already talked with to my friend who I went through school with. Well, so anyway, I said, "Well, you asked me if I knew anybody," but I said, "You didn't ask

me if I could” [laughs]. He laughed, he chuckled, and he says, “Would you help me out?” He says, “I’ve been trying to get clerks in here,” he says, “and I can’t seem to get seem to get any clerks from Cherry Point,” or wherever he was going to draw ‘em from. What could I say? I had no aircraft to work on because we were just forming the group. And so I got pulled in as being the personnel clerk for the squadron, which turned out to be great because I’d get a hop in a dive bomber once in a while with my Commanding Officer, Major Cummings, whose desk was right next to mine. In fact, we were all in the same area. Our desks were almost back to back, front to rear, and so forth.

Okay, and that of course propelled my overseas tour, I might say, and I’m thankful for that. Because one Sunday morning me and a friend of mine, Frank C. Smith, who was also working in the office—he was from Atlanta, Georgia. Anyway, him and me are in the barracks one Sunday morning, and a fella comes in with a clipboard. And he wanted to know what our names were [laughs] and we happened to have the spec numbers on office work that he needed for a detail to go to Miramar to ship out with Marine Air Group 33. Lo and behold, it wasn’t an hour and a half later we have our gear all packed, and we are in a jeep on our way to Cherry Point. Meet some other fellas in the detail, and that same afternoon we are on a train heading for the West Coast [laughs] of Miramar to gather with Marine Air Group 33 and ship out overseas. It was kind of, well, I might say discouraging in a way for Frank C. Smith because we passed—we didn’t know we were going to pass through his home town of Atlanta. Anyway, Frank sits, we have layovers of two, three, four hours in some places, in small places that you didn’t even have any place to go. Well, when we got to the Atlanta station, his mother lives seven blocks from the train station. We had fifteen minutes there. He did get a chance to call her, but she didn’t have time to come see him. And of course we knew we were going overseas, so it would have been nice if he could have seen her, you know [laughs], but so much for that.

Well, we shipped out that same fall out of Miramar. Boarded an Army transport of all things, here we are Naval personnel, Marine Corps, and we boarded Army transport. The little blimps would guide us out past several miles into the ocean, and then they would leave us, and immediately the ship would start zig-zagging in order to avoid submarine torpedoes and so forth. And we zig-zagged all over the Pacific for six weeks and hit a couple of typhoons and stopped over at Peleliu while the campaign was going on. We were suppose to go in there, but for some reason we got there late, and there was another air group came in, and they went in our place. In fact, that air group even used some of our aircraft until their aircraft arrived. Then we continued on with some other stops along the way to the New Hebrides, and we regrouped there and got ready for the invasion of Okinawa, which was the last operation of Word War II. One

reason I mention that it was—I was kind of lucky that I got in to the office work and got pulled on that special detail to go to the West Coast is because a lot of the fellas that I went through Aviation Machinist School with, the timing was such they never even got overseas. After I came back after my fifteen months overseas I ran in to some of them. And I ran into even some of them that were on board a ship, and they were midway, halfway, to Hawaii when the war ended, and they had the ship turned around and sent back to San Diego, and I met them at Miramar [laughs]. So anyway, I am grateful for having the experience of being able to put in my full tour of fifteen months overseas.

Jim: Where did you go? Where did the ship go?

Steve: Okay, we first—we had a ten day stop in Hawaii, and then we went—I think in one of these pictures it gives some of the islands that I touched on.

Jim: Now, just watch and speak.

Steve: Oh, well, we jockeyed around the—we stopped at Eniwetok, and I mentioned the Peleliu. We stopped at the Ulithi. We stopped at Manus, and finally—and at Guadalcanal even, and we finally wound up at Espirito Santo in the New Hebrides.

Jim: That's where you set up. The squadron set up there.

Steve: Yeah, right, that's where we did the final things. And incidentally, that is when I transferred back into mechanics.

Jim: You spent the bulk of your overseas time there?

Steve: No, no, the longest—the fifteen months that I was overseas, my longest stretch was on Okinawa. I was on Okinawa for seven months. In fact, it's kind of interesting, because here a couple of years ago I read in the *VFW Magazine*, national magazine, about the criteria for the Occupation [Service] Medal. And I'm just going over the details of it, and I said, "Well hell," I says, "I qualify for that just in the length of time that I was there after September 2nd until I left there, Okinawa, on November 3rd." In as much as I got to Okinawa, I believe, on April 9th. We started operating off of Kadena Airfield on April 9th, and I stayed there until November 3rd, in fact. We did change air fields. We transferred from Kadena Airfield on July 14th. We transferred to a smaller air field on Buckner Bay which was Awasi, called Awasi airstrip [approx. 1 min. 15 sec. pause in recording].

Jim: So then you settled on this airfield on Okinawa.

Steve: Yes, on Kadena.

- Jim: That was your most permanent base.
- Steve: Yes, right.
- Jim: Was it different than—you said the other one was Ulithi?
- Steve: Ah, no, the other was Espirito Santo, New Hebrides, yeah.
- Jim: What was that base like?
- Steve: Well, it was a staging area is what it was, where air groups and squadrons would form up and determine all the personnel and make sure that they had all the equipment and everything that was needed to go into a combat area for operation.
- Jim: That was a big Naval base there.
- Steve: Yeah, a lot of Naval personnel on the island and so forth, true.
- Jim: So your working day would be like, what, three and a half—
- Steve: You know, I don't even remember what the hours were. I would say you'd be up and on the line maybe 7 o'clock in the morning, 7:30, something like that. It all depends how busy things were. When we were on Okinawa, as I remember after we moved to Awase Airfield, the days weren't all that long. We would be off the field by 5 o'clock in the afternoon.
- Jim: What was your duty at 7 o'clock in the morning?
- Steve: Well, we would go out on the line, get our tool boxes, and go out on the line and work on the aircraft. We would—I was—.
- Jim: These are the ones that aren't in operation that day.
- Steve: No, they weren't in operation that day. See, I was based in a service squadron. We serviced the aircraft that three squadrons of Corsairs. Each squadron of Corsairs had like a complement of 18 to 21 aircraft. We did all—in fact I was involved in engine change work. That's what I specialized in. I didn't really do—we had prop shops, we had carburetor shops, and all the other instrument shops. They were actually tents back there [laughs] at that time, but we referred to them as shops. But I worked on engine changes is what I did.
- Jim: Did everyone sort of specialize like that?

Steve: Yeah, when we got there everybody specialized. Like I say, we had all the different shops. So when we pulled a propeller off of an aircraft prior to removing the engine and everything, it wasn't necessary for us to go overhauling the propeller. We would prepare the old engines for shipment back to Guam to the A & R shops, assembly and repair shops. And we would get all the cosmoline and everything off the new engine, install the spark plugs and all the accessories and everything. And we would get the mountings on there and hoist it up and attach it to the aircraft. Then eventually the prop would come back and get the prop on and all the other items hooked up properly. We would run the engine in on the ground for three hours and make final adjustments and everything to make sure that it functioned properly.

Jim: Before you put it in the plane?

Steve: After we put it in the airplane. So there you'd get some cockpit time [laughs]. After we would get it checked out for three hours on the ground, we also would—a pilot would fly it for three hours, not all at one time—in increments.

Jim: Yes, that was certainly a breaking-in period.

Steve: That's right, yeah, breaking-in.

Jim: What kind of engine?

Steve: They were Pratt & Whitney 2,800 cubic inches of displacement, eighteen cylinder engines. You had two rows, nine cylinders in a radial position in each row. It was the biggest, most powerful engine on fighter aircraft of that era, and it was developing 2,000 horsepower. And by the time the war ended they developed what they had called the "Dash Four" Corsair model with the four-bladed prop instead of the three, and those were rated at 2,250 horsepower.

Jim: Did you work on anything other than Corsairs?

Steve: I pulled one engine on an F6F Grumman Hellcat because our night fighter squadron that was in our air group where F6F Grumman Hellcats, and they had the radar pod on the right wing. Maybe you've seen those. Before we moved off of Kadena Airfield, I mentioned we moved to Awase. I pulled an engine off, me and another fellow, pulled the engine on an F6F Grumman Hellcat. But we had to move, and therefore, we never even got to put the [laughs] new engine back in there.

Jim: So you couldn't compare one to the other because you didn't work on it.

- Steve: No, well, the engines were basically the same engine, Pratt & Whitney 2800s. Yeah, of the fighter aircraft of World War II, the Corsair, the Grumman Hellcat, F6F Hellcat, and also the Army Air Corps P-47 Thunderbolt used the same engine.
- Jim: Really?
- Steve: Yeah, but, you know, I frequently make comment about the fact you didn't have to look up to see what airplane was flying. Even though those three planes had basically the same engine, the Pratt & Whitney 2800, you could tell the difference in the sound because of the way the air ducting was taken in and also the exhaust system and everything. You're gonna get a little different tone. In fact, the Japanese called our Corsairs "Whistling Death" because when that Corsair was flying the air intakes where such that gave it a whistling sound, and that's where the Japanese dubbed it "Whistling Death" [laughs].
- Jim: An engine would last how long?
- Steve: Oh golly, you know, I—
- Jim: Generally speaking.
- Steve: They would do every so hours, so many hours, the flight line crews would do a 60 hour check, 120 hour check. And there were different numbers in there. I forget now at this time what the actual hours were before they would replace the engine. I can't recall exactly. I came home. I brought huge engine power plant manuals with me. Instrument manuals, carburetor manuals, and everything, and you know, back in 1957. I kicked myself, but I threw them away. I said, "What am I holding on to these things for?" [laughs]
- Jim: The [Wisconsin Veteran's] Museum would love those things.
- Steve: Definitely, definitely. I have a lot in my museum. I have a lot of maintenance manuals on old aircraft, WWII aircraft and every [unintelligible] I acquired later where people knew that I treasure these things and collect them, have sent them to me.
- Jim: You have any problems getting engines, getting equipment? Did that ever occur?

- Steve: No, we at that particular point in the war had no—we were never really suffering for problems. Now, another thing if you check history you will find that there were more planes wrecked and pilots lost in training than there actually was to enemy firepower. And we always had—I have about 200 pictures of 8x10s in my collection of my air group on Okinawa and in there you can see some of the wrecked aircraft. So we not only had new parts available but we would cannibalize these wrecked [laughs] planes and take parts off of them.
- Jim: Your air group, was it in combat a long time?
- Steve: Through the entire Okinawa campaign and in fact—
- Jim: From April through August.
- Steve: From April through August, right. Our air group, Marine Air Group 33, in fact surpassed the number of aircraft shot down of all Marine Air Groups of World War II. But of course I frequently, when I make that comment, I say we don't gloat about it because the enemy pilots were not the quality they were in the early parts of the war at Guadalcanal and the early parts of the campaign. Like "Pappy" Boyington, Kenneth Walsh, and Robert Hanson and all the early aces of that time. And not only that but a lot of the planes that our air group shot down were suicide planes. Japan sent over 1,900 suicide planes against shipping in the Okinawa campaign. A lot of the ones that—of the 229 that my group shot down, many of them were suicide aircraft.
- Jim: That was a major mistake, one of those major mistakes of the Japanese Emperor.
- Steve: Yeah.
- Jim: It didn't keep spirits high.
- Steve: No, they lost—
- Jim: They flew them till they were dead.
- Steve: That's right. They didn't use them to train other personnel.
- Jim: Right. And so as the experienced guys went there was nobody to teach the young guys.
- Steve: That's right. They would keep them in combat.

- Jim: A horrible mistake. I can't imagine—they were persnickety about everything else, but it didn't occur to them how dangerous that was.
- Steve: Another thing, they didn't upgrade the quality of their aircraft like our manufacturers did.
- Jim: Oh yeah, the quality kept improving as the war went on.
- Steve: Yeah, correct, yeah.
- Jim: They developed the P-51 half way through the war.
- Steve: And even the P-51 went through the models of A,B,C—D was the very popular model at the end of the war, and even to begin with, P-51 A had the Allison engine.
- Jim: They built it for England, you know.
- Steve: Yes, the British were the first ones to buy the P-51 Mustang.
- Jim: And they were sort of—they were modestly impressed but not very.
- Steve: No, right.
- Jim: It wasn't till they got their own engine in it, the V—
- Steve: The V-12 Merlin, the Rolls-Royce Merlin, that's what made it a high altitude, the long range fighter out of it.
- Jim: On Friday, I interviewed a guy from Madison, a P-51 pilot and he talked about the difference.
- Steve: Sure, yeah.
- Jim: He said the last version of that P-51 allowed them to go way high.
- Steve: Yeah, right.
- Jim: Which they couldn't do in the other ones.
- Steve: Yeah, and interestingly the P-47 Thunderbolt, which people regard as such a heavy big machine for a fighter, was a very good high altitude fighter. It had over 40,000 feet capabilities.

- Jim: Yeah, I always wondered until I talked to a P-47 pilot, why did they use drop tanks? He said their wings were too low. They're too low on the ground, and they couldn't hold them up. He said they thought—they—
- Steve: Well, I have pictures—now, you know our high ranking living ace, Francis Gabreski of Oil City, Pennsylvania, and I have pictures where even his plane has an auxiliary belly tank. But still, even—and they used to also put on two like sixty-five gallon tanks, one under each wing, which wasn't a real big tank. Still in all, the gasoline consumption on the Pratt & Whitney 2800 was so much greater than it was on the V-12 Merlin, and therefore it still didn't have the capabilities of long range like the 51 did.
- Jim: The P-47 pilot that I talked to lives four blocks away from me. He said it's interesting—'cause he flew both—51—he said that the one difference that people don't appreciate is as they pull. He said when you're coming in a dive, you know, dive straight down and level out, he said in that 47 it was just like hitting a stone wall, 'cause that big engine really slowed you down. Whereas the 51 could sort of skim right along. He said when you turned the 47 around all of the sudden you're like hitting a wall with that big engine, you know just slowed everything down.
- Steve: Well, that's one tactic that our pilots had over the Japanese in case they wanted to break away. With the heavy engine and heavy aircraft they could dive away much faster than the Japanese could get away from them, you know, because of the weight of the aircraft.
- Jim: Gravity took—assisted.
- Steve: Yeah, [both laugh] that's right exactly.
- Jim: All right, now you're talking engines and engine life [**End of Tape 1, Side A**]. Whatever the total hours were, you did bring them in on a regular schedule?
- Steve: Yes, yes.
- Jim: The engines after a certain number of hours, they didn't even bother checking—
- Steve: No.
- Jim: They just junked 'em.
- Steve: Well, we would send them back to Guam. We'd send them back to the A&R shops, and they would rebuild them down at Guam, yeah.

- Jim: What part of the engine seemed to wear out the fastest?
- Steve: Well, I would say the cylinders and so forth would take the most wear because you have the most movement there, you know. A radial engine is very durable, much more durable than the in-line because your crankshaft being a radial is short. You don't have nowhere as much stress on the parts internally like you do on the V-12 with long crankshaft and long rocker shafts and so forth. And as a result, why, the radial is very dependable. I won't elaborate on that to the degree of what takes place at air racing at Reno because they still race those planes up at Reno Air Races every mid-September, and I'll tell you it's the radial engine planes that really hold together when they push them to the excess. Whereas the others have a little bit of a—
- Jim: Tend to breakdown more?
- Steve: Breakdown more because of the difference in design, right.
- Jim: So you say they still use them in racing?
- Steve: Oh, yeah, right, they still use them.
- Jim: Because of the dependability?
- Steve: Well, it's the radial engine planes—they don't use as many of them anymore because they aren't as readily available as the P-51 Mustangs. When the war was over and they released surplus aircraft there were more Mustangs purchased by private parties than there was of any other fighters because of the maintenance problem and the gasoline consumption and so forth. And the P-51 Mustang had a lot more eye appeal for private people.
- Jim: Tell me about the gas consumption. What's the point here?
- Steve: I would say at economical cruise maybe a V-12 would go upwards towards 40 gallons an hour whereas the Radial 2800s at economical cruise would go 60 gallons an hour or something like that. So there was a variation—
- Jim: They used a lot more gas.
- Steve: Oh, yeah, right. Well, see your V-12 Merlin was only 1,630 cubic inches of displacement whereas, like I say, the Pratt & Whitney 2800 had 2800.
- Jim: Pretty powerful.

- Steve: Yeah, correct, yeah. And of course in wartime you did not push them to the limits like they do in the racing field. You had limitations, except in some emergency you could go beyond the limited range. And you also had water injection tanks. Where if you pushed it beyond the limits, it would inject water into the cylinders to prevent pre-ignition because if you have a pre-ignition situation where the fuel in the top of the cylinder explodes before the cylinder is top dead center and ready to go down again, you're gonna break something, yeah.
- Jim: It's just too touch on those pistons.
- Steve: Yeah, that's right, yeah.
- Jim: [unintelligible] Would you say that the maintenance of either those in-line or radials—about the same or harder to get at?
- Steve: Ah, I would say the in-lines required more maintenance probably than the—
- Jim: More parts?
- Steve: Well, it was a much more complex engine. A more complex engine and you had your supercharging system and everything all connected in there, and, hey, you got a lot of moving parts there.
- Jim: Didn't the radials have a supercharger?
- Steve: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we had superchargers on ours also, correct.
- Jim: The gasoline is the same, though. They didn't change any [unintelligible].
- Steve: No, they used 100 octane. 100 octane fuel.
- Jim: Pretty much standard?
- Steve: Yeah, right, the standard for all aviation gasoline.
- Jim: How about riding in this Corsair that you taking care of? You must have had a chance to [unintelligible] some flights?
- Steve: No, it's a single seat fighter.
- Jim: Oh, that's right. They didn't have any of those [unintelligible] training.
- Steve: We did have an interesting incident. We had a replacement aircraft came in off of a carrier, and it had only sixteen hours flying time. The pilot

couldn't get the main gear down. So he belly-landed it in after attempting everything. He belly-landed the plane in, but what he did, the brass said, "Scrap the airplane." It was back in mid-summer, and, you know, planes were readily available. All that happened is he scuffed up these gear doors over here and bent a couple of prop blades. Well, the metal smiths and prop people, they went against orders and replaced the blades and fixed up the gear doors and everything. And the metal smiths also installed a back seat, what they called a jump seat. We were all looking forward to getting a ride in it [laughs]. Lo and behold—and then on the side of the fuselage between the ribs they cut an opening for the fellow in the backseat to be able to see out. They put a Plexiglas window on each side. Well, the brass came around inspecting one day, and they saw those two windows, and they looked in there and saw that seat, and they said, "This airplane is supposed to be scrapped," and that was the end of that. We never did get a ride [laughs].

Jim: Because I know the 51 had a couple of training models. Where they had—

Steve: Yeah, right.

Jim: Room for a little backseat.

Steve: Yeah, right. In fact, some of my books show one that was painted in red. It was an earlier model like a "B." It wasn't a bubble canopy. They had that double training situation in there. Some of the people that are restoring P-51s today are converting them to twin control and so forth. But back in the late '60s, early '70s all the P-51 and fighter plane owners were installing jump seats. But the insurance rates got to the point where, hey, in order to be able to buy insurance they started taking those seats out of there because the insurance company didn't want passengers being hauled in there.

Jim: Have you seen any these up at the EAA [Experimental Aircraft Association's annual air show in Oshkosh, Wisconsin]?

Steve: Oh, yeah, yeah. I spend six days there every year. Because of the heat I only spent five days [laughs] here.

Jim: I've seen quite a few Corsairs up there.

Steve: Yeah, one year they had ten Corsairs there when they did special recognition for the first Navy squadron that flew Corsairs. And they were land-based because the Navy couldn't handle them on the carriers to begin with. And they had ten Corsairs there that year, and that is the most I saw in one gathering since World War II. And that is another interesting thing. The Navy—the Corsair was built for the Navy, but when they got to using

it, trying to use it on a carrier, to come in a three point position that pilot could see nothing forward. Also, with the high powered engines, if they got a wave off too frequently the pilots would pour on too much power, and the torque would just take them right over. Instead of the wings having enough flow of air over the surface of them and over the ailerons to control them in a level position, the torque would just turn that airframe over and over the side they would go. So the Marines got the Corsair. The saying always is “Whatever the Navy doesn’t want, the Marines get” [both laugh]. But the Marines were tickled to get the Corsair because it was such an improvement over the little F-4F Wildcat that was their best plane.

Jim: Why?

Steve: Because of the more powerful, more maneuverable—and they had good firepower. Of course, the F-4F Wildcat also had good firepower; it had the six .50 caliber machine guns. Some of ’em had four. Ah, excuse me, yeah, some had four, and some had six. But all the Corsairs had six, and some of the Corsair models, even the F44-1C model, they started putting in two 20 millimeter cannon in each wing. But they were running into problems at high altitude; high altitude the 20 millimeters didn’t want to function in the cold; they would freeze up and so forth. So they went back to the six .50 calibers.

Jim: A Corsair pilot who I talked to, I asked him, if he was at the highest angle was there any problem landing on the carriers.

Steve: Yes.

Jim: He said, “No.”

Steve: To begin with it was.

Jim: He said because they never, never flew straight in. He said they always came in on a curve. And he said just at the last second you would straighten it out.

Steve: Right, exactly. And they would watch the landing service officer. That is all they watched. And another thing they did to help the situation on carrier landings, in order to eliminate some of that torque, they put a spoiler on the right leading edge of right wing. And at slower speeds it killed the efficiency of that right wing. And therefore it wasn’t quite as susceptible to go over. And in fact, the original models, why the Navy didn’t want them on carriers was also the oleo struts when they would touch down would bounce so hard. And the British were buying Corsairs from us, and they were instrumental in developing the struts where they didn’t bounce so much. And in fact the British aircraft carriers at that time,

you won't see any of them now, but at that time if you saw a Corsair that had a squared off wing tip it was built for the Royal Navy, because their hangar decks were not high enough. When the Corsair would fold its wings they didn't have enough height, so they had about a foot shorter wingspan on each wing.

Jim: While you're on these islands did you have any trouble getting mail?

Steve: Well, sometimes we didn't get mail for several weeks, you know, like if we were en route from one area to another. But once we were on the island, in the location on land, the mail came through fairly good. I get a kick out of one situation where my folks sent me a box [laughs] of little goodies, and there were some canned goods, and also they knew I loved summer sausage. They sent me a stick of summer sausage, and that box was en route six months before it caught up with me [laughs] and it caught up with me on Okinawa. And here it was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and we're hungry as badgers about that time of day, and we got mail call. And we got that, and it had green mold and everything on the outside. We cut it off and scraped it off and sliced it up and we ate it up [laughs]. One fella got a can of canned shrimp. I could never stand this gooey, slimy shrimp out of a can. Believe me, about 4 o'clock in the afternoon it tasted good, and ever since then I can eat shrimp [both laugh].

Jim: And did you see anything at the USO post?

Steve: You know, that is one thing I never ran into much. I just bought me a book on—done by Maxine Andrews, one of the Andrews Sisters. And, you know, I remember when I was in basic, Red Skelton was performing at a USO function, and my platoon got to go. That is one of the very few things that we got to see during our nine weeks of training, basic. And you know, the sergeant asked me—he liked my shirts for some reason, maybe I did better than some of the other guys, and we had a big inspection the next day. He asked me if I'd iron the platoon's shirts, and I did. I never did get to see Red Skelton [laughs]. Oh, I didn't mind. I didn't think Red Skelton was all that big a deal [laughs].

Jim: The food generally was good?

Steve: Food, stateside basic, the food was terrific, and—

Jim: But on the islands?

Steve: But on the islands—well, one thing that really sticks out when we got to Okinawa for many weeks at first we were eating meat and vegetable stew from Australia and meat and vegetable hash from Australia that was canned. And I'd open up a can of each, and I could never tell the

difference. They both looked the same and tasted the same. The way we would prepare it, we would have some rocks piled up, and we had the armor plating out of the backseat of a Corsair laid across there, and we had a fire going underneath, and we'd open up the cans and put the cans on there and heat them up that way.

Jim: Was that food already cooked? So you could it eat cold.

Steve: You could eat it cold, yeah. It was pre-cooked, right.

Jim: But not very tasty?

Steve: No, mutton, I'm not fond of mutton. I don't think I ever ate mutton since then [laughs] in all these years.

Jim: Most of the guys I talk to hated that mutton.

Steve: Yeah, but, well, even on board ship for instance, when we'd hit a typhoon we didn't have any hot meals at all. It was all K-rations and so forth. But normally, they would do sea rations where we would get at least one hot meal a day on board ship, you know. But that was on an Army transport, but on a Navy the food was always better. Food was always better on a Navy transport. The living conditions were better and cleaner—

Jim: The Navy knows how to do it.

Steve: Yeah, they have been in the business for a long time [laughs]

Jim: Did they have a beer ration?

Steve: We had, yeah, we would have on rare occasion we would get issued two cans of beer. And even when we were en route the six weeks on my overseas tour, there was one little island that we debarked onto, and everybody got two cans of beer. We couldn't drink it aboard ship. We had to go—

Jim: [unintelligible]

Steve: No, no, that's right [laughs].

Jim: [unintelligible] only deprivation [unintelligible].

Steve: Yeah, no, no that's—and of course I [Approx. 17 sec. pause in recording] or was it four? Okay [laughs]. I didn't use them. I'd give them to other fellows and so forth. And there was one thing everybody recognized, and that was Chelsea's. You know, you didn't hear about Chelsea's in civilian

life. But the Chelsea's tasted like varnish, you know [laughs]. Everybody hated Chelsea's [laughs], but even if you wanted to buy cigarettes in the military at that time they were a nickel a pack for Lucky Strikes, Camels, first line cigarettes.

Jim: So did you have any trouble with the personnel, anybody give you any problems?

Steve: You know something, I make comments about it to this day even through basic, or through my entire time in the military, I never had conflict with officers or fellow enlisted personnel. I seem to get along real good with people.

Jim: You were with happy faces, and wherever you were everybody seemed to be reasonable.

Steve: Yeah, yeah, right, and one thing I want to mention that is just like I tell the media that has interviewed me in the past, I tell them, "Hey," I says, "Anything you do, don't try to make me look like a hero because," I said, "I'm one of these guys that didn't have a rough time of it." Sure, our field and our quarters would get shelled and air raided and one thing and another. I have photos of our tent areas ripped up [laughs] in the morning on occasion with night shelling, but I say I never regarded it as a rough time like the infantry personnel had. In my mind they are the heroes of the Marine Corps, the infantry.

Jim: Everybody agrees with that.

Steve: Yeah.

Jim: Tell me about the Japanese shelling your camp. You didn't talk about that.

Steve: First of all, when we got to Okinawa they would land a few shells in our area compounds in the mid-afternoon or something like that.

Jim: Mortars?

Steve: Not mortar, no, it was anti-personnel shells and such. From a long way back they would have these hillside caves, and they would have the artillery pieces on tracks. They would roll them out on tracks, fire off one or two rounds; roll them back in. But, they learned not to do that because our planes up in the air would see the gun flashes, and they would go and rocket and strafe. So they quit that in the day time after about the first week or two. Then they would always do it at night, though, but fortunately it seemed like the airfield was a little further over than our living tent area, and it always seemed like they always landed the first one

a little high, and it [laughs] gave us a warning to get out of our tents and into our foxholes [laughs].

Jim: How far away was that?

Steve: Oh, our foxholes, we'd have them right outside of the tent. In fact, when I relocated in one place I dug a foxhole right next to my bunk. I said I'm getting tired of this getting out and going outside and getting in a foxhole [laughs].

Jim: Did you lose many people?

Steve: No, no. I have an interesting picture of a Corsair that took—got started with an anti-personnel shell one night. That's it right there. It looked real bad in the morning. Like I say, outside of tearing up our tent area on occasion and damaging an aircraft or something now and then, no, we didn't have many casualties in our group. One night a Japanese plane came on the back end of a formation of a section of our Corsairs and dropped two bombs and killed, I think, two or three of our crash crew on the flight line. But one of our fellas got a bullet hole during an air raid through his head. We even lost a fellow who went souvenir hunting—yeah, picked up some souvenirs, which they discouraged us to do.

Jim: For that reason.

Steve: Yeah, for that particular reason. That's right, yeah.

Jim: He didn't know any better.

Steve: Yeah, that's right, exactly.

Jim: Okay, I can't think of anything, I'm running out of questions here [Approx. 25 sec. pause in recording]. So at the time you were leaving Okinawa what rank were you?

Steve: I was sergeant.

Jim: That was standard for most guys who had been there that long?

Steve: No, no, some guys were still privates first—

Jim: PFCs.

Steve: PFCs, corporals and—

Jim: So you were in charge of a crew then?

- Steve: I was second, you might say second in charge, yeah, right, because I was second ranking. The chief was staff sergeant, one rank higher than me.
- Jim: Looking back, the training you got for your job was excellent or average or—
- Steve: I would say so. I would say it was excellent, right.
- Jim: You were prepared when they put the problem in front of you; you were able to deal with it.
- Steve: Yes sir, yeah, correct.
- Jim: They didn't miss anything in your training.
- Steve: No, no.
- Jim: Good. Well, that's nice to hear. So then after you left Okinawa where'd you go? You go home?
- Steve: In fact, before I left Okinawa I volunteered for an extra six months duty at Midway because one of our squadrons was going to Midway. They told us, "Hey, you fellas should pick up at least one or two ranks during that six month period if you volunteer." Well, I volunteered, and a friend of mine that worked on a crew with me volunteered. We were going to go, you know, together. Lo and behold they accepted me and they didn't accept him. So, before they cut the orders, Line Chief Hawkins says, "If there is anybody has reservations about going let us know." I told him, I says, "Hey," I says, "You know Jim Muldoon and me, we volunteered thinking we would both get to be accepted." And I said, "You accepted me and didn't accept him." And I said, "In as much as my overseas time is in," I says, "If I have the option I'll go Stateside." And they honored it, and let me go Stateside. So the reason I volunteered, we were going to have our R-4D, which is a C-47 Army, we were going to run our supplies from Hawaii to Midway and so forth. We felt it would give us some weekend liberties in Hawaii [laughs] but it didn't work out. Incidentally, fifty years later I meet a fella that was compelled to go on that detail to Midway because his overseas time was not in yet. And he told me, he says, "Nobody got any extra rank up there in those six months." He said, "They had so much high ranking people there." He says, "I was doing line chief work which calls for tech sergeant," he said. He said, "The captain called me in the office. He said, 'I want to get you a rank, but I just can't.' He says, 'The table of organization is way overloaded with rank.'" And so I said, "In a way," I said, "I'm glad I didn't get to go" [laughs].

- Jim: Have, you kept track of any of your buddies?
- Steve: You know, there is only one from Omaha, Nebraska, that I have really had any contact with on a basis from time to time, and that isn't very regular. Other than that you know out of a five, six hundred mile radius I think there was only five or six people that were in my air group, in the service squadron, from a radius like that. Other than that, we had a lot of people from out east and California.
- Jim: Don't you go to any reunions?
- Steve: I understand they had one once, but I migrated from Stevens Point down here to Madison, and the one that I know that they had, I never got notice on it. I never attended a reunion.
- Jim: So you're out of the loop now?
- Steve: Yeah, I don't know, I have no idea. I do have a roster. My friend that shipped out with me from the East Coast to the West Coast that day, that Sunday, before we split up at Okinawa, he made a roster of all the service squadron personnel, and I still have it to this day. And there are a couple of fellas from Milwaukee which I looked up from time to time.
- Jim: But you never call them to talk to them?
- Steve: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: Oh, you have. And have they gone to the reunion?
- Steve: You know, I guess I never asked him if he was at the reunion or not.
- Jim: Did you join a veterans organization?
- Steve: I belong to VFW. I belong to American Legion. I'm a life member of VFW. I belong to a lot of aviation organizations.
- Jim: What did you do after the war?
- Steve: Okay, I got home. I got my discharge in Great Lakes, Illinois, on March 6th of 1946. I stepped out of the gate, and I says to myself, "What the hell do I do now?" You know [laughs], you were always told where to go and what to do [laughs] and now I gotta do it myself.
- Jim: You have to think now.

- Steve: So, anyway I headed back home to Stevens Point, and at that time they had what they called the 52-20 Club. \$20 a week for 52 weeks unemployment you might say, and I drew that for awhile. My brother was in the trucking and excavating business up there, and the company is still going, run by my nephew. I worked for him here and there running bulldozers, cranes, caterpillar tractors and stuff like that.
- Jim: [unintelligible] GI Bill.
- Steve: No, no. I'll tell you what I did. I did come fall, his work is more seasonal—I went to work for the Ford dealer, and I did start on the GI Bill on mechanics, automobile mechanics training. Well, anyway, I went to work for him in November, and in mid—I think it was about the second week in December they asked me to come into the parts department and help prepare for inventory work and so forth. They said, "Well, we'll have you maybe about three weeks or something like that. Then you'll go back into auto mechanics." Well, three months went by, and I was still in the parts department. And five months went by, and there were two fellas ahead of me, and over a period of a next couple of three months, they both left, and I was the parts manager at the time, just like that. I stayed in that line of business for thirty years. I was up in Stevens Point for seven, and then I came to Madison, and out of a fourteen-man crew I captured assistant parts manager shift. And then by the time I left there I was parts manager for a number of years and had twenty-four people working for me in the parts department below me.
- Jim: So it worked out even though looked like it wasn't gonna.
- Steve: Yeah, yeah, and, you know, my boss after I was on the job training for something like three months or so forth—they had it so screwed up, the government did, one month they'd send you double compensation, next month they send you nothing. My boss, he says, with filling all the forms and everything out, he says, "Why don't we just pay you what you're worth?" And he paid me [laughs] a hundred dollars a week at that time, which was very good money at that time in 1947, '46 and '47 right in there. I was happy with that, and he was happy and that's the way things worked. I stayed in it for thirty years.
- Jim: That's very good.
- Steve: Other than that I never partook of any veterans' benefits like loans or anything of that. I have a certificate of eligibility laying there yet to this day which I never used.
- Jim: And the VFW, you say—are you involved with them?

Steve: Well, you know with all my work and hobbies and so forth, I said, “Those are good organizations for people who don’t have anything to do to get into.” But I always was so active and my wife likewise that I never got too involved. However, the T-33 aircraft that’s over at the—[End of Tape 1, Side B]—the club north of Truax, my wife and me raised the up-front money to put the plane on the pylon. Yeah, the plane used to be standing on the ground on a slab where she worked for the State of Wisconsin at Central Center. But the patients were crawling on it, falling off, getting hurt. So they wanted out of there, so that’s when we moved it over to our club.

Jim: So tell me how did you start your little museum here? What prompted that?

Steve: Well, okay, what happened there is—here I couldn’t believe it later on when I realized that it was nineteen years before I really took a re-interest in aviation. But in 1964 a fellow up the hill had a Cessna. He says, “Let’s fly down to Rockford, Illinois.” EAA Convention was held at Rockford a couple of years. We flew down there, and there were about three or four WWII what we call our “Warbirds,” P-51s. There was a F6F Hellcat, and I think three were 51s and maybe one Hellcat. When I heard the big engines, the sweet sounding V-12 Merlins and the powerful Pratt & Whitney 2800, I got all re-interested. And when I realized how few of those airplanes were left, where there were like 12,500 Corsairs built, and at that time there probably wasn’t only one or two flying. I developed a thirst for more knowledge on aircraft as a result of WWII. So I started going to libraries—you know, they had some books but not that much. I started building my own library, and people knew that I was interested. They started giving me memorabilia of all sorts. And it just kept growing. So when I retired, like I say gonna to be thirteen years ago, I built that forty-foot-long addition with two levels and transferred all of my stuff in there. And the more people that came to see the more stuff I would get because they would say, “Gee, we have this or that sitting around. Nobody sees it at our place. We’ll send it to you.” Or if they were locally, they’d bring it, boxes of things and so forth. And I said everything that is given to me is on exhibit. Nothing is stored away. It is there to be shared on a no-charge basis to anybody that has the interest to come and see.

Jim: That’s really nice.

Steve: Yeah.

Jim: All right. So that’s an ongoing project.

- Steve: Oh, yeah, yeah. One fella called me one time after I had put the building up, and he says, “When will the museum be done?” I said, “A museum is never done.”
- Jim: Any last thoughts before I turn it off for good here?
- Steve: Well, I could go on and on, but I, like I say, they might not be related and so forth.
- Jim: Primarily we’re interested in your wartime experience.
- Steve: Yeah. One thing that catches a lot of attention in my Museum is when I bring to their attention a painting that I have. And in fact, it’s done by a nephew of Deke Slayton, Wisconsin’s astronaut here. It shows a Corsair that has chopped off the Jap’s plane’s tail up at 38,000 feet. And that was one of our pilots did that over Okinawa with his Corsair. He ran out of ammunition. He did have some ammunition, but they had to fire away some in order to lighten the weight of the plane to get up to 38,000 feet. And they had a load of fuel fully loaded with fuel and so forth. So they fired away too much, and didn’t have enough to shoot the plane down, so he made three passes to shoot the tail off the plane with his propeller. I understand Russian pilots used to engage in that type of operation [laughs] during World War II a lot.
- Jim: That’s a good one. I hadn’t heard that before. All right, thank you.
- Steve: Yeah, we had—oh.
- Jim: No. You’ve got some more to say?
- Steve: Yeah, about some of our pilots. We had four pilots went up one morning. They split up and attacked a bunch of suicide planes. On that flight two of them shot down five planes apiece, and one shot down six. And one of them was the commanding officer of what they called VMF [Marine Fighter squadron] 323, the Death Rattlers Squadron was their nickname. In fact, I have a nice display on him in my museum. I have a flag of the Death Rattlers Squadron and numerous other artifacts. But anyway, they had a real heyday. They were what became “Aces in a Day” [a fighter pilot who has shot down five or more airplanes in a single day]. I also have—one of my over two hundred 8x10s that I have on Okinawa of my air group shows the cook of the squadron, Sol Mayer went and traded some souvenirs with a Navy ship, some personnel on a Navy ship, where he obtained some steaks from the Navy, and it shows a picture of these three fellows indulging, eating their steaks, and [laughs] he is watching them there in celebration of their ace-hood of that day [laughs].

Jim: Oh, that's good.

Steve: Yeah. I have a lot of stories like that, but I know they're not related to perhaps to what you want here [laughs].

Jim: That's very good.

Steve: Yeah, my museum is filled with stuff like that.

[End of Interview]