

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
John Fifer
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
May 14, 2010

Smith: First of all, thank you very much for coming up here and doing this.

Fifer: You're welcome.

Smith: Tell me, first of all, how you got into the Navy and how you got on to the *Monterrey*?

Fifer: Well, I was just out of high school.

Smith: And that was where?

Fifer: In South Bend, Indiana. Of course it was in '43, so we'd already been at war from '41-'42. Boy, I wanted to get in so bad.

Smith: Really? Describe for a generation that maybe has trouble understanding that. Why did you want to get in so bad?

Fifer: Pearl Harbor just really hit hard. Those kind of things just get to me. But I also could hardly wait to get out – when it was all over. So I went to Great Lakes, I think it was for three months. Then they shipped us in a troop train to California, and then took a troop ship to New Caledonia, which is kind of due east of Australia.

Smith: Today I think it's probably Indonesia.

Fifer: Yeah, a pretty big island. I think the French owned it. We were there for a while, then they put us out on another troop ship and took us to the New Hebrides. One day here comes these ships. They had a big, real nice bay area there. And here come all these ships in there. The *Monterrey* was one of them.

Smith: Now, let me stop you for a second because – were you under age when you joined?

Fifer: No, I was seventeen.

- Smith: They took seventeen year olds?
- Fifer: Yeah. Well, I don't know. My parents signed, let's put it that way.
- Smith: Okay. Was this a bit of an adventure, initially – to see the world?
- Fifer: Oh my goodness, it is a big ocean I tell you. I can't get over it. It is huge. Even when you look at a map and you see these little dots, islands all over the place. But the *Bunker Hill* was in there and the *Monterrey* and I forget some of the other ships that were in there. And of course, everything was alphabetical – so it was you, you, you... And I don't know how many fellows - they put us on the *Monterrey* - but there were seven of us – all of our last names began with a F. And they put us all in the same division, which was the air division, flight deck.
- Smith: Now, did you have any knowledge that you were going to be put on a ship?
- Fifer: You didn't know it because on all the islands they had Navy guys. It was amazing how everything had to be shipped clear across that ocean – from food to ammunition – everything – guys. It's a wonder we won the thing. But I think the enemy just spread themselves too far, I think.
- Smith: Long supply lines.
- Fifer: So then when you are in the air division, of course, they had warnings right away when you launched planes, you had to find the landing gear and sit there. They told everybody to take off and you pulled a chock(?). And then the wings had to be on the fighters. You released a lever and then the wings would slide out and then two or three guys would have to get on each wing and pull it up until they locked. When they landed they had to do the same thing the other way – they had to push it up until it locked.
- Smith: I assume you were in this division – what other divisions made up the crew? What other functions?
- Fifer: The gunnery division, it was just everything – your supplies, the quartermasters. A good friend of mine was a paymaster, and I had a good friend who was down in the engine room. Of course, they'd come up and visit

guys. I think most of the guys were from the East that were aboard the *Monterrey* at that time.

Smith: Was there a hierarchy? And I don't mean in the formal sense, obviously, the Navy has a hierarchy. But was there an informal hierarchy? If you were in the engine room, was that less desirable than X?

Fifer: No, I don't think so.

Smith: There weren't functions, particular functions, that you would much prefer to do as opposed to something else.

Fifer: No, I don't think so. I really don't. Well, anyway, you did what they told you.

Smith: Well, of course. And did you do that function through the end of the war, or were people trained to do different things?

Fifer: You had to work as a mess cook for three months, if you were a Seaman's 2nd Class or 1st Class. And then you'd go back in your division again after that. Then I got into the arresting gear group – which is the wires and the barriers that catch the planes when they come in. You started out as a chase and hooks. A guy from each side would have to run out and unhook it from the wire and I did that until the end of the war, actually.

Smith: Is there danger associated with that?

Fifer: Oh, yeah. You're out there, before the plane even stops, you are on your way out there. All you do is watch that hook and if it catches one, you know he's going to stop. So you are on your way out there. You had to wear real heavy gloves because of the wires. They were all chopped up and greasy. And you had to grab the hook and break it loose from the wire and then turn around and run because that props – he's gunning it to go forward and you had to watch the props.

Smith: Did anyone ever not watch it? Did you ever lose anyone to an accident?

Fifer: One guy walked into one. Young guy, real young guy. It was towards the end of the war and he'd just come aboard, I think. We lost a guy that way. Like in the morning, when you first start up, all them props going and you're sitting

there on the wheel waiting to pull – and when you've got to grab the thing, you get out of the way for the next one. It was a dangerous place to be, that flight deck.

Smith: Let's see – there's a flight deck and then there's a hangar deck?

Fifer: Hangar deck, yeah.

Smith: And the hangar deck would be what? The deck storage?

Fifer: Yeah, and when they worked on the planes. In the bulkheads they had everything – wings and torpedoes and everything strapped up to the bulkheads. Whatever they'd think they would need to fix up a plane if something happened.

Smith: Now, did you have contact with Ford on the ship?

Fifer: No. I knew who he was, but no, I'd never talked to him.

Smith: You knew who he was.

Fifer: Well, from athletics, mostly.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Fifer: We'd get in a port and I'd go over to the elevator and hang a couple of baskets and they had teams. Of course, it was square, it wasn't much of a basketball court. But that was fun to watch. You were up on the flight deck looking down on them all the time. And then when we had our – in Pearl we had a boxing tournament and he was a judge.

Smith: Really?

Fifer: A good friend of mine, a guy I graduated from high school with, come aboard. He was in the Marine division. They were a squad, maybe twenty guys, I don't know anything about the Marines, but he won the heavyweight championship. Lt. Ford was a judge. But other than that, there were fifteen, sixteen hundred guys on that thing and you just didn't see many people there that you didn't work with.

Smith: Who was the captain?

Fifer: Well, let's see. The first captain – was it Hunt? I think his name was Hunt. Then he got transferred and I think he took over Pensacola Naval Air Station. Then Captain Ingersoll and then there was one other, but I can't think of his name right now.

Smith: You mentioned being a mess cook. How was the food?

Fifer: Not bad compared to the Army or whatever.

Smith: Are you saying the Navy ate better than the Army?

Fifer: Oh, I'm sure we did. Like on a holiday, we'd have the whole turkey and everything. I'd always give my oysters away to somebody. I didn't eat them things.

Smith: How did it feel – you said yourself that Pearl Harbor was such a motivating factor – how did it feel to be sailing into Pearl Harbor?

Fifer: The first thing – you could see a lot of the damage even when we went. And it was the same thing when we sailed into Tokyo Bay. The damage – it's all around – it was just all burned and rusted. And that was just a day or two after they surrendered that we sailed in there.

Smith: I want to get to that in a minute. The typhoon.

Fifer: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Tell me about anything you remember about the typhoon.

Fifer: Well, of course, we all heard the explosion when it happened.

Smith: Did you know you were about to experience this? I mean, were there weather forecasts that warned you in advance?

Fifer: Not that I know of.

Smith: Okay, it took you by surprise?

Fifer: That ship was so top heavy.

Smith: What made it top heavy?

Fifer: Well, it was built on a cruiser hull, which is narrow, and then the flight deck. Then your gun mounts and everything hanging over. It just rolled something awful.

Smith: Was that a problem, generically, with the ship?

Fifer: I think so, yeah. I'm pretty sure. I think they admitted that. And even the destroyers they lost in the typhoon, they admitted that they took the old destroyers and put all that radar equipment way up on the boat, and it made them top heavy. So I think they lost three destroyers in that.

Smith: Did it come upon you suddenly, or did it just kind of build and build?

Fifer: I think it just kind of built up. Of course, we heard the explosion.

Smith: Now, what was that?

Fifer: Our quarters were in what was called the poop deck – it was aft – and it was right underneath the flight deck. In other words, our overhead was the flight deck. Most compartments were down below water level, but we were up above. There was one hatch in that one bulkhead in the forward wall of the compartment. And if you opened that hatch, the elevator pit was right there for the aft elevator. So that was never opened, believe me. But we ditched it and someone else was doing all the work, we didn't do anything. You had to almost hang on to everything. You couldn't sleep or anything. Some guys would get in their bunk, but you couldn't stay in the darn thing. It was that bad. So actually, we didn't realize how much was going on until you read about it in books and things like that. I think when I read where Lt. Ford -the captain told him to take some men and go in there and put that dog gone fire out - he did it.

Smith: And what caused the fire?

Fifer: Well, the planes were sliding back and forth and there was some fuel in them, I guess. This was on the hangar deck. The flight deck, they were just sliding

off three or four at a time. We had them wired down, but the wires weren't very big wires.

Smith: So you lost planes to the storm?

Fifer: Oh, yeah. I think we lost eighteen planes, or something like that, out of twenty-five. There might have been more than twenty-five with some of the extras down in the hangar deck. I don't know how many were down there. But that's where they'd take them when they worked on them, if there was something that took a while – instead of up on the flight deck where it was dark a lot of times. I read where Admiral Halsey, well, he had a job to do, too, because we were supposed to fly cover for General MacArthur to raid Mindanao, one of the Philippine Islands. And we couldn't get out of that darn typhoon. I read where he left us, or was going to leave us, because we were dead in the water, I guess. All the water went down below and the engines all flooded out. We didn't even know this.

Smith: Really?

Fifer: But I really give President Ford credit for saving my life. I think he did, I think he saved our lives by getting that fire out with those guys he took in there. And then the guys in the engine room got an engine going and we were able to maneuver then because you couldn't even put your bow into all those waves in the wind.

Smith: Were the waves the worst you'd ever seen?

Fifer: Oh, my. I looked out once and there was one of the larger carriers – it was pretty close to us – because everything was grey to look out there. It was just shadowlike. I don't know how close we came to it or whether they would capsize or something. That's how bad it was.

Smith: There were waves up over the flight deck?

Fifer: In fact, somebody said the gun turrets were dipping water when it went the one way. Of course I didn't see any of that, but somebody said that.

- Smith: Now the fire – I'm trying to understand the sequence here – the fire was on the hangar deck.
- Fifer: The hangar deck.
- Smith: But when President Ford talked about almost going overboard, was he up on the flight deck or the hanger deck.
- Fifer: No, he was on the flight deck. I think he came out and I don't know if he was going to climb up into island, or if he was going to come down out of island, to the flight deck, and then I don't where he was going to go. But I guess he slid all the way across the flight deck and there was about a half inch steel plate, and it was about this high above the flight deck and the catwalks, or gun turrets. That stopped him, I think they said – the paper or the books I read. His feet hit that thing.
- Smith: His feet?
- Fifer: Yeah. But he must have got back to the other side again to get into the island or wherever he was going.
- Smith: To people who don't know, what is the island?
- Fifer: The superstructure. The bridge.
- Smith: We've been told the typhoon lasted two days.
- Fifer: Yeah, I think it probably did, a day and a half.
- Smith: Probably seemed longer.
- Fifer: Yeah. Oh, God. You just couldn't do anything. You couldn't stand up hardly. And I don't know how he got those guys in there on that hangar deck. That hanger deck was a steel deck and all that water and oil and gas – I don't know how he ever did it. I still think he saved our lives.
- Smith: There are people who have voiced some criticism of Admiral Halsey for driving you into the storm. People have said Nimitz wouldn't have done it.

Fifer: They didn't know much about weather in those days, like they do today either.

Smith: What was your opinion of General MacArthur?

Fifer: Well, I always like the guy pretty well. But then I read things about how him and Nimitz were always trying to do something ahead of the other guy. What did I read – where Nimitz was coming in, he wanted to be in Tokyo first; but MacArthur flew in and beat him. It was those kinds of things. I didn't care for them kind of things.

Smith: The enlisted man, you hear of the "Dugout Doug" references, that sort of thing. You were in Tokyo Bay you said, at the end of the war?

Fifer: Yeah, just for a couple of days, I think.

Smith: Before that, of course, you didn't know about the bomb.

Fifer: No.

Smith: Were you all dreading the prospect of an invasion of Japan?

Fifer: Yeah. I think a lot of us were that way. Because Iwo Jima, they lost so many guys and Okinawa - 40-50,000 guys. And then we spent – what did they say? I think 57 days without even seeing land out there. And we were ready to launch planes that one morning when they cancelled it and told us about the bomb.

Smith: That's extraordinary. I want to get that story. I'm curious, how much did you on board ship know about the rest of the war? I don't mean in Europe, I just mean in the Pacific. For example, you mentioned Okinawa – did you know at the time of the battle what was going on? How did you get information about the rest of the war? Was it simply what your superiors told you?

Fifer: Yeah. We had a newspaper aboard ship. It wasn't much, but it would tell some of the things about the war. Of course, we missed Iwo Jima because we had to go back after the typhoon. But we got back out there of Okinawa and, boy, that's when all the kamikaze started.

Smith: Tell me about that. Did you have kamikazes hit your ship?

Fifer: Oh, no. We never got hit.

Smith: Did you see any other ships hit?

Fifer: I didn't ever see any get hit by kamikazes, but we went in and we hit Formosa, which is Taiwan now. That's way in there. That's further west than Japan. So that was quite an experience. But in those days, all through the war, they always come out at night after us. They never come out during the day and it was always torpedo bombers. So we were trying to get out, after a couple of raids then you turn and try to get out, get further away from Formosa at the time. But they sent a lot of planes out after us that night and I saw the *Houston* get hit. It was pretty close to us. It took a torpedo and, boy, you could just see the fire coming out of the stacks. The very next night I saw the *Canberra* get hit the same way, another cruiser. Now I don't know – Canberra is a city in Australia, but I don't know if it was an Australian ship or one of our own. I don't know.

Smith: Did they go down?

Fifer: No. Neither one went down. They towed *Houston* all the way back to Hawaii, I guess, or Pearl.

Smith: Wow.

Fifer: But I've got pictures of her that I cut out of magazines and boy, she was only that far out of the water in some places.

Smith: It's hard to imagine anything more terrifying than in the middle of the night, out of nowhere, a torpedo. Was that the worst you could imagine?

Fifer: At night, you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing. You've got a far off station that you're supposed to be at.

Smith: During the hours of darkness, when you're lying awake, do you imagine what could be out there?

- Fifer: Oh, yeah. You think about it. You can't help but think about it. Oh, I know what I was going to say. The Chaplin would get on the speaker system and he would be telling you what was going on, if you were down – not on a flight deck. And that's scary – “there goes a torpedo – it just went forward – I'll let you know...” Crazy stuff like that. I think I liked it better if I was up on a flight deck and I could see what was going on.
- Smith: Of course.
- Fifer: I did see at Okinawa, I'm sure this plane was coming in. At night they would come in real low, but in the daytime, like at Okinawa, those kids, those kamikazes, they were just kids I guess, they'd come in from real high. And I stood there and I watched this thing coming and it was getting bigger and all of a sudden it seemed like it just stopped in mid-air and the wings just – one wing went that way and one went that way. He must have caught a five incher in the gut. He just went straight down. But I was just standing there watching him, and then I decided I'd better run. I'd just started to run when I saw him get hit. But I never saw a kamikaze plane hit another ship. I've got some pictures that one guy sent me that he said he got from ship's photographer. And they show some ships getting real close to getting hit that must have been around us and he was taking these pictures.
- Smith: So now we know - obviously, you didn't at the time - we were in the closing months of the war. Do you remember when you heard about VE Day – the end of the war in Europe?
- Fifer: Oh yeah.
- Smith: Obviously that was a milestone, but did it make you think that you were closer to getting home?
- Fifer: Yeah. We all said, let's get this over with. They had broadcasts over the PA system when something like would happen – like the atomic bomb – they let us know about that.
- Smith: After the death of FDR...when President Roosevelt died?
- Fifer: Yeah, got that, too.

Smith: You don't know about the bomb and you're anticipating a likely invasion of the home islands, Okinawa squared. How did you learn about the bomb?

Fifer: Over the PA system. They let us know what happened when they canceled the raid, when we were going to launch planes.

Smith: Did they explain what an atomic bomb was?

Fifer: No, they didn't. They just said it was something big. We had no idea what it was like. We weren't too far from there.

Smith: That's right. But, of course, it took two bombs to end the war.

Fifer: They had to save face.

Smith: And the Emperor. So after the second bomb, the war is over. How did that feel?

Fifer: Boy. Right away the guys are saying, "How do we get out?" That's what everybody was wondering, how to get out. So right away they came out and told us how. We had to have 40 some points or something like that. But you got points for being married or having kids, or you'd get more points for being overseas, things like that. Your age made a lot of difference. So I didn't get out until March of '46.

Smith: Really?

Fifer: Yeah.

Smith: So you were in Tokyo Bay after the signing?

Fifer: No, before.

Smith: Before the signing?

Fifer: And we sent our Marine squad, they went ashore and I think they took some volunteers out of the Navy that wanted to go ashore. I didn't volunteer.

Smith: You didn't?

- Fifer: No. I didn't know anything about guns. And maybe two or three weeks they were ashore and then they all came back and had these souvenirs that they picked up and they took them all away from them.
- Smith: Was there concern that they would encounter resistance from diehard Japanese?
- Fifer: Yeah, I thought they would. And I think they did find a lot of caves and things like they did in Iwo Jima and Okinawa.
- Smith: You could see Tokyo? You could see the devastation?
- Fifer: Oh, yeah, in the Bay there – ships that were docked and sunk and everything was just tore up something awful. And that wasn't from the atomic bomb, either. But they finally got it over with.
- Smith: And from Tokyo Bay where did you go? You said you weren't out until the spring of '46.
- Fifer: We took a cruise. I think we stopped in Okinawa, and we stopped in Pearl and then Panama, and then New York. And it took about a month, I think, something like that if I remember right.
- Smith: New York look pretty good?
- Fifer: Oh, I'd never seen it before and we led the fleet in because we had more time out there than anybody in the other ships, even the *Enterprise*. And, of course, they had the fireboats out there with the hoses and all that. And they made a flag – I don't know if you'd call it a flag – it was only half red and half white and it must have been about two or three blocks long – that they flew when we came in. We all got a foot of it.
- Smith: So now, did you stay in New York for several days?
- Fifer: Oh, yeah. We were there for quite a while. And President Truman – we all lined up in the Hudson there and he came by and reviewed the fleet. They took us to Brooklyn Navy Yard and then they sent us home. That's the first time I'd been home since boot camp. So it was a long time. Then I went back, then they sent me home again and that was it. I had to report to Indianapolis

for another assignment and I thought I'd just get enough points to get out. So they sent me to Norfolk and I had nothing to do there but stand a watch once in a while. Finally, New Year's Eve a guy said, "We're sending you to a ship down in Florida that's the *USS Solomon*, and it's qualifying new pilots, and they arrested your man down there. So I got sent down there. New Year's Eve they put me on a train and sent me down there. So that was January 1 and in March they sent me to Toledo and I got out.

Smith: And breathed a sigh of relief?

Fifer: Oh, yeah. It was good, like I said, I could hardly wait to get out. And you lose all – you're eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old.

Smith: You never thought about making it a career?

Fifer: No. They offered me \$3,000 and they'd send me to school for three months, or something like that – or maybe a month – and I turned it down.

Smith: Do you have any idea how many *Monterrey* survivors there are?

Fifer: No. I got elected treasurer about three or four years ago, I think. We were down in Charleston. I think we were having a reunion and the guy who was the treasurer passed away and his wife was doing all the work. So they wanted to make her treasurer, but they couldn't because she wasn't a Navy person, so they said they wanted to know if I would take the treasurer's job but she'd do all the work. All I had to do was sign checks. So I did. But then the next year they made her an honorary shipmate and she is our treasurer now. But she had a list, or her husband did, of about 140 that were paying dues.

Smith: Now would that cover not only World War II, but Korea?

Fifer: Yeah.

Smith: We'll get this on the record: the *Monterrey* had a second life during the Korean War.

Fifer: But she didn't see any action. In fact, they stripped all her guns off. She didn't have any guns or anything. She just operated in the Gulf of Mexico. That's what I did when they sent me down to Florida. We'd go out for two or three

days and come back. But we'd go out in that Bermuda Triangle area – I wasn't crazy about that.

Smith: What ever happened to the *Monterrey*? What was her final fate?

Fifer: I think they just scrapped her, finally, after the Korean War. The cabinet was CBL, ___ class and I think they loaned her to Spain or Portugal for quite a while and then they gave her back and I think she was down in Louisiana some place. But I think she is gone now, too.

Smith: How frequently do you have reunions?

Fifer: Every year.

Smith: You do?

Fifer: Yeah. First we were having it every two years, and then we started to run out of guys and I think like she had 140 that were paying dues. But they were both World War II and Korea. And we had one San Antonio trip we made and we had three busloads of people and that was in '95. But it started to dwindle. And when I brought the guys here last year, we only had four guys from each war. And of course they brought their wives, some of them.

Smith: Did President Ford ever attend a reunion?

Fifer: Somebody said he did one time in – I don't know if it was in Norfolk or someplace like that. But I wasn't going then because I was married and had all those kids.

Smith: Did you ever have any contact with him afterwards?

Fifer: No. I asked Rose, her name was Rose, our treasurer, she lived in Texas, Sinton, Texas, and the President paid \$100. We paid \$5 and his secretary sent in \$100 every year. But of course when he died, then she quit. When I heard about this new ship, I said to her, "How could we find out about this?" So she says, "Well, I've got his number down in California. I'll call his secretary." Well, she called and she started talking to this gal and somebody cut in. And I think it was the FBI or somebody and said, "Where did you get this number?" And she explained to him what it was, so she got to talk to this gal. Because

we wanted to find out about this new ship. I think she said it would be about 2013 or something like that before it was...but, boy, I'd love to be there for that christening. That would be wonderful.

Smith: I guess the final and most obvious question: how did your wartime experiences affect your life?

Fifer: I don't think it had too much effect.

Smith: Really?

Fifer: No. Like I said, I went back to work that I hated – that job. I was a salesperson at a pay department at Sears. I couldn't get along with those customers and then I went to school for a year. When you get out of school you have to start at the bottom, but I had some good jobs, worked for some nice guys all those years. I still have breakfast with them now and then, some of them.

Smith: Do you find the war memories don't come back until later in life? Is it the older you get, that those experiences sort of mean more?

Fifer: Most of the time it's when I'm in bed, before I fall asleep. That's when I think about the old days a lot.

Smith: Well, that was certainly very much the case with President Ford, too.

Fifer: Really?

Smith: Yeah.

Fifer: Long time ago, though. That was the war to end all wars.

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