

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
WILLIAM J. WATTERS
Aviation Radioman and Gunner, Navy, World War II.

2002

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Watters, William J., (1924-). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 35 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 35 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 35 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

William J. Watters, a Washburn, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a machine gunner aboard a Navy aircraft based on the aircraft carrier *USS Shangri-La*. After being drafted and sent to boot camp at Great Lakes (Illinois), Watters talks about aviation radioman training at the Naval Air Technical Training Center in Memphis (Tennessee), air gunnery school in Hollywood (Florida), and operational training at Opa-locka Naval Air Station (Florida). He speaks of overcoming airsickness, assignment to his torpedo squadron, VT-84, squadron training, and assignment to the newly commissioned *USS Shangri-La*. Watters talks about his duties as a radioman-gunner in a Grumman Avenger airplane. He touches upon learning to operate radar on-the-job, shipping to the Pacific, and six weeks of training at the Naval Air Station on Maui. Joining Task Force 58 (part of the 5th Fleet), he describes his first combat experience bombing Minami-Daito-Jima, dropping bombs during the battle for Okinawa, and attacking Kure Naval Base and Tokyo. Watters describes the *Shangri-La*'s being saved from a Japanese kamikaze attack by the *USS Wisconsin*. After the war, he mentions having a furlough at home and then disassembling radio equipment at the Naval Air Station at Seattle until he had enough points to be discharged. Watters touches upon attending the University of Wisconsin with the GI Bill and attending reunions of his torpedo squadron.

Biographical Sketch:

Watters (1924-) served in the Navy from 1943 to 1946, and he was as a radioman-gunner with Navy Torpedo Squadron 85. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1950 with a degree in soils and agronomy. He worked at the Bureau of Reclamation in Minot (North Dakota), Northrup-King (Minneapolis and Madison), and the Union Carbide Company in Madison, where he settled.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002

Transcribed by Michael Kerins, 2009

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Interview Transcript:

Jim: This is the 19th of February, 2002. Talking to Bill Watters. Where were you born, sir?

Bill: Washburn, Wisconsin. Up on Lake Superior.

Jim: Right. I know where it is. When was that; it was 1924?

Bill: Right.

Jim: What month?

Bill: May [coughs].

Jim: So, you were in high school when the Second World War began.

Bill: Yep. Pearl Harbor.

Jim: Did you plan on any particular branch of service, or did you plan that you'd work 'til you were drafted, or what was your thinking at that time?

Bill: Well, let me see. That occurred in December of '41, and I was gonna graduate in May of '42. So my plan was to wait until I graduated from high school and then enlist in the Navy V-5 program which was pilot training. And I had to go to Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin where the nearest recruiting office was. And when I got there we found out that the V-5 program was restricted only to seventeen-year-olds at the time, which was kids right out of high school or still in high school. So the guy told me, "Well, wait and enlist in the Navy on a kiddie cruise," which would have been four years, I believe, "and then you can transfer into the V-5 program once you're enlisted in the Navy." Well, I found out that that wasn't so easily done, but I waited until I was drafted, and then was a selective volunteer into the Navy.

Jim: And that was in '43?

Bill: In April of '43. April 1, April 2.

Jim: Then you went to Great Lakes [Naval Station Great Lakes, Illinois] I presume?

Bill: Went to Great Lakes, and then on to Naval Air Technical Training Center at Memphis, Tennessee.

Jim: Right after boot training?

Bill: Yup.

Jim: Did you have to take an exam or anything like that?

Bill: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Jim: I was gonna say that they probably wouldn't have accepted you unless you passed physically and also something written.

Bill: Right. And then we were there, oh, probably from July until the end of the year—Christmas. I graduated from there and then was sent to Naval Air Gunnery School at Hollywood, Florida.

Jim: Well, wait a minute. Let's not get too far out. Tell me about that training in Memphis. What did that involve?

Bill: Well, it was basically preliminary radio, Morse code reception and sending, and minor radio repair, and that was primarily it.

Jim: You were heading to be an aviation mechanic, is that what--?

Bill: Aviation radioman.

Jim: Radioman. That was the goal. How long was that course?

Bill: This was approximately six months.

Jim: Was it difficult?

Bill: No.

Jim: No. I was kinda wondering about the dropout rate, whether it was—

Bill: No, no, not really. I think at the technical training center they also had ordnance courses and mechanic courses. Aviation mechanics. But I was in the radio end of it, radio and radar.

Jim: Right. That was operating the equipment and repair, or--?

Bill: Basically operating it.

Jim: Basically operating it. So, when you finished that, then you went to where?

Bill: Naval Air Gunnery School in Hollywood, Florida.

Jim: What was that experience like?

Bill: Oh, that was shooting guns every day. We started off with free shotguns, sort of like trap shooting or skeet shooting. And then they graduated us into shotguns that were mounted with a speed grip to simulate a machine gun. And then we graduated to turret. A ball turret with shotguns mounted in the turret. And with an illuminated site, so that—it was good training.

Jim: That sounds like it was fun.

Bill: Yeah, it was. I got a sore shoulder out of it the first couple days [laughs], but otherwise it was a lot of fun.

Jim: And once you passed that, did you get a rating? [Unintelligible, both talking] by that time?

Bill: No. We didn't get our air crew aviation ratings until we graduated from operational training.

Jim: And that was next?

Bill: Yes. That was at NAS: Naval Air Station at Miami, Florida. Opa-locka Field. In fact, that field is still in operation. That's where Miami's main airport is, where our naval station was.

Jim: So after that—you don't have that listed here. So, after you left Hollywood, you went to Opa [struggling]—

Bill: Opa-locka Naval Air Station.

Jim: C-A?

Bill: Yes.

Jim: In Florida, right?

Bill: Right.

Jim: And how long were you there?

Bill: We were there from probably about the first of March until the end of May.

Jim: Of '44?

Bill: '44.

Jim: And that training was--?

- Bill: That was training with the full crew: pilot, gunner, and radioman-gunner. And there was squadron tactics, and—
- Jim: Then you had your first experience flying in the airplane?
- Bill: First experience flying in an airplane, right.
- Jim: And what was the airplane?
- Bill: A torpedo bomber. Grumman Avenger. Right. It held three people: a pilot, turret gunner, and a radioman-gunner. Right. I had a sad experience—
- Jim: That's a three-man affair, wasn't it?
- Bill: Yup. My experience the first six times was I got airsick, and had to have a, what was called a—known today as a puke sack [laughs]. So, after about the sixth time, they said to me, "Either shape up or ship out" [laughs]. So, after that I didn't get airsick anymore. For some reason, I was over it.
- Jim: Did you find when you were graduated into shooting on a moving aircraft—was that a lot more difficult?
- Bill: Oh, yeah. Extremely difficult.
- Jim: That really takes some practice I bet. How did they—did you fly past targets, or—how did you practice your shooting?
- Bill: We practiced our shooting in operational training with tow targets, tow planes. Basically, that was it.
- Jim: Your gun, was it the Twin 50?
- Bill: My gun—the radioman's gun—was in the belly of the plane, stuck out the rear end. It was a 30 caliber.
- Jim: Oh. One single?
- Bill: Single. Caliber—yeah, 30 caliber.
- Jim: You were also the radioman.
- Bill: Right. And then the gunners—the turret gunner—in the torpedo bomber had a 50 caliber machine gun.
- Jim: One single?

Bill: Right, right. And then they had 50 caliber machine guns mounted in the wings of the plane. And we also carried rockets when we were in combat. These rockets were under each wing. So we had a lot of capacity.

Jim: When did you leave Florida for a ship? I guess that's what I need next.

Bill: Well, we went from Florida to—we were assigned a squadron out of Martha's Vineyard Island up by Cape Cod [Massachusetts]. So we entered the squadron with the VT-85.

Jim: When was that?

Bill: That would've been in the last part of June of '44.

Jim: So you were only in Opa-locka for two months then.

Bill: Yep.

Jim: Now a torpedo squadron is what? Eight planes? More?

Bill: Well, we had twenty-five pilots and fifty air crewmen in our squadron. Right. Plus the ground crew assigned to us, which was about fifteen people.

Jim: Did you go right to the *Shangri-La* [USS *Shangri-La*]?

Bill: No, we were in squadron training from about the first of July until November, all along the east coast. We were at Martha's Vineyard Island, and Hyannis, Massachusetts—

Jim: Oh, you were shore based?

Bill: Yeah. Hyannis, Massachusetts, at Falmouth, Massachusetts, and then we flew to Naval Air Station at Norfolk, Virginia. And we were there for a short time. And then we flew and boarded the ship, made our first carrier landing on the ship.

Jim: When?

Bill: Probably November of '44. The ship was newly commissioned.

Jim: The *Shangri-La*?

Bill: Right. And so it was due to go on shakedown cruise. So we were the first air group on the ship, and we went on their shakedown cruise down to the Caribbean, Trinidad, and down in that area.

Jim: Now tell me about landin' on that carrier deck. Was that a surprise to you?

Bill: Well, it was exciting.

Jim: Sure.

Bill: Yeah [laughs].

Jim: Could you see what's going on in your position?

Bill: Oh yes. Sure, you bet.

Jim: You're down under there, and I didn't know whether that obscured your forward view.

Bill: No. Well, yes. Except there was hatches on both sides, and in the rear there was a hatch where the gun—the machine gun—

Jim: Sure. I understand that.

Bill: But, no, it was quite exciting.

Jim: The radio that you had, was that a far-reaching radio that could reach out several miles?

Bill: Yeah.

Jim: When the pilot wanted to talk to the ship that was your business to put 'em in contact?

Bill: No, really he had direct communications from his microphone.

Jim: OK. So that was separate from what you did?

Bill: Yeah.

Jim: So what was your primary function then?

Bill: Well, after we got—probably out into combat, my main function was radar operation.

Jim: But you didn't get radar training at the same time you got your radio training, though.

Bill: No. I think radar training was probably sort of on-the-job training.

- Jim: 'Cause I know it was very new then.
- Bill: Right. And we used radar primarily for torpedo drops where we had a screen and it showed us the position of the target and also showed us in distances so we could advise the pilot where he was in relation to the target and also distance from the target—when to drop the torpedoes.
- Jim: How many torpedoes did you carry?
- Bill: Just one. 2000 lb torpedo.
- Jim: That's a load of ammo [??].
- Bill: You bet. Yeah, our plane could—
- Jim: Was that armed when you took off?
- Bill: We armed it. Yes, right, I had the arming switches in my compartment.
- Jim: That was one of your jobs?
- Bill: Yup. And we also could carry four 500 pound bombs. Not at the same time, I mean. Or twelve—in the belly of the plane, we had a bomb bay. Yeah, carried four 500 pound bombs or twelve 100 pound bombs. It depended on the mission we were on what we were gonna carry.
- Jim: And who dropped those?
- Bill: Well, we had what was called an intervalometer in my compartment, where you set if you were gonna, say, drop twelve 100 lb bombs, you'd space 'em with the intervalometer, or you could release 'em all at once. And the actual pickle—in other words, the trigger to drop the bombs—was on the pilot's stick in his cockpit. And he aimed the plane when we were bombing. It was more or less like a dive bomber. I mean, you aimed the plane, and just go right down on the target and release the bombs.
- Jim: That's a pretty heavy plane to be divin'.
- Bill: Yeah. It was a great plane, though.
- Jim: Big.
- Bill: Yeah, it was the biggest single-engine plane in the war, I think.
- Jim: I believe that. The only thing is I suppose it couldn't go very fast.

- Bill: Well, downhill you could go about 300 miles an hour [laughs]. We never flew at high altitudes. I think 15,000 feet was the maximum because we never carried oxygen.
- Jim: Oh. Now there's something I didn't know.
- Bill: Most of our experience in combat was at lower level bombing.
- Jim: Where did the *Shangri-La* go?
- Bill: Where did it go?
- Jim: When you came aboard?
- Bill: Okay, we went through the Panama Canal and up to San Diego, and from there we went out to Hawaii, and we were headed for combat. Our sister ship at the time heading for combat was the *USS Franklin*, which was a carrier that was just about wiped out by the Japs. Instead the *Franklin* continued on out into the combat area, and they sent us—stayed us—stayed our ship and our crews at Pearl Harbor to train night fighters. And we were put off the ship to Naval Air Station on the island of Maui. And we were there for about six weeks, I believe. And then we went from there out to the combat zone.
- Jim: And this was on the *Shangri-La*? Or did you have another ship?
- Bill: No, on the *Shangri-La*. Yeah.
- Jim: What were your quarters on board that ship?
- Bill: Our quarters aboard the *Shangri-La* were on what was called “the island.” It was—
- Jim: Where in relation to the hangar deck was this island?
- Bill: Well, it was above the hangar deck.
- Jim: It was above that.
- Bill: Yeah. It was basically level with the flight deck.
- Jim: The *Shangri-La* was an Essex-class, correct?
- Bill: Right. It was the largest carrier at the time.
- Jim: Yeah, I've been aboard the [*USS*] *Valley Forge*. Same thing.

- Bill: At the time, it was the largest of the Essex-class carriers. And we went out, actually, in our task force, we were Task Force 58 when Admiral Mitscher and Admiral Spruance had the 5th Fleet. That was – our flag was the 5th Fleet. And we had such ships as the *Missouri*, the *Iowa*, the *Wisconsin*, the *Franklin*, the *Ticonderoga*, the *Yorktown* were all sister ships in that task group.
- Jim: And where was your first mission there?
- Bill: First mission was on a small Japanese island where they had a manufacturing phosphate plant for munitions.
- Jim: Do you recall the island?
- Bill: Yeah, it was called Minami-Daito-Jima. It was part of the Iwo Jima group. After that most of our missions early were during the Okinawa campaign, where we did air support work with ground Marines and Army planes.
- Jim: You mean dropping 500 pounders on the Japanese?
- Bill: They had a spotter plane that'd give us the target site, and we had a grid over a map so that we could spot what they were talking about, and then they'd direct us into, let's say, a Jap troop concentration or something. And, yeah, we'd drop antipersonnel bombs.
- Jim: 500 pounders usually?
- Bill: 500, yeah. 100 pounders too.
- Jim: Did you have a chance to drop that pickle?
- Bill: Not at that time, no.
- Jim: So, at this island, then that was pretty short work. You won't there--
- Bill: Well, we were at Okinawa until—
- Jim: I'm talkin' about before Okinawa.
- Bill: Oh no. That was just a bypass deal on the way to Okinawa.
- Jim: Well, that was the first of [unintelligible].
- Bill: Right. We spent the greater part of April, May, and June at Okinawa.
- Jim: On the *Shangri-La*?

Bill: Yeah. I was on the *Shangri-La* all the time during combat.

Jim: I interviewed a pilot. Lives in Madison, just outside of Madison. Burt Avedon. He was a fighter pilot aboard the *Shangri-La*.

Bill: What was his name?

Jim: Burt Avedon.

Bill: Well, before I go I'd like to have his address [laughs].

Jim: Yeah, he's in the phone book.

Bill: Yeah. Avedon.

Jim: But he was on several ships, so this guy's moved around quite a bit.

Bill: Was he during World War II?

Jim: Yeah, and then [unintelligible] he was a career guy.

Bill: Oh, yeah. See, aboard the Essex-class carriers they had what was called an air group, and the air group consisted of fighters, fighter-bombers, dive bomber, and torpedo squadron. And all told, there was approximately 100 planes aboard ship. I'd say we had aboard the *Shangri-La* we also had six night fighters, which were the first out at that time—first naval air night fighters.

Jim: So, did your plane ever get shot at?

Bill: Oh, many times.

Jim: From ground fire?

Bill: Yeah, basically.

Jim: You never had to deal with any of the Zeros[??]?

Bill: No, nope.

Jim: And it worked, you say, it performed well?

Bill: Oh, yeah, you bet. It was the best plane there was.

Jim: And how about the other crew members. Did you all stay on the plane and the ship together throughout your experience?

Bill: My crew, you mean? Yes, we lived together as a crew from operational training all the way through combat.

Jim: Do you still keep in contact with these characters? The ones that are left.

Bill: Well, I do with the pilot. The gunner died many years ago.

Jim: So, do you have reunions pretty often?

Bill: Well, our group—our first reunion as a whole squadron was in 1954. And it was in Chicago, which would have been the anniversary of our commission as a squadron. And then we didn't have another reunion until about in the '70's. Since 1975, I believe we've had a reunion every year.

Jim: That's great, that's wonderful.

Bill: Like the one coming up is gonna be in South Dakota. Deadwood, South Dakota.

Jim: Not one of the grandest spots on earth [both laugh], but at least you get together.

Bill: Well, it's close to Mount Rushmore, you know. One of our pilots lives in Rapid City. So he's hosting it for the group.

Jim: And the group will expect how many people?

Bill: Oh, probably about twenty couples probably.

Jim: That's pretty nice.

Bill: Mm hmm. About 40 people.

Jim: Hey, that's just terrific. Say, your radios worked well? You didn't have a lot of trouble fussing with them?

Bill: No.

Jim: Seemed to behave with all that [unintelligible].

Bill: Yep.

Jim: Bouncing around on that deck of that carrier didn't seem to interfere with them?

Bill: Nope.

- Jim: Did you have to climb out of your spot on the bottom of that plane when you landed on a carrier? Or not?
- Bill: No, we stayed right in the compartment.
- Jim: Some planes had lower—
- Bill: Well they had a ball turret, belly turret. Yeah, like the B-17s.
- Jim: Yeah, they had to crawl out of that [both laugh].
- Bill: Oh, yeah, yeah. You bet, yeah, right.
- Jim: You got mail from home on a regular basis?
- Bill: Not regular. Once in a while.
- Jim: And how was food aboard your ship?
- Bill: Not too bad. At the time we griped about it, but it really wasn't too bad [laughs]. All I remember, we never had butter so they used to make homemade bread aboard ship, and it was real good. But instead of having butter to put on it, I used to put salt on it. And in fact, I first had my first Spam sandwich aboard ship. I never thought I'd like something like luncheon meat or something like that, but that Spam was really good.
- Jim: I like Spam. Still do.
- Bill: Yeah, I do too.
- Jim: It tasted good to me. So after your cruise around Okinawa and that battle was finally settled, did you stay in that area or go to Kerama Retto or somewhere like that?
- Bill: Well, we operated in the home islands of Japan. We attacked kamikaze airfields and Kure Naval Base, which was the largest Japanese naval base. And bombed—probably we were in the 1,000-plane Navy raid on Tokyo. I think that was on July 10th, 1945. Then we cruised up and down the Jap islands seeking targets of opportunity.
- Jim: In that time there was not much opposition from airplanes.
- Bill: No, no, mostly—
- Jim: You didn't have the threat of the kamikazes?

Bill: Pardon?

Jim: No threat from the kamikazes?

Bill: Well, yes. Not against our planes as such, but—

Jim: Your ship?

Bill: Against the ships, oh yeah, there was—

Jim: I mean *your* ship. I don't worry about the others.

Bill: Oh, yeah. In fact our ship, on my birthday May 4th, I remember distinctly. When we were not flying, and the ship was at general quarters, the air crewmen and pilots such as myself had a compartment they were assigned which was underneath the hangar deck, somewhere where there was a lot of armor plating for protection. And while we were in this compartment they had the ships intercom communication system open. And we could hear them talking to the pilots and stuff that were flying against these kamikazes, and on May 4th, my birthday, a kamikaze was heading right for the *Shangri-La*. It was about 100 yards from our bow when it was shot down by the *USS Wisconsin*.

Jim: Hey, how about that. That was the closest you came to being hit?

Bill: The *Shangri-La*, yeah, right.

Jim: That's what I meant. Then you were there until the war's end?

Bill: Yup. September 2nd.

Jim: And then you bring some people home, some prisoners of war?

Bill: On September 2nd we flew over the peace signing aboard the fleet, which was in Tokyo harbor at the time. I think on the 3rd of September, we were transferred from the *Shangri-La* to the *USS Attu*, which was Attu, which was a jeep carrier, a small escort-type carrier. From there, we came back to Hawaii and then back to Coronado Heights.

Jim: You transferred with your plane, or as just individuals?

Bill: Individuals.

Jim: Yeah, the planes --

Bill: The pilots and crew.

- Jim: The planes stayed aboard the *Shangri-La*.
- Bill: Yeah, yup. Right. And we came back to the States at Coronado Heights, California.
- Jim: On the jeep carrier.
- Bill: Yup.
- Jim: Okay. Well, that was a thrill.
- Bill: Yeah, you bet.
- Jim: Did your folks know you were coming?
- Bill: Ah, no.
- Jim: They didn't.
- Bill: No.
- Jim: In the war you wouldn't [??].
- Bill: Unh unh.
- Jim: They must have suspected that with the war being over you'd be home soon.
- Bill: Yeah, my mother was the only one living. My dad had passed away. Yeah, I got home—I think we had leave shortly after we got to Coronado Heights, and we had a—I think it was a—twenty-two day leave or twenty-seven day leave, whatever it was. Yeah, that was great.
- Jim: Did they have a celebration for you in Washburn, [Wisconsin]?
- Bill: No. They didn't even know I was coming I guess [laughs]. Nope. Pretty low key.
- Jim: Pretty low key. Shortly after that, you were out of the service, is that correct?
[End of Tape One, Side A]
- Bill: No, I didn't get out of the service until—you had to have enough points and age and everything, you know, so I stayed in until March of '46. I was shipped back to—I think we reported back to Minneapolis, and then they sent us out to Seattle. The Naval Air Station at Seattle. And we disassembled radio equipment and just passed the time away I guess waiting to get out.

Jim: Kill a little time.

Bill: Yeah, right.

Jim: After the war, did you use your GI bill?

Bill: Yup. I went to the University of Wisconsin.

Jim: In what?

Bill: I was in the Ag school [School of Agriculture], graduated in –major was soils and agronomy.

Jim: So that provided a job for ya?

Bill: Yeah. I graduated in 1950 and went to work for the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, out in Minot, North Dakota. And from then on I proceeded to other jobs.

Jim: In the same department?

Bill: No, no. I came back in --

Jim: You didn't like the job in Minot, North Dakota?

Bill: Well, it was a typical government job. You didn't know what the Congress was going to do with appropriations, so I decided to—

Jim: By this time, were you married?

Bill: I'd just married. In fact, well, I was married the last year in school.

Jim: I see. When you quit the government, did you get another government job, or did you go into private business?

Bill: I went to private business.

Jim: What was that?

Bill: I went to work for an outfit called Northrup-King up in Minneapolis.

Jim: Northrup-King.

Bill: Yeah, right. And I was with them about eleven and a half years, both up in Minneapolis in a sales territory and then I was transferred to Madison. Let's see –we lived in Madison for about four or five years, and then I went to work for

another company, which was Union Carbide Company. It was in the chemical industry.

Jim: Where was that?

Bill: Here in Madison.

Jim: So you finished out your working career here?

Bill: Well, they were sold out and bought by another company so I ended up with a—the parent company was called ConAgra, which is a big food conglomerate.

Jim: Well, you should've had—great experienced fellow being in this business after all the training you've had in soils like that—you must've had a wonderful job.

Bill: It was a good job, yep.

Jim: Good.

Bill: Yeah. I brought along a couple things that you might be interested in here. You want to look at 'em? We had a log of our—

Jim: Wait a minute, I'm not through asking you questions [laughs].

Bill: Oh, alright.

Jim: Did you join any veterans organizations?

Bill: No, none.

Jim: Well, I think that's about the only last question that I needed to ask. Oh, and you already told me you keep track of your buddies.

Bill: Oh, yeah. You bet.

Jim: So you're very tight, that's impressive.

Bill: Yeah, you bet.

Jim: I'm sure that it's an enjoyable experience.

Bill: The ranks are getting thinner all the time [laughs].

Jim: We're all deteriorating.

Bill: Yeah, right. **[End of Interview]**