

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Frank Weston
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Tell me about your naval service – how it began.

Weston: World War II started when I was in high school. I was a senior and wanted to join up and my dad says, “Show me a diploma first.” So in June I signed up; I was seventeen. Got in the Navy. At that time they weren’t shipping guys until they were eighteen overseas, so I went to school at Navy Pier, the aviation mechanics school. And then I went to gunnery school, that was in Hollywood, Florida, and then I went up to Willow Grove, outside of Philadelphia, then I went aboard ship on the *Monterrey* in June of ’43 in Camden, New Jersey. I stayed the whole war on the *Monterrey*. The *Monterrey* had the honor of having the most nautical miles of any ship, any man of war, in the Pacific during World War II. So we had the honor of leading the fleet in for President Truman to honor the fleet coming back from the war.

Smith: Really?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: Describe the *Monterrey*. What kind of ship it was, what it did.

Weston: Okay. The *Monterrey* started as a cruiser. There was nine of them designed as cruisers, and they decided they didn’t need cruisers, they needed carriers. So they redesigned them while they were being built. They never finished them as cruisers. It was really named the *Dayton* as a cruiser, and finished as the *Monterrey* as a carrier. There were nine of them. Princeton class carriers they called them. So we had a cruiser hull; we were fast. We could go thirty-five, thirty-six miles per hour - thirty knots.

Smith: As an aircraft carrier, we were in many sea battles (12 battle stars).

Weston: While I was there I was a mechanic on planes; I was a carburetor specialist, worked on the planes as a mechanic. That’s why I didn’t have much contact

with Jerry during the war, because he was ship's company. He was navigator and athletic officer and a gunnery officer.

Smith: And what were those functions?

Weston: Well, he was on the bridge when he was navigation; when he led athletics or exercises, he was doing that. Otherwise, when we were in general quarters, he was due out at the gun mounts and aircraft guns. That was his function.

Smith: How large a crew?

Weston: Fifteen hundred men.

Smith: And what were conditions like on the ship?

Weston: Not too bad. I was a kid.

Smith: Was it an adventure?

Weston: For me, it was good. I mean, when you've seen a little action, you didn't get scared until afterwards. You'd get the shakes when you figured what you went through.

Smith: Could you be prepared for what you were about to experience?

Weston: Not really. You never knew what was going to happen.

Smith: What were the dangers that you confronted?

Weston: Well submarines were the worst. And then at night the Bettys would come in with torpedoes and try to torpedo us.

Smith: Explain to a generation that doesn't know: what were the Bettys?

Weston: Bettys were twin engine bombers, Japanese. They were a torpedo; they would come at dawn on the horizon and try to torpedo you. I saw about three ships get torpedoed or dive bombed – you know – kamikazes. We traveled in a group, usually anywhere from one to four carriers, six or eight. Toward the end of the war we had sixteen carriers out there, man of war carriers.

Smith: And where were you in the Pacific?

Weston: Where was I? I've got a history here. I can't tell you unless I read it to you. I was all over. The first, I think, battle we were in was the Marianas, when the Marines went in on Marianas Islands. I can't remember – we were all over.

Smith: Were you part of the fleet at Leyte Gulf, when MacArthur returned?

Weston: Yeah. I was in the typhoon. Of course, Jerry was in that, too.

Smith: Tell us, was that the scariest?

Weston: The waves were so high, you just said your prayers. You have no idea of what the feeling is. You think you're gone.

Smith: Did weathermen alert you to the fact that you were about to go this?

Weston: Halsey, the fool, took us into it. They wanted to really burn his butt, you know, but they didn't.

Smith: Tell us about Halsey.

Weston: Well, I don't know the man, but there are write ups about him. Nimitz saved his butt because he wanted to sink the Japanese fleet, and he was following them to get them. We went right into this typhoon. It was his fault.

Smith: Did anyone tell you that you were about to go into a typhoon?

Weston: No.

Smith: So it was a surprise?

Weston: You didn't know what was going on. Your job was to work on planes.

Smith: So the weather was a surprise to you? This storm was a surprise?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: And what time of day? Did it break during the day?

Weston: Well, it seemed to me it broke just before breakfast. Went down to eat breakfast and the tables – they had fold up tables and benches – they were sliding down the deck.

Smith: At what point did you realize – presumably you ran into rough patches all the time?

Weston: Then they would put us on general quarters. We had to report to our station for general quarters, which is “enemies in the area.” But there was also a warning for the storm. We went up there and we started tying down the planes with three-quarter inch steel cable. They broke loose and the gasoline from the tanks caught fire. We caught fire. I was in the hanger deck during the fire and explosion. I was lucky; I was behind a stack when there was a fire and explosion right there. But I helped push the planes over the side – that was the easiest way. We raised the curtain, I hankered up and we just shoved them over so they wouldn’t burn.

Smith: Really?

Weston: Some of them would be on fire while we were pushing them.

Smith: How many planes would you ordinarily carry?

Weston: We had about forty-five planes. I think between forty and forty-five. It wasn’t a big carrier. It was what they called medium class.

Smith: And a big carrier would carry?

Weston: Would carry sixty to eighty, ninety planes.

Smith: And ordinarily they would all be out on hangar deck?

Weston: On the hangar deck or the flight deck. They had them on the aft part of the flight deck to get ready for launching. The first ones would launch by catapult. And then after they had catapulted a bunch off they had enough room to take off and you’d taken weight off. We’d always head into the wind, get the most lift for the planes.

Smith: I’m intrigued. The storm went on, was it prolonged?

Weston: Two days.

Smith: Two days?

Weston: There was a write up in *Readers Digest* on it. I don't know if you've ever read that.

Smith: I haven't, but thank you.

Weston: I have a lot of papers for you to see.

Smith: Perfect, thank you. So this was a day and night and day...

Weston: And the next morning after the storm, the sea was like a mirror. You couldn't believe it.

Smith: Is it worse at night?

Weston: You never know. At night you are lucky because you are in your bunk. We had bunks four high, and you can strap yourself in. You go to sleep you're so darn tired.

Smith: Even while the ship is...?

Weston: Oh yeah. You get used to it.

Smith: Were most of the planes lost?

Weston: Yeah. The waves were so heavy they washed right over the flight deck. We had a chief petty officer that washed overboard. The next wave caught him and washed him back aboard.

Smith: You're kidding? Really?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: Did you lose people?

Weston: We lost five, those were on the hangar deck where I was. They got caught in the explosion or crushed; either caught fire or crushed.

Smith: By the planes exploding?

Weston: The gasoline fires from the tanks, with the gasoline. They broke loose, they were banging into each other. The gas started leaking out of the tanks and the scraping of the metal caught fire.

Smith: Did you, at that point, think it was maybe a little bit less of an adventure than you had bargained for? Or more of an adventure that you had bargained for?

Weston: Yes, you betcha.

Smith: And you almost lost Ford.

Weston: Right. They sent him down; he was on the forward part of the hangar deck. I actually never saw him down there, because it's quite a long hangar deck. But they tell me that there is an article someplace that the captain sent him down to help, to see what he could do to get the good of the planes down there on the hangar deck.

Smith: Again, for people who have never been on the ship: hanger deck and flight deck. What's the difference?

Weston: Well, the flight deck is where all the planes take off from and land on. The hangar deck is the next step down. They have elevators; they can bring them down and shove them back in and tie them down. And that's where we work on them. Every time a pilot comes in, if there is anything wrong with the plane, he makes a memo and then that comes to our officers and that is handed down as a worksheet for us to do.

Smith: So the fires, or the explosions...

Weston: Were on the hangar deck.

Smith: On the hangar deck?

Weston: Yes. Because the plane broke loose down there and then they caught fire.

Smith: And you were in this small, congested area.

Weston: It's not small, it's as wide as the ship was.

Smith: And Ford was at the other end of the hangar deck?

Weston: They sent him down. He was actually on the bridge when the storm was going. He may have been navigator at the time, I don't know. I didn't associate with him much aboard ship because there are two separate divisions.

And also, he was an officer and I was an enlisted man. So therefore, you didn't have much in common. They had their corridors and we had ours.

Smith: But now, his athletic skills came into play?

Weston: A lot of times, when we would be out of a bad zone, they would have what they called exercise up on the flight deck. And everybody wanted to go up and he'd be one of the leaders. Actually, he was assistant athletic instructor. You don't go back far enough. Joe Stydahar – football player – Chicago Bears. Later became a head football coach for San Francisco '49ers. He was our head athletic director. And Ford was his assistant.

Smith: Okay. And were these regularly scheduled?

Weston: No, whenever convenient, depending on the area we were in or if it was a danger zone or not, whatever you want to call it.

Smith: And what form did it take?

Weston: We had exercises, they had exercises, we had wrestling mats, they'd play basketball. On the elevators we'd hang baskets on and we'd play basketball. And Ford was a great basketball fan. He used to do officiating for – we had division teams aboard ship – and he would do the officiating for it.

Smith: Now tell me again – I'm trying to understand: the divisions, the divisional makeup on the ship.

Weston: I was in the V-2 division, which was plane maintenance. V-1 division was where they moved the planes around and then they had a gasoline division. That was all in the air department. Other than that, everything else was ship's company. We had the – well, whatever you wanted – we had the catapult people, too. And we had the radio men, the hydraulic men, but they were all part of the air department. And it was kind of a little - between the ship's company and the air department – there was always a little tension.

Smith: Okay. What is ship's company?

Weston: Ship's company is the people who run the ship.

Smith: Okay.

Weston: They are responsible for everything like food and maintenance and whatever.

Smith: Is it a little bit of a hierarchy?

Weston: Well, yeah. They didn't like the air department because we were preferred. We were above board. Like when we were launching planes, I had to be up there in case the carburetor needed a little quick adjustment, or so. And I was on the flight deck. Some of them never seen daylight, you know, unless there were athletics.

Smith: Just day to day existence – what was the food like?

Weston: Not too bad. One time we didn't meet our tanker to refuel and to get food. We didn't get meat and all we had to eat for about a week was green beans and butter – all you wanted. We ran out of bread and couldn't bake anything. So, to this day, I don't care much about green beans.

Smith: I can understand. Did you put into ports?

Weston: Oh, sure. We came into Pearl Harbor several times. Tied up at Ford Island and I would go aboard, fly with the planes to Kaneohe Bay, it was a Marine base across from Ford Island, and I'd stay with the planes.

Smith: At Pearl Harbor, could you still see evidence of the Japanese attack, or had that all been cleaned up?

Weston: We never got there until '43.

Smith: Did you ever visit the Philippines?

Weston: We were on islands – they'd give us four cans of beer and a ham sandwich and put us on some island with a bunch of coral on it. Actually, we never got to any villages or anything. Luzon or something like that – some outer islands, but never got to the main part of the Philippines.

Smith: In the South Pacific – did you ever get around Australia or New Zealand?

Weston: Never got on shore down in that area. We were not too much in the south. We mostly, what we did was send our planes in when the Marines would take over these islands back from the Japanese. Tarawa Atoll, and Macon and there's several of them.

Smith: You were on Wake Island?

Weston: I was never at Wake. No. Wake was before my time, actually.

Smith: Okinawa?

Weston: Okinawa...

Smith: The battle was late in the war.

Weston: No, I don't think so. That was another part of the war.

Smith: I would be fascinated to know how the Navy felt toward the Army, and particularly toward MacArthur?

Weston: Dugout Doug, we called him. Old Glory Hound, Dugout Doug – that's what we called him. That's the feeling we had.

Smith: And was that in part because he was a showman?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: That's interesting you say that, because when Stephen Ambrose visited here, he was working on his book on the Pacific war - which is now on HBO - he said he had talked to hundreds of veterans of the Pacific war and he had never met one who had anything good to say about General MacArthur.

Weston: Well, I can't say he was a bad man or anything because I never met him as an individual, but that's just the attitude we had.

Smith: Was some of that a rivalry between the Navy and the Army?

Weston: More Navy and Marines.

Smith: Really? How so?

Weston: Well, the Marines thought they were better men than the Navy men. You had to be a better person to get in the Marines than you could to get in the Navy. So they held themselves one notch above us. We had a Marine detachment aboard ship, about fifteen fellows. But they were in charge of protecting the captain of the ship.

Smith: Of course you didn't know there was an atomic bomb in the works - did you anticipate taking part eventually in an invasion of Japan?

Weston: We sure did. We were worried about that.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Weston: Well, we didn't know anything about the bomb until after it went off. All we always heard about was the hell they dug in on the islands. The Japanese - if they were doing that on the mainland - it would be a long war. And we all wanted to go home, naturally. So we were very happy when the war ended.

Smith: I was just thinking, sort of daily occurrences; how did you get mail?

Weston: Oh, well, that came when we had supply ships. They had to refuel us and we had to have oil for our diesel engines to make the ship go, we had to get gasoline for the planes to fly, and we had to get food. And we'd also get mail on those supply ships. Sometimes it would be a long time, three months or three weeks or six months before we got mail - depending on your supply line; dependent on people in the port, too. Sometimes we'd put in on some of these islands out there, and there would be a supply ship there. We'd get supplies that way.

Smith: So a letter from home was treasured?

Weston: Oh, yes, oh very much so.

Smith: Particularly, I suppose, if it was from a sweetheart?

Weston: Well, yeah. I had a couple of girlfriends I wrote to.

Smith: How aware were you of the rest of the war? How much information did you get about the bigger picture?

- Weston: They would announce it on the PA system. Sometimes they would announce we're headed into attacks the next day. We'd have to have our planes ready at dawn. They would be actually in the dark getting them wound up. They'd take off just before it got light for bombing. And they'd come back and land and refuel it and bomb more.
- Smith: But in terms of a geopolitical war, what's going on in Europe and what's going on in the bigger picture?
- Weston: Actually, we didn't hear much.
- Smith: Really? So you were pretty isolated?
- Weston: Oh yeah, very much so, aboard ship. You only heard what they told you.
- Smith: Were there people on board who didn't want to be there?
- Weston: Oh, yes, several of them would fake sickness and stuff like that. And some of them, nerves got to them.
- Smith: Really?
- Weston: Yeah. We had one fellow, he got this alopecia, lost all his hair and became bald because he couldn't take it. I was very fortunate, I wasn't smart enough to...I was young, I felt sorry for the draftees that came in. They were thirty, thirty-two, had families, children, and a wife, and they brought them out there.
- Smith: What was discipline like on board?
- Weston: Pretty good because most of the guys felt that they had to do their job to get the war over with. So it was pretty good. You had a few of them when we'd pull into Pearl that left the ship. They'd hear about other ships going back to the States and they'd go aboard and they deserted.
- Smith: Really? There were deserters?
- Weston: Yeah.
- Smith: What punishments were meted out?
- Weston: I have no idea, because...

Smith: You didn't see any of your crewmates punished for infractions?

Weston: No, no punishment that I ever saw.

Smith: How long were you on the *Monterrey*?

Weston: About two and a half years.

Smith: To the end of the war?

Weston: Right to the end of the war. In fact, I was there when we came back after the war ended, the fifteenth of August, and we went into Tokyo Bay, and I saw the *Missouri* in the distance where they signed the thing. We pulled in, in the morning and left that afternoon for the Philippines. We picked up prisoners, we picked up people that were sick and took them back. We came back to New York via the Panama Canal.

Smith: So you were there when the bomb was dropped?

Weston: Oh, yes.

Smith: How did you find out about it?

Weston: They announced it over the PA system.

Smith: How did they describe it?

Weston: It was just mindboggling. You had no idea what an atomic bomb was. They told of what happened, how many people were dead, and it really kind of scared you in a way. Because what are you going to do?

Smith: What was the reaction?

Weston: The reaction was good because it hastened the end of the war. So the reaction was good.

Smith: And then of course, with the second bombing in Nagasaki...

Weston: That did the job, yeah.

Smith: And then came the news. Did someone say the war is over? The Japanese surrendered?

- Weston: On the fifteenth, we launched planes and within an hour they had on the PA system that the war is over and we had to get the planes back.
- Smith: Were you part of Task Force 58?
- Weston: Yeah. I'm going to tell you some stories. We had Third Fleet, Fifth Fleet, and Seventh Fleet – are you familiar with that?
- Smith: Yeah.
- Weston: Task force – you know that's all one fleet, don't you?
- Smith: Turkey shoot.
- Weston: Yeah, it's the same ships, depending on the admiral in charge.
- Smith: Oh, really?
- Weston: Nimitz was there, it was the Fifth Fleet, I think. When Halsey was there it was the Third Fleet. And then they had Kincaid and somebody else, too. And it depended on the admiral leading the fleet at the time. We didn't have three fleets out there; we had one fleet with different admirals. I'm sure you guys know that.
- Smith: No, I don't. Was Nimitz admired by the men?
- Weston: Yes. Nimitz was admired much more than Halsey. There were the old timers, the real – what you call the people that were in the Navy for...
- Smith: Career. Career people.
- Weston: Career – they liked Halsey because he was their kind of guy. But to the rest of the people he was a glory hound. He wanted to sink the Japanese fleet, that's what took us into that typhoon. I'm sure you know that; you've heard that before.
- Smith: The war is over; you say you came back through the Panama Canal?
- Weston: Yeah, we went in to Tokyo Bay, picked up our Marines, which they had taken in for the occupation; we sat there the day of the signing, and immediately left for the Philippines. We picked up people that were sick or wounded and so

forth; go to Pearl Harbor. From Pearl Harbor to Panama; and up to New York. And we led the fleet into New York City for Truman to review from a presidential yacht because we were the ship with the most nautical war miles of any ship during the Pacific war.

Smith: All drawn up in uniform for the review.

Weston: Oh, yeah. We had to line up on deck and wear whites. You've seen carriers where the guys are.

Smith: Where would Ford have been in something like that?

Weston: Well, he would be with the officers, too, but he wasn't aboard anymore. He got off after the typhoon, you know.

Smith: Oh, okay.

Weston: Ford didn't stay until the end of the war. After the typhoon, we pulled into Bremerton, Washington. See, we had four screws on our ship. You know what screws are? We lost three of them in the typhoon. So we had to come into Bremerton to dry dock to get repaired. And he got off the ship at that time, I think. I'm not sure. You fellows probably know that, when he got off the ship. I'm sure it was either there or in Pearl Harbor on our way back.

Smith: Okay.

Weston: The article I have says he went to Glenview, Illinois, that's where he was stationed when the war ended. You have that probably.

Smith: No, that's helpful. Did you have contact with him in later years?

Weston: Oh, sure, after the war. The contact I had with him was after I got out of college. I didn't see him the first three or four years, after the war because he was in Girmich. But then he ran for Congress. We bought a trailer; we were in a trailer park at Holland, Michigan. I don't know if you are familiar with a Coast Guard station that's out there. His folks, either his brother or his folks, had a cabin in the hills behind the state park and we used to come over and I'd go right past the cabin to the beach from my trailer. And when he was (vacationing) there in the summertime, I'd run into him many times or I'd see

him in a little store there. I used to pick up groceries on the way home. Then after I got my drug store, he used to stop in and say hello whenever he spoke at athletics banquets. He was a great politician to speak at athletic banquets or graduations when he was a congressman. He did a lot of that. And then ran into him up at Cadillac, Michigan a few times skiing. Lee Rotary – I was in Lee Rotary and he would speak at our Rotary meetings. He was a great one to do that.

Smith: Did he change over time?

Weston: No. Jerry was always Jerry. We were never close, but we knew each other. Whenever he'd see me, he'd say, "Hi, Frank." After he got to be vice president, I never saw him again. Before that, many times.

Smith: How has this area changed since then?

Weston: How has it changed? The biggest change I've seen is the Dutch aren't as Dutchy as they used to be. They are more open.

Smith: Now tell us, we'd love to know. How Dutch were the Dutch fifty years ago, and how did it manifest itself?

Weston: Well, they never went to the movies or danced. When TV came out, they didn't go to TV. They didn't trade with you if you didn't have a Dutch name. They were very clannish. There is nothing wrong with the people; they are good people. They are clean people, they maintain good homes, but they just – within themselves – they had strong beliefs. Very Dutchy. This town was that way. Now they go to shows now, they watch TV and they dance.

Smith: Whether that's progress or not, we'll leave it to others to decide. Were you surprised when he died at the amount of reaction that there was?

Weston: Oh, yes, very much so. He was well respected, nationally and locally. He was one of the finest presidents we've ever had, I believe.

Smith: Did you ever meet Mrs. Ford?

Weston: No, never met Mrs. Ford. I met the boys one time in a barbershop in Holland, when they were pretty small.

Smith: Was he with them?

Weston: No, he had dropped them off and he was going to pick them up because I got to talking to them.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Weston: Very highly. I had a lot of respect for Jerry, knowing his background and everything.

Smith: There were a lot of people who were bothered – the image of him as a klutz – because, in fact, physically, he was a natural athlete.

Weston: Well, he was a stud when he was a kid.

Smith: Good basketball player?

Weston: He was good at most anything he did. He had a good body and he maintained it. He was a good athlete. Like I say, athlete because he was eleven years older than I am.

Smith: How did your experience on the *Monterrey* affect you?

Weston: Well, the Navy taught me one thing: I went out of high school into the Navy, and I didn't have any other form of education, and they had these fellows who had one year of college – they made them ninety day wonders – and they were in charge of us. And we had to teach them what to do, if you know what I mean. So I made up mind when I got out of the service, I wanted to go to school and get an education because I thought it meant more to have that college. It would give you a break in life and I saw it there. So that was the biggest thing I learned about the Navy.

Smith: Do you keep in touch with your old shipmates?

Weston: Actually, I don't have any of them left that are alive. I used to keep in touch with a few of them, yes. But they are all gone.

Smith: What do you think it means to be part of the Greatest Generation? How do you feel about that title?

Weston: Well, I think we are very fortunate to be that. I don't think there's going to be that much luck for the next generations to come. They are going to have a rougher time. My wife and I always say we lived during the good years.

Smith: Really? Now that included the Depression and the war?

Weston: Well, I remember the Depression. My dad worked on WPA – fifteen dollars a week and groceries. I can remember going with a car, going to the stores and getting groceries as a kid.

Smith: But you say you lived in the good times?

Weston: Well, I do, I think so. Hey, I was real lucky. I bought my first car when I was thirteen, going on fourteen, you could get a driver's license. I drove to the police station with my dad, in my own car, to get my driver's license on my fourteenth birthday. And I was working at gas stations; I worked at Gracewil Country Club and the Highlands out here caddying. I worked in drugstores, I set pins in the bowling alley, had a lot of good experience. You could buy a Ford Model A when I was a freshman in high school for \$25.00.

Smith: Do you think, in fact, that the Depression and the war fostered a sense of community that maybe is missing today?

Weston: Oh, yeah, at the time relations got together and friends for picnics and stuff. You don't have much of that anymore. It's hard to get the family together because they are spread out so much.

Smith: We're a more materialistic culture.

Weston: Oh, yes. I think television has spoiled the world.

Smith: Amen. That's the perfect note on which to end. This was wonderful. Thank you so much.

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