

## **Transcription: Robert McKinley**

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*Today is Monday, April 23, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Robert McKinley. This interview is being conducted by telephone for the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. McKinley is at his home in Corpus Christi, Texas. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to us today. It's certainly an honor. The first question, sir, that I always like to start off with, for folks listening to this interview, is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the Navy.*

**Robert McKinley:** I was born in Temple, Texas, on July 15, 1923. When I was about a month old, my parents moved to Port Arthur, Texas. They lived there for about a year. Then we moved out to a little town about nine miles from Port Arthur called Nederland.

*Okay. I know where that is.*

**Robert McKinley:** That's where I did my growing up. We left one time during the Depression. We went up to Boise, Idaho, to a brother of my mother. Told us he could get work for my dad if he come up in a state truck. So we took off and drove to Idaho. Stayed up there about six weeks and my mother and her brother had a run-in with one another so we picked up and come back to Texas. And we stopped off in Temple, Texas, where both of our parents' families were there. And we stayed there for about, I don't know, a year and half or two years. And my dad got rehired at the Gulf refinery down in Port Arthur and we moved back to Nederland.

*Did you have any brothers and sisters?*

**Robert McKinley:** I have one brother three years older than me. He was a Pearl Harbor survivor. He got out of the Navy when the war was over and he stayed out a couple of years and went back into the active fleet reserve and finished his 30 years.

*Wow.*

**Robert McKinley:** He died about four years ago in our hometown of Nederland.

*Yes sir. So let me ask you what was it that made you interested in joining the Navy? Because I know you joined right out of high school and you joined before the war had started.*

**Robert McKinley:** Well, my brother had gone into the Navy in 1938. There was very little for kids in that area except refinery work and I wasn't interested in that. I wanted to see the world. I was not a college prospect. I just barely got through in my school. So the only thing that I could think of was going out and seeing the world. So as my book said, I graduated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May in 1941, and I was in the Navy the 27<sup>th</sup>.

*What did your parents think about you going into the Navy? Obviously, your brother had already gone in, but what did they think of having their two sons in the Navy?*

**Robert McKinley:** They didn't object to it, you know. I mean this was my choice. And of course we didn't know we were fixing to get into a blood-thirsty war.

*Sure.*

**Robert McKinley:** So I went in, went through my boot camp in San Diego, and when I finished that we had a nine-day leave. I went home by bus, stayed home a couple of days and had to turn around and come back to California. And then when we got back to California, we were interviewed by some Naval officers as to what our expectations were and what I wanted to strike for. And I says, "Well, I want to get on destroyers." And he says, "Why?" And I said, "Well, I got a brother that is on a destroyer." And he said, "Well, you might not like that kind of duty at all." He said, "Do what you want to do," you know. So he started naming off things and when he said "airplanes," I liked to jumped out of my skin. I said, "Airplanes?" That's my big draw. And so he said, "I'm going to send you to aviation machinist's mate school." And I said, "That's fine." And so, I guess a third of my company all ended up in NAS Sand Point in Seattle, Washington. And some went to radio school, some went to metalsmith, and I went to the aviation machinist's mate part of it.

*Did you enjoy the school? Was it something that came naturally for you? I know that some folks really struggle with the aptitude it takes to be a machinist.*

**Robert McKinley:** I would say that I was happy to be associated with airplanes. So anyway, we went through the school and we finished sometime around the middle of November of '41. So we got a nine-day leave, I think, but I didn't go home from there. I just stayed there. They paid us off to continue when they discharged us from Sand Point. And we were to be back there on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November. And we were going to be shipped over the Hawaii. So when the 29<sup>th</sup> came, they picked us up there at Sand Point in a bus or two, took us over to Bremerton, Washington, and put us on the USS Saratoga, which was coming out of a yard period.

*Which was one of the aircraft carriers, correct?*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah. One of the original. The Saratoga and the Lexington, you know. Lexington was sister ships. So anyway, they put us on this ship and I never saw anything so big in my life. I just couldn't get over it. It was breathtaking. I was assigned to a crew member for work detail. And so we left the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>.

*Of November.*

**Robert McKinley:** Of November, and started down the coast to San Diego. And we were going to be qualifying their air group when we got down to San Diego. And of course we made a shake-down cruise, testing all the systems in the ship to be sure they were in shipshape and working. And we got off the coast of San Diego about, just before daylight, and the aircraft were out there waiting on us. So they started shooting landings and take-offs, you know. They have to do five landings and take-offs to be carrier qualified. And this was an experience. We weren't supposed to be on the flight deck, but you know how sailors are. They find a way. And, magnificent. Absolutely breathtaking watching those planes come in and land and take off and crash. We had several of them that crash landed on the flight deck. Because the aircraft that we were qualifying were the TBDs and the Brewster Buffalo, Grumman F4F, and there was some other fighter plane that I can't remember right now. And about 10:30, all of a sudden, all the aircraft left. Now this was the morning of December 7<sup>th</sup> that we arrived there. And, like I said, about 10:30, all the aircraft left. We put on flank speed, come around Point Loma like a speed boat, and tied up at North Island. And when they sounded the security bugle. Every time a ship comes to a dead still, they sound over the PA system, a bugle. And that means the ship is

secured. And the guys that were stationed on the ship was figuring on getting liberty. Oh, I don't know. It took a few minutes for them to pass the word that that morning at daylight, Pearl Harbor was attacked. And that we are now in a state of war and to conduct ourselves accordingly.

*Wow.*

**Robert McKinley:** We started loading that ship with anything that would be useful in Pearl Harbor. And so we went over to the Navy and Marine Corps boot camp. Every man that had his inoculations, whether he had finished his boot training or not, was brought over to the ship and told to find a place to lay down. I'd say three or four hundred men, all told. And so we worked all day long putting anything on that ship that could conceivably be useful over in Hawaii. And so, the morning of the 8th, we left before daylight, and headed for Pearl Harbor. We arrived there mid-afternoon on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December. And if I live to be 150 years old, I'll never see anything like that. I've seen a lot more destruction, but at that particular time, it was absolutely unbelievable. And everybody that wasn't on a work detail or on duty manned the flight deck. We cried a little and we cussed a lot and we cried a little bit more. My group of men was 105 that had left Bremerton and we were supposed to go to PATWING 2, there at Ford Island. Well, it got wiped out and there was no more squadron. And they put us in an old warehouse there on Ford Island, and told not to get more than 10 feet away from that building or a submarine will kill you. And the guy that told us that, he was never more sincere. He said, "Now don't think I'm joshing with you." He says, "Everybody is trigger happy. And if you get away from this building, walking around, you're going to get shot." And so, anyway, that day, I learned that my brother's ship had been sunk. And, of course, that just threw me into a tizzy.

*What ship was he on sir?*

**Robert McKinley:** The USS Cassin.

*Yes sir.*

**Robert McKinley:** 367. I think that was his.

*So you heard from other sailors that the Cassin was . . .*

**Robert McKinley:** No. There was a printed sheet, like the plan of the day, and it listed the ships that were sunk and damaged and so forth. And there it was, big as life, the USS Cassin. And I told this little JG that was in charge of us. I said, "I'm going to go find out about my brother." And he said, "Don't do it, son." He says, "You'll get killed." He said, "Sure as the world you going to walk around on this island." He said, "I'll make a deal with you." He says, "By this afternoon," he said, "I'll come back here and I'll let you know about your brother, what I can find." So I agreed to that. And so I waited all day long and he came back that evening and told me that everybody had gotten off. The ship was in dry dock. You've seen the picture of these two destroyers in the dry dock and the USS Pennsylvania was in the dry dock with them? And the two destroyers, the Cassin and the Downes, were in the front end of it, and they had gangways running from one side of the dry dock to the ship, from ship to ship. And then from the other ship over to the dry dock on the other side where people could walk, you know, without going all the way around the dry dock. But the Downes had lost a lot of men but the Cassin had gotten all the men off of the ship. And so that was some satisfaction to me, but not much. So anyway, I sat with the rest of 'em at this warehouse. The morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>, the USS Enterprise

came in and tied up about a hundred yards from where we were. And here was 105 men with records and everything in a cardboard box and no place to go. So they lined us up, marched us over to the Enterprise, and we went aboard the Enterprise. They lined us up on the hangar deck and said, "You six men go to this division. You eight men go to that division. You 10 men go to this one, and so forth," until they scattered us all over the ship, regardless of the fact that we had gone through a school. I ended up in the seaman division. There was four of us. Division 1, 2, 3, and 4. And we were responsible for one-quarter of the ship. The second division, which I got put into, had the starboard quarter, that's the back quarter of the ship. No, it was the front quarter on the right hand side.

*Starboard side, yes sir.*

**Robert McKinley:** And that was our job. We were to keep it shipshape, painted, whatever had to be done. That was our area of work. We put to sea just a couple of days after we got on there. They went to sea again and we learned that we were in Task Force 16. We had the carrier, we had two cruisers, and four to five destroyers, would go out in a task force. Every two or three or four days, destroyers would come alongside and we'd top off their fuel tanks in case we got into a running battle, you know. Hell, we didn't know what was happening and when it would happen again. And so anyway, we come back into Pearl Harbor a time or two. And sometime later on, I think it was in the month of March, we were out and we were refueling the destroyers, and I kept looking for anybody that I might recognize that would know about my brother.

*So you'd still not, even though you were at Pearl Harbor at the same time, still not had a chance to see your brother or talk to him?*

**Robert McKinley:** No, in fact, I hadn't seen him in two and a half years. He hadn't been home on leave when I went into the Navy. So anyway, one day I was on the gun mount, on watch. My section had duty. We were standing up, or I was standing up, in the gun tub there. We were on a 1.1 quad-mount anti-aircraft gun. I was just looking down at a 45-degree angle onto that destroyer's deck, and I saw somebody that looked familiar and I was trying to get his attention. So when he looked at me, and damned if my brother didn't walk across my line of sight. He was on the USS Balch. And I hollered at him and he stopped and he looked up at me and for a second or two, you know, kind of shrugged his shoulders and started to walk off. And I hollered at him again. And he stopped and he looked up at me. When I was in boot camp, I got a tattoo of a fouled anchor on my right arm. He never did forgive me for that. So anyway, I pointed at my tattoo and all of a sudden, it was like a light came in and he broke to run and just fell through a hatch. And I thought, "Well, what's he doing?" So in a matter of a minute or two, he come bouncing back up out of there and he had a piece of paper. And we were passing this breeches buoy back and forth between the two ships, to give him some supplies that they needed. And he indicated he was going to tie this note on the breeches buoy. And so my gun captain, who was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian, was my gun captain. And he let me go down to the lower starboard side and get that note. And I have that note to this day.

*What did he write on there?*

**Robert McKinley:** He says, "We're going to be back in Pearl in about four or five days." He said, "I'll have first liberty. You stay put and I'll find you." So sure enough, we was back in Pearl Harbor about, I don't know, a few days later. And we finally got together around noontime.

He came aboard ship and we had ourselves a little crying reunion. His ship stayed in that Task Force 16 until late '42. I'm not real sure just when his ship was moved to the east coast for convoy duty. And so we didn't see each other anymore then until the war was over.

*It had to have made you feel like it was a small world in a small Navy, though, when you finally saw him like that.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yes. Running across him out of all the ships. That one that he was on was in our task force. It was quite an experience.

*Yes sir. Sir, tell us a little bit about the Enterprise if you can take a second. Because I know that folks listening, it is such a storied and historic aircraft carrier. Just tell us a little bit about some of the men you served with, what the ship was like. Just some of your impressions. It's just a fascinating ship.*

**Robert McKinley:** Still, it was all new to me. And I just couldn't get over, out in the middle of the ocean, and flying airplanes off this ship and retrieving them. We had lots of crashes. Men coming in, for one reason or another, they would run off the side of the ship and into the water. Some would go off of the bow, you know, on takeoff, and their engines would stall on them and they would go into the water. And the ship would try to miss them and turn off their screws and the men down below could hear the aircraft scraping the bottom as the ship passed over it. Sometimes, the two men in the aircraft would pop up in the water, in the wake of the ship. Sometimes they wouldn't.

*Yeah.*

**Robert McKinley:** You came to value life pretty doggone serious. 'Course my experience with aircraft was just watching them. Made friends. There was one man aboard on my gun mount watch by the name of Bonzo Smith. He's in the book there.

*Yes sir. I saw his photograph.*

**Robert McKinley:** He was our gunner's mate. He and I hit it off fairly well together. And we become fast friends and several other men. Moose Lampson was a . . . Dwayne Lampson was his name, but he was a great big old boy, and we called him Moose. Moose Lampson. On August the 24<sup>th</sup> of '42, he and I had been working all morning up in the officers country, scraping paint off the bulkhead 'cause that caused toxic smoke, you know, if it caught fire. And so, we were down off Guadalcanal. We were sitting there having a smoke just before lunch, or dinner, I should say. And he says, "Mack," he said, "if I don't make it through this war," he said, "would you go see my mom?" And I says, "Well, certainly I will." I says, "Let me know where I can locate her." And I says, "By the same token, if I don't make it," I says, "I hope you'll go and see my folks." That afternoon he was dead. We were attacked by a Japanese group of aircraft on August the 24<sup>th</sup> of '42. They just bombed the hell out of us. Didn't hit us with a torpedo but they estimate that there were a 120 to a 130 aircraft came and attacked us. The battle lasted about two hours. And 'course I had been changed to another gun crew from the one I had been on. On mount three. After Midway, we were in the Pearl Harbor Navy Yard and they mounted one of those 1.1 anti-aircraft guns right up on the forecastle. And I got reassigned to that mount five when I had been on mount three there on the flight deck. That's where Moose Lampson was, on mount three, when he was killed when a bomb hit about 20 feet from mount three and four.

*When that bombing took place, there was one bomb that went through the flight deck, right?  
Went down the flight decks?*

**Robert McKinley:** There was two of them. Two armor piercing bombs had gone through the flight deck down to the fifth deck before they detonated. And just tore the hell out of the inside of the ship and the fire come up through the holes that those bombs made. And we had two five-inch 38-caliber anti-aircraft guns back on that quarter. And they kept 30, maybe 40, rounds of ammunition in some lockers right there on the gun mount. Well, the fire hit those and it exploded and killed everybody on the two guns. Just parched them. Of course, Moose got killed on mount three. So anyhow, that was so much for that.

*Yes sir.*

**Robert McKinley:** We had had a couple of skirmishes. 'Course our aircraft would go out and attack things on Guadalcanal. Henderson Field and several other places when we were down in that area.

*You had to return back for repairs after that?*

**Robert McKinley:** Oh yeah. After that, we went into a French Island. Is that the name of it? Anyway, we put into there that when that bomb, those bombs went off, they cracked a plate that had a leak below the water line. And we went into, this French Island.

*Was it Bougainville?*

**Robert McKinley:** No, that's not it. I'll think of it maybe. By shifting water, we tilted the ship over where this cracked plate could be reached. And they welded a patch over that hole. Then we righted ourselves and shortly thereafter, we went back to Pearl Harbor and got that damage taken care of. It took about near a month, I think, best I can remember. And then we come back out to the south Pacific again. And then we were attacked again off the Santa Cruz Islands on October 26th.

*Of '42?*

**Robert McKinley:** In the meantime, I had made 3<sup>rd</sup> class aviation machinist's mate and I got transferred to V-1 Division on the flight deck, and I became a hook release. Me and my running partner on the port side of the ship.

*Explain to us, sir, what that means. I'm sure a lot of people listening don't . . . But first let me ask you, sir, if you could explain for us, what exactly it means to be an aviation machinist's mate. Tell us a little bit what your typical duties would be and what type of job that was.*

**Robert McKinley:** Well, you work on airplane engines, aviation machinist's mates. And metalsmith, of course, they do work on the metal part of an airplane. The radio, of course, they're in the electronics part of it. But you can be an aviation machinist's mate and not work on an aircraft engine, like me when I transferred to the V-1 Division on the flight deck. V-1 Division was the recollection group of people that saw to bringing the aircraft back in after they'd been out on flight. And what we would do, we had nine deck pennants across the flight deck. And we, hook release, we would stand on the side of the ship and whatever wire we were

assigned to, when an airplane came in and landed, he and I would run out together. One of us would hold up the landing gear hook in the up position so the pilot could lock it up there. And the other man would hold the arresting gear down so the tail wheel could taxi over it. Then we scampered back to the side of the ship and waited for the next aircraft to come in. We would land an aircraft ever 60 seconds.

*Wow. That would keep you busy. Yes sir. How many cables were there?*

**Robert McKinley:** Nine.

*Nine cables.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah.

*So there were at least 18 men doing that job?*

**Robert McKinley:** No, there was only four of us running at a time.

*Okay.*

**Robert McKinley:** There were six of us as designated hook release and we alternated.

*Okay. That makes sense. Yes sir.*

**Robert McKinley:** The resting gear cables counted from the stern. That was number one, number two, three, four, and so forth, up to number nine. Well, if you run . . . It's not going to make sense to you but, when you ran forward, you took care of the first three wires. If an airplane came in, you caught one of the first three wires. And then we took care of that aircraft. And we stood on the sheaves that the cables come out from underneath the flight deck. We would stand on the fifth cable and if an airplane caught the number three wire, he would run himself out to about the fifth wire. Me and my partner, we would go out and take care of that airplane. If an aircraft came in and caught anywhere from four to nine, the two men running halves, we called it, would take care of those wires. And after that, you hit the ninth wire, landing gear pennant, we called them. If you missed all nine of them, they had a barrier cable that stood about four feet tall and if you missed all of the wires coming in for a landing, you'd go into this barrier. And 'course, it would nose the airplane up and the prop would gouge the flight deck and just general havoc until they shut it down and moved it out of the way before we could land another aircraft.

*Was it not option for them, sir, if they missed the cables to just go ahead and try to fly around again?*

**Robert McKinley:** No way.

*No way to do that.*

**Robert McKinley:** No way to do that. They're going so slow. It's not like the jets of today. You know, the jets of today, when they touch the flight deck, they go to full power. In case they don't catch a wire, they can make it off the bow of the ship. But, no. When ours come in and when they chopped the throttle to land, that was it. You either stayed aboard or you went over the side.

*Sure.*

**Robert McKinley:** And we had many of them to do that.

*I was going to ask you, sir, because I should mention first of all for those that are listening, you have written a really neat book about your experience, and I got that in the mail. It was on my desk this morning when I got in, and I had a chance to look over it pretty quickly before starting this interview. I know on there, there's a couple pictures of a plane that had had to land. It looks like the landing gear collapsed and you were actually struck in the arm by a tip of the wing.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah.

*I was wondering if you could tell us about that experience?*

**Robert McKinley:** Well, that was in October 26<sup>th</sup> down off of Santa Cruz Islands. We were under attack, and this fighter pilot was wounded and he had run out of ammunition. He was our cap . . . We had four airplanes, four fighters that stayed at 10,000 feet and circled over the ship, who if they could get a fighter plane coming in or a bomber coming in, if they could shoot him down before he got the chance to drop his bombs. Well, this guy had gotten tangled up with someone up there in the air, and he was shot, had a wound, and he was running low on gas and ammunition. So there was a small lull in the attack, and he asked permission to land. Well, the ship turned into the wind, brought him in for an approach, and he was just what we call "in the slot" and it really to a stalled-out position before he got over the end of the flight deck, and, of course, I was standing up on number five pennant sheave, and when he came in, he got a hook on a wire, on number five wire I think it was. No, not five. He caught three, pennant number three, and when just about the time he got in the slot, another wave of dive bombers had started their approach, their attack on us, and the ship had to go into evasive maneuvering whether he was landed or not. So when the ship turned, the flight deck tilted, and it was on the starboard side, on the high side, and his landing gear collapsed on him. He had hooked a wire and he started over in my direction, and I had to end up in a catwalk that run around the flight deck. And there was a space in there that I could jump down into the catwalk and take a dive into this hole that I could get under the flight deck. So anyway, when I was watching him, and when he hit and I saw the gear go out from under him, I watched him as long as I dared, and when I jumped, I was about two seconds too late, and the tip of that airplane, when I jumped, I turned sideways and it passed right on my stomach, the tip, and then it caught me in the elbow of my right hand, right arm. And, you know, it just thumped and, of course, it bruised my arm pretty bad. It swelled up about three times the size it was, and I was out of commission for about three or four days. Well, not three or four days, it was longer than that, probably about 10 to 12 days, that I couldn't work because I couldn't use my right arm.

*Yes sir. Close call.*

**Robert McKinley:** But I didn't break anything. If I had a been six inches lower than I was, it would have hit me right in the head, the wing tip. And I was very fortunate.

*Yes sir. Did the pilot survive?*

**Robert McKinley:** Oh yes. It was so funny. When I picked myself up out of the catwalk and got up on the flight deck, he was just getting out of his airplane. And he jumped down, and he had, I

think it was his left side just below his ribcage. He had a bullet that had gone through him. And he had his thumb and forefinger in them holes to keep from bleeding, and I was without a right arm so I put my left arm around his waist and he put his right hand around my waist and we walked up the flight deck to a battle dressing station, and I let him go first down the ladder and I come behind him. It was about, oh, a ten-foot space that we had to go down. Somebody pulled him out of the way and I took a belly flop down the ladder, and I come nose to nose with the chaplain on the ship. His name was Chaplain Young. There's another story in my book about him. And, his eyes were big as saucers, you know, and he says, "How does it look out there?" And I said, "My God," I said, "I never saw so many airplanes in my life, and it seemed like they was coming from everywhere." We didn't have anything to do when, you know, under attack. I'm speaking of the hook release. We didn't have anything to do so we were just freelanced to do what we wanted, and we did a lot of running. If you saw a dive bomber coming down, as soon as he dropped his bomb, you could look at it for a second or two and decide whether it was gonna hit up forward or whether it was gonna hit close to where you were. So that's when you moved quickly. Yeah, he was all right. He was flying probably in a week's time after we got through with that battle, and made himself useful. That sound all right?

*Oh, yes sir. Another thing I wanted to ask you about, sir, because I was fascinated by this, and we talked briefly last week. You told me about how you were a witness to the Doolittle Raid, and I was hoping, sir, you could share with us your whole account of that because that is just a fascinating piece of American history and you were an eyewitness to it. So, if you could, sir, just tell us a little bit about that.*

**Robert McKinley:** Okay. On or about April the 10<sup>th</sup>, we were in Pearl Harbor, and one day at reveille, you know they blow reveille over the PA system, you know, and right after they did that, they said make preparations for getting underway. And we were tied up at a place called 1010 dock. It was a wharf that was a thousand and ten feet long, and that's why we called it 1010 dock. And, it was a good place to get on and off the ship. You didn't have to use a boat to get back out to your ship if you were on anchor. But anyway, I had liberty that day and it just ticked me off good and proper 'cause we was gonna be late getting off the ship. So anyway, we backed away from the 1010 dock and we headed for the channel, and I thought, "Uh-oh, this ain't right." So we went out the channel and put to sea. And we went out, oh, I don't know, two or three miles I guess, and this was, like I say, early morning. Well, we just zigzagged up and down, back and forth in sight of the islands, and we couldn't figure this out. There wasn't any scuttlebutt about, you know, going anywhere or any kind of action going on. And we were all just in wonderment. So we got up the next morning and we were in cold green water, marsh green water. That means we were going to the Aleutians.

*Okay.*

**Robert McKinley:** And that was what everybody got to talkin' about. And so on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, the captain come on the PA system and said he had just opened his secret orders, and he read 'em to us. He said we are to rendezvous with the USS. Hornet this afternoon around 2 o'clock, and he says they have a task force and the aircraft carrier Hornet has 16 B-25 Billy Mitchell bombers aboard there, and said we're going to go within 500 miles of Japan, launch those airplanes, and they are going to bomb Japan. Well, we went crazy, absolutely crazy. Nobody has ever heard that I've found that there was a song at that time that was very popular

called "Goodbye Mama, I'm off to Yokohama." And somebody had a record of that and they put it on the PA system and played it all afternoon.

*That's great.*

**Robert McKinley:** And sure enough, about 2 o'clock, everybody that wasn't on duty was on the flight deck waiting to see this flotilla task force to come over the horizon. And pretty soon, here it was, and the closer they got, the more we saw of 'em. And sure enough, there they were, and they come within sight of one another, and the next day they had a tanker with them, and they topped off both of our carriers, topped off the fuel tanks, topped off the tanks on the destroyers, and we left the destroyers and the tanker out at 1,000 miles, and we started our run in with the two carriers and four cruisers. And about mid morning on the 18<sup>th</sup>, we spotted some Japanese fishing vessels off several hundred yards, several thousand yards I should say, and, of course, the cruiser blew 'em out of the water, but we had to assume that they had gotten a radio message that there were two carriers in the vicinity. And so we were at that time about 750 miles out, and they had a gathering of the heads and decided what to do, and they decided we better launch right then. And so they alerted all of the Army men and told 'em to man their aircraft and they jacked the tail end of the airplanes up where they could pour a few more gallons of gasoline in the tanks, put some five-gallon cans of gasoline inside the aircraft that they could pour into or feed through a fuel line if they needed it. And so about, it was mid morning, and so we turned into the wind and started launching. And, of course, Doolittle went off first, and I forget just how many feet he had to get off of the flight deck. Anyway, he went off the front end and sunk down, looked like he was gonna go in the water and everybody held their breath and pretty soon he begin to pick up speed and get a little altitude and started climbing. Well, in the meantime, every airplane that took off had 40 more feet than the other one of flight deck to get off on. And so there was no more problem at all. All 16 of them got airborne and they were about 800 feet in altitude. They wanted to stay as low as they could until they got within a certain number of miles from the mainland. And, of course, everybody was holding their breath, and when the last one got off and made it, of course, there was jubilation on both ships, the Hornet and the Enterprise.

*That had to have been an amazing moment, sir, just . . .*

**Robert McKinley:** It was.

*Just to see those bombers fly off an aircraft carrier, and also it was the first . . . A lot of people don't realize but that was the first direct strike back against the Japanese after Pearl Harbor.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah, we were on top of the world, the ships' crews were, I tell you. But anyway, when the last one took off and cleared itself, we made 180-degree turn and put on flank speed and we got the hell out of there 'cause we didn't know what the Japanese might have gotten over the radio. So we went back and intercepted, rendezvoused with the destroyers and the tanker and headed back for Pearl Harbor. And funny thing, the other day on the anniversary, I bet I asked two dozen people just at random if they knew what the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of some event, this was the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of it, and no one, none out of the bunch that I asked knew or remembered it was 70<sup>th</sup> year since the Doolittle Raid, and that was kinda disappointing.

*It is. It's not surprising but it's definitely disappointing that people don't know that. But in talking to you last week, sir, you mentioned that song, "Goodbye Mama, I'm off to Yokohama."*

*I'd never heard of that before and I was able to look that up on the Internet and listen to it, and that's really a great tune. It really is.*

**Robert McKinley:** You really did find it?

*Oh, yes sir.*

**Robert McKinley:** I'll be darned.

*Found it pretty easily. It's on YouTube and it's a great song. Definitely has a . . . Pretty catchy and that was a neat piece of history I didn't know that I learned just by talking to you briefly. So I thought that was great. I'm sure that was an amazing moment.*

**Robert McKinley:** And you know the funniest thing was, it was so secretive but when we got back to Pearl Harbor, both ships, I had, you know, liberty and, of course, there were thousands of sailors on the streets there in Hawaii. And go into a bar and some of the bar girls was asking us, you know, all the information that we had about this raid that the B-17 . . .

*B-24?*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah, the B-24 raid on Japan. And it beat us back to Pearl Harbor but we was supposed to be mum. We were told, don't even think about . . .

*Yeah, they say loose lips sink ships, and that was absolutely true. Well, sir, I know what I find amazing too is that you went in the Navy before World War II, and you served all the way until 1962. So you really, in your career, saw a great deal of change in the Navy I would say.*

**Robert McKinley:** Oh, good Lord, yes. Now I tell people, I said, "This Navy of today don't even resemble except by name of the Navy that I was in." I don't know whether it's better or worse.

*Yes sir. I'm sure there's probably a little bit of good and bad in terms of certain things. I'm sure it's a lot more high-tech-related in terms of the ships today and that sort of thing.*

**Robert McKinley:** You know, the Enterprise that I was on, when we were at sea, we were allowed seven and a half gallons per man per day of fresh water. That's cooking, eating, showering, washing your hands. If it exceeded seven and a half gallons a day, they shut off the fresh water.

*That's not a lot of water. I don't think people realize how much that is. That's not much.*

**Robert McKinley:** We had about 2,000 or 2,100 men aboard when we were at sea with the air group aboard, and so it didn't take that much to use seven and a half gallons per man. But we laugh about that. I tell people about a Navy shower. A good many years ago I had a young family live next door to me here, and this lady said one day about her boys taking such long showers. She said, "They stay in that shower sometime for an hour."

*That's crazy.*

**Robert McKinley:** And I told her, I said, “You better teach ’em how to take a Navy shower.” And she says, “What’s a Navy shower?” And I says, “You get in, you wet down, you soap down, you rinse off and you turn the water off.”

*That’s right.*

**Robert McKinley:** I said that was what we considered a Navy shower.

*Yes sir, and I know, I’m in the Marine Corps, I served in Iraq, and when we were over there, it’s not like a ship exactly but they didn’t always have a lot of fresh water either, and they had some portable trailers that were set up, and they had the signs that were posted that said, “Navy showers only.” And, one funny story is one of the young Marines had gone around for a couple days and had not taken a shower. And when his sergeant asked him why not? He said, “Well, all the signs just say Navy showers only.” He thought that it meant that only Navy personnel could use those showers. He didn’t understand either what a Navy shower was so he was going around trying to find the Marine Corps showers.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah, I had another cruise in ’47 and ’48. I got assigned to the USS Topeka, a light cruiser. And it was in September of ’48, and we made a trip to, stayed two and a half months in Shanghai, China, two and a half months in Taipei, Formosa, and two and a half months in Yokosuka, Japan, and then we came home. Got home May 8<sup>th</sup> of ’48, and that was an interesting trip. I hated every minute of it. I didn’t like the duty and tried to get out of going. I’d spent two and a half years in multi-engine aircraft and went to the west coast for reassignment, and then they put me on a cruiser.

*What did they have you do, sir, on a cruiser as a machinist mate?*

**Robert McKinley:** Work on the engine.

*Work on the engine of the ship?*

**Robert McKinley:** No, the aircraft engine.

*I didn’t realize they had aircraft on the cruiser.*

**Robert McKinley:** Oh yeah.

*Tell us about that, sir, because I didn’t realize there were aircraft on the cruiser.*

**Robert McKinley:** Okay, well, they had a, at the time, an aircraft called an SC-1 made by Curtiss. It had an 1830 cubic radial engine on a big pontoon.

*Okay sir. So is this one of the planes they’d fly, you could fly it off the rail and then it would land in the water and you retrieve it?*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah.

*Okay sir. I didn’t realize they were using those in the late ’40s.*

**Robert McKinley:** Oh yeah, and they . . . We started off with two aircraft and we made it to Hawaii. And the day we left Hawaii, they had to go to the eastern part of the world, we lost our

first airplane. When the pilot came in for a landing, the water was pretty rough, and he dug a wing in the water and broke the wing tip float off. And, of course, the airplane sitting, had that wing down, and in time it turned completely over, and we spent, I guess, two and a half hours trying to get the cable hooked to hoist that airplane aboard, and me and the chief petty officer of the air division, you know, we kept telling 'em, "Don't bring that damn thing onboard." You know, an airplane that's been dunked in sea water, they're useless. You'll never get 'em to run again. And finally after about two and a half hours of fiddling around with it, the captain says, you know, shoot the pontoon where the gas was carried, and you know, blew it up. And that airplane sunk and we went on about our business. And when we got to Shanghai, we relieved the Saint Paul there, the USS Saint Paul, and we bummed one of their airplanes off of 'em so we could have two aircraft. And we stayed there like two and a half months and lost one of our other airplanes there. In the landing, it hit a . . . They had big runway lights. They had a runway light, like a big acorn on a pedestal.

*Okay, I know what you're talking about.*

**Robert McKinley:** That's the best I can tell you what it looked like. So anyway, one of the pilots had been out on what they called a training flight. The anti-aircraft guns on the ship would train all these planes as they passed over in different directions. He come in for a landing and were out on the airstrip called Kiangwan Airstrip. It was about 13 miles outside of Shanghai, and we were operating out of this air dome, and he came in for a landing and a gust of wind caught him just as he flared for a touchdown, picked him up, moved him over about ten feet and set down right on top of one of them big acorn lights, just gutted that airplane.

*I'll bet. Yes sir.*

**Robert McKinley:** So we got to Taipei, and we tried to operate there, and we screwed up that airplane that we had left. And then when we went to Japan to Yokosuka, we went out and got the airplane running, and the pilot, we hoisted him over the side and put him in the water and he made a water takeoff. He got just outside of the breakwater and lost his engine. And so they towed him in, towed him back to the ship. We made an 8-point engine change on it and set it, got it ready for flight, and the senior aviator, he says, "Put that damn thing on the catapult and weld the hold-down jacks on it." He says, "We're not gonna fly another hour or another minute 'til we get back to San Diego." So it was an interesting trip but we sure had a lot of aircraft troubles.

*Were you ever on another aircraft carrier after the Enterprise?*

**Robert McKinley:** No. The cruiser was the only other shipboard duty that I had. From then on out, I was in patrol squadrons and I was in one that left Seattle, Washington, and we went to a place called Iwakuni, Japan, on the southern Honshu, and we were in PB4 Y-2 aircraft on that one. We came back to Whidbey Island and switched over the P2V type aircraft and we made another deployment to Iwakuni with that squadron. And when we got back from that, it was in the wintertime, and we had to change engines on one of those aircraft so they had nose docks. We didn't have enclosed hangars. And they hung an engine on it and drug that airplane out to the northernmost point at Whidbey Island Air Station, and sent me out there to do all the connecting up of everything on the back end of the engine. And in one eight-hour period, I got rained on, snowed on, my clothes froze from my waist down, and the sun shined. I said, "This ain't no

place for this southern boy.” And I went into the personnel office and requested a transfer to Hawaii. Thirteen days later I had a set of orders for a VR squadron at Hickam Air Force Base.

*Okay.*

**Robert McKinley:** We went out there in July of '55, and I stayed in that squadron until September . . . In 1957, Hickam Air Force Base, they kicked us off of their base and we had to go back to Moffett Field in California, and I did my last five years there. And I did seven and a half years in VR squadron flying the Super Constellation.

*Yes sir, I saw the pictures of that. That's a neat plane.*

**Robert McKinley:** And I logged 6,324 hours in seven and a half years in that squadron.

*That's quite a career, sir.*

**Robert McKinley:** Went as far east as Saudi Arabia, and as far . . . That was out of the west coast. And out of the east coast I made two trips to Frankfurt, Germany, and through the Azores and so, yes, I had a very interesting career. I don't regret a minute of it. In fact, I would have done 30 years but I got into a donnybrook with a commander in my squadron and I either had to get violent or retire so I just decided to get out.

*Sir, we're certainly proud here at the Land Office of your career and service that you did for our country. This program is all about trying to honor our veterans and also to try to save some of this history for future generations and for posterity. The fact that you even took the time to write your own book and put all these photographs in here is just, it's really something. I think it's pretty impressive.*

**Robert McKinley:** Let me tell you something about those pictures.

*Yes sir.*

**Robert McKinley:** The first two years of the war, we had a news correspondent by the name of Eugene Burns that rode our ship with us, and he took these pictures. See, we couldn't take pictures. We couldn't even have possession of combat pictures. They'd raid our lockers at different times, you know, to see if you had anything that the enemy would be interested in. And so anyway, when Eugene Burns come back to the States with us in July of '43 into Bremerton, Washington, he left the ship and he wrote a book called, "Then There Was One." And he derived it from the fact that down on the Santa Cruz Islands when we got hit so hard and the Hornet got sunk down there, we were the only United States carrier in the Pacific Ocean.

*That's right, the last one left.*

**Robert McKinley:** Then there was one, that's where he got his title. And you can find that book through YouTube, not YouTube . . .

*Amazon?*

**Robert McKinley:** Somewhere on the . . . I'm not a computer person.

*Yes sir, I know I can find it definitely.*

**Robert McKinley:** They are available.

*Yes sir, I'll definitely track that down.*

**Robert McKinley:** I had about six copies of it at one time, and I loaned 'em out and never got 'em back.

*We can help you track down some, sir, because they have them on . . . I'm sure we can find them on Amazon.com. They can find almost any book out there. These pictures are fascinating. They're really just great photographs of all these events. Because there's pictures in here of that plane that we talked about earlier and how it struck you in the arm, and there's pictures of that landing, and there's pictures of the bomb damage aboard the Enterprise, and just amazing photographs. Sir, I wanted to ask you too, because I like the one photograph here of your ship's captain receiving the Presidential Unit Citation from Admiral Nimitz, and all the men are in their dress whites aboard the ship. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that day. Was that after the war was over or towards the end of the war?*

**Robert McKinley:** Oh, no, no. No, that was . . .

*Still during the war?*

**Robert McKinley:** That was, in fact, when we were called back to Pearl Harbor, we thought we were going back to the States in May. And when we got to Pearl Harbor, Admiral Nimitz decided to keep us there for a couple of months just in case they needed another carrier which pissed us off no end 'cause we thought we were going back, so we finally got back to the States in July. But, yes, we got that citation at that particular time, at the two months we were in Pearl Harbor before we came back to the States in July of '43.

*I was going to ask you too, where were you when you learned that the war was over? Were you at sea on the Enterprise or were you . . .?*

**Robert McKinley:** No, no, no, no, no. I had gone to two or three squadrons since then, but I had been, I was in NAS Corpus Christi right here where I'm living.

*Yes sir. Well, tell us what that day was like, when you got the word that it was over.*

**Robert McKinley:** Well, I was flying as an engineer on a PBV-5A, and I had the duty that day. And so we had two pilots, Grant and Howard were their names, Lieutenant Grant, Lieutenant Howard, and me and my cohort that flew with me, we had the duty. And when we found out about it and we was down at the hangar, and I found out, it was like, actually like a huge weight had been taken off of my heart and my body. You know, it's hard to explain the feeling that I had. Lieutenant Grant, he was one of our regular pilots, and I flew with him a lot, he and this other one. And Lieutenant Grant, about 10 o'clock in the morning when the news really got out in force, you know, and everybody was celebrating, he left the hangar area, you know, and he was gone about maybe 30 minutes. Come back and he had a jug of whiskey, and we sat there and drank highballs all day long. It was just such a relief to know that it was all over with. We were restricted to the base for three days. They would not let anybody out. Those men that were on liberty stayed on liberty but nobody else got time off for the first three days after it was announced. Several years ago there was a piece, a letter to the editor, and some yoyo was talking

about all the drunken sailors that were on the streets in Corpus Christi, and it made me so mad I wrote a letter to the editor myself, and I told them SOB's, I said, "By God, I'll grant you there were no drunk sailors on the streets in Corpus Christi for three days after the . . ."

*Yeah, because everyone was restricted to the base.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah, I said, "We were all restricted to the base for three days." But every time I turn around or I used to, still do every once in a while, somebody will say drunken sailors and drunken this and drunken that. I said policemen and secret service people, that bunch of bastards up there in Washington now, they got caught with their pants down.

*That's right.*

**Robert McKinley:** I wish they'd hang their ass. But anyway, so, is there anything else that I can help you with?

*No sir. I could talk to you for hours, and I really appreciate you just taking the time to share with us some of your memories. I guess the last thing I want to ask is, you know, here at the Land Office, we have archives that go back to the 1700s. We have the original registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of all the settlers that came to Texas, and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. And our goal is to take these interviews and save them so that hundreds of years from now after you and I are long gone, people might be able to listen to these interviews and learn something from them. With that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening a long time from now?*

**Robert McKinley:** Lord of mercy.

*Just about your service in the Navy or anything in general?*

**Robert McKinley:** Well, I enjoyed the Navy. My wife, after we married in '45, I liked the service. My wife liked the service. The kids didn't seem to be bothered by moving around, and I'd do it all over again if I had to.

*That's great.*

**Robert McKinley:** It's a . . . I think every young man that turns 18 years of age should be forced to go into the military. He should get one year of strict military conduct, and able to control themselves. And then in another year, let 'em choose a vocation and give them training in that vocation. And then at the end of that two-year period of time, if they want to stay in the Navy they can do so, or at least they will have something that they can fall back on to make a living at. And I've said this so many times, and I've had mothers want to cut my throat for saying things like that. In fact, I had one little girl used to live right behind me, and I gouged her every time I got a chance. But these kids getting into all this trouble, it's just . . . They're mollycoddled too much.

*Yes sir. I agree. I definitely think there's a lot that comes from military service. I think it's a definite benefit.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah, I do too. And let me tell you something about my book. I wrote it primarily for my family. I had no idea of having it published. I wanted them to know what I did

for 22 years for my country. And I found this printer that would, I think he printed about two or three dozen books for me, and I sent them all out to my family scattered out all over the United States I guess, and, you know, that was gonna be the end of it. And people in my church heard about it and they says, "Where's our copy of that book you wrote?" You know, and I said, "Well, I don't have any more." And they said, "Well, get some more." And I've given away, I haven't sold any of 'em. I just can't make myself sell 'em. They cost me six dollars a copy and I said if people want to give me that, that would be fine but otherwise it's a gift.

*It's great that you've done that, especially for your family.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah, and I'm proud of my family. They stood by me through thick and thin, and I just wish more men had written their stories as we already talked about.

*It's a hard thing for the average person to do, to be able to sit down and write much of anything, let alone write about themselves. You know, I think of all the veterans I've interviewed over the last several years, you're probably one of only a very small handful that have actually taken the time to write anything down, but I can tell you firsthand how great it is for your family that you did that because my wife's, one of my wife's grandfathers is now deceased and I never got to know him but he wrote his personal memoirs, just kind of the same thing for his family, and I had a chance to read that a few years ago. The joke that my father-in-law says now is I actually know more about their family history than they do because I took the time to read his memoir. So I never had a chance to meet her grandfather but I feel in a lot of ways like I know him because I was able to read all of his memories. And so I know for your family and future generations of your family, I know that they'll really appreciate that book that you wrote.*

**Robert McKinley:** You know, every once in a while I'll get a return, somebody that I've given a book to, you know, they'll write and tell me about it. This one here just the other day, I had given a copy to this lady and I mailed it to her, people that we used to square-dance with, and I didn't hear from her, and I didn't hear from her, you know? And I thought, "Well, I missed my guess." So anyway, last week I got this letter from her and she says, "Bob McKinley," she says, "I have an apology." She says when I come back off of an extended trip she was on, she said, "I knew that book was there," and she says, "I had so much catching up, laundry and such as that." She had been gone about a month. And she says, "When I had a lull in my work," she said, "I saw the book there," and she said, "I picked it up just to give it a glance." And she says, "I didn't put it down 'til I finished it."

*That's great.*

**Robert McKinley:** Yeah, and she says, "Too bad more people don't do this." You know I thought about doing it many years ago, and I just kept putting it off and putting it off. So one day I was in Wal-Mart and in the stationery section, and they had a whole stack of spiral notebooks sitting there, and I said, "By God, I'm gonna do it." I bought two of those spiral notebooks, got home that night and started writing. It took me almost two years.

*Yes sir, it's not easy to write.*

**Robert McKinley:** No, it isn't.

*Yes sir. That's great. Well, sir, I tell you, we really appreciate your letting us interview you today, and especially your service. In about a couple weeks, we're going to send you copies of this interview on CDs you can give to your friends and family or whomever along with a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson. It's going to come in a commemorative binder. Commissioner Patterson is a veteran. He's a retired Marine lieutenant colonel, Vietnam veteran, and so I know he appreciates your story and your history. Everybody here at the Land Office appreciates your service for our nation, so it's just a small way of us saying thank you.*

**Robert McKinley:** You know, when I get into conversation with people about my service, I wear my uniform a lot when I go to the Lexington down here, you know. And I say, "Well, I did 21 years, six months and 18 days in the service, survived three wars, and I'm still here. And my goal in life is to live to be 100 and get shot by a jealous husband."

*That's great.*

**Robert McKinley:** And I'm going to be 89 here in July.

*Yes sir, that's great. Well, you sound like you're doing great. You're well on your way to your goal.*

**Robert McKinley:** That's what I'm shooting for. My wife says she'll shoot me first.

*Yes sir. Well, sir, we'll be in touch again soon. Like I said, I'm going to get all that stuff together and in a couple weeks or so, we'll have it in the mail to you. We hope you enjoy it.*

**Robert McKinley:** All right.

*Yes sir. Take care. We'll talk to you soon.*

**Robert McKinley:** Okay. Bye bye.