

Transcription: John Nelson

Today is Wednesday, February 9th, 2011. My name is James Crabtree and today I'll be interviewing Mr. John Nelson. This interview is being done by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Nelson is at the Frank Tojada Home in Forestville, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, first off, thank you very much for taking time to speak to us today, it's an honor for us. The first question I usually ask is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

John Nelson: Well I was raised in Mathis, Texas, which is a small town about 35 miles in from Corpus Christi, Texas, on the coast. I lived on the wake down there. I went to high school in school in Mathis, Texas, and I went to Texas A&M for college until I got married and my father wanting me if I was going to have a family, I needed to go to work. So I did not finish college, and I was drafted then and went into the Navy and the war.

OK, tell us a little bit about when did you get the draft notice, do you remember that day?

John Nelson: Yeah, that's been a good while ago, but to be honest with you I was ready to go. My father had been in World War I and he tried to go in World War II, and they told him he was too old, and it kind of broke his heart, and he started the Texas State Guard. I don't know if you ever heard of it or not, but in World War II, earlier World War II, he taught high school kids, boys how to march and do close order rail, even to fire rifles and things like that. I was raised in an environment to be proud to be an American and fight for that cause.

So were you back home then when you got the notice?

John Nelson: Yeah, I still lived in Mathis, yeah.

OK, and do you remember though, I guess to back up a little bit, do you remember where you were on December 7th when you learned about the bombing at Pearl Harbor?

John Nelson: Yes, I remember when we came in from church and were sitting at the kitchen table and it was around noon, see, in south Texas time when that happened, and oh, my father was, he couldn't wait to go down and sign up and go. He was very disappointed when they told him he was too old.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

John Nelson: Yes, I have two brothers and a sister. My older brother was in the Army and he was made a corps man, he was a medic. Then my younger brother went to Europe and he was in Germany, in Berlin when the terrible happened there when Berlin was cut off.

So when the bombing of Pearl Harbor took place and war was declared, I guess you must have known then at some point that you were gonna go to war yourself, is that right?

John Nelson: Yes, we all knew that was gonna happen then. Our father, my family believed in performing your duties and thought that you were responsible for holding up your end.

So when you received the draft notice, how long was it before you were actually on your way to basic training?

John Nelson: Actually they put us on the bus in Sinton, Texas, where the draft board was at, and they drilled us to San Antonio, and it happened pretty quickly the whole thing, and they give us a physical there and they put us on a plane and flew us to San Diego, California, and I was in boot camp that night.

Tell us about your first impressions of arriving in San Diego.

John Nelson: Well it all happened so fast that it seemed like it was kind of overwhelming, but there was a bunch of other guys just like me that we were there together, and they were rough on us, but at the same time, they treated us like we were Americans.

Sure, well and obviously there was a purpose behind the roughness and the training. To you, what were some of the biggest challenges of going through boot camp?

John Nelson: I guess learning to kill. I was raised in a Christian home and the military, war is a killing operation and it takes getting used to, and I'll never forget in my first real experience in Korea, we were in a crash flight and I had the guy that was in the foxhole with me stood up and come back down without a head, and he had a Browning automatic rifle, and we were in a fire fight and I was fortunate and I had 19 confirmed kills, and then the captain told me that I was going to burn in hell for killing them and I often wondered what he was doing on the battlefield.

Well let me ask you sir, so you were in the Navy, right?

John Nelson: Was in the Navy.

And you were in the Korean War, not World War II?

John Nelson: That's right.

OK, I got a little confused then when I was talking to you about Pearl Harbor.

John Nelson: I was a kid then.

You were a kid, yes sir. So when you were drafted, it was for the Korean War, do you remember roughly what year and month it was you were drafted?

John Nelson: I finished high school in 1951, I went to college and got married, and didn't go back to college. It would've been about 1952-53 when I went to Korea, yeah.

OK. What was your MOS, what was your specialty in the Navy?

John Nelson: I was put on a flight crew and I sat at a radar screen and I was an Airborne CIC Operator. I'd been a high school quarterback and learned to throw a football leading, and that's what you got your planes that you're sending in on the enemy, you try to bring them in out of the sun and above and intercept them.

Was that an MOS that you chose, or was it one that was assigned to you when you were in training?

John Nelson: No, I was assigned it. I had no choice in it. Things moved pretty quickly, and I was young.

How long was it after your training, I imagine you went through your basic training and then they sent you to a school where you learned to be an actual airborne operator?

John Nelson: Well, I actually didn't go to school. Mine was all on the job training. Things were moving pretty quickly then. They didn't have time to send us to the school. They had the school, but they sent us and our training was on the job. And we had crew members and chiefs and things that were with us that were extremely talented at that, taught us how to do things, and almost like a lot of us do it.

When was it you learned that you'd actually be going to Korea?

John Nelson: Well it happened real quickly. As soon as we got out, I got out of boot camp, I came home for I think we had 10 days off, and then we went back to San Francisco, and I was on a ship, well actually we didn't go on a ship, we flew to Hickam Field on Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands, and I was there quickly.

At that point, how did your wife handle you being deployed like that?

John Nelson: She stayed at home with her parents and my parents, and she worked and did what she had to do, too.

So when you get to Oahu, are you with an assigned unit at that point?

John Nelson: Yeah.

And then again, I know you said everything was moving pretty quick, did you spend much time in Oahu before you were on to Korea?

John Nelson: Yeah, we were there for a while. In fact, we did most of our training there, and then they moved us to Japan, and well actually we jumped around between Midway, Guam, Iwo Jima, and Atsugi in Japan, and then we flew out of there to Korea.

What were your first impressions upon arriving in Korea?

John Nelson: Well, it was a different world. It was to begin with it was winter time, it was very cold. I'll never forget this in a foxhole there and having to cover up with snow, and then your body heat would melt it and you'd have about a foot of water in the bottom and then the ground cold would turn it into a block of ice, and you're sitting on ice. I did think it was God's forsaken place, I tell you what. It was cold and people were, even the South Koreans, you'd see 'em and be sitting on the side of the road and you'd have a sandwich or something and you'd give it to 'em and when you turned your back to walk away, they'd try to stick a knife in you and things like that. It was a very unfriendly environment.

I imagine. Were you as a member of the Navy, were you around a bunch of Marines then in those fighting holes, and how was it that you came, because I don't imagine going in the Navy you would expect to be in a bunch of fighting holes.

John Nelson: Oh, I wasn't planning on that. And hadn't actually been trained for it, but I'd been a country boy and learned to use rifles and things and then they did give us training in using weapons, too, yeah.

Were you with a bunch of Marines at that point, or Army?

John Nelson: There was Army and Marines in there, yeah.

So were you assigned then to like an air field as an operator?

John Nelson: No, things went kind of fast. After I was down on the ground in Korea, I was left there for a good while before I got back with my outfit and back into flying again.

So I guess, I'm trying to figure out, so they sent you over there as an airborne controller, but you ended up being put kind of in the fighting holes?

John Nelson: When we went down, yeah, I was, we were there. We went down in the middle of it is what happened, yeah.

And so how long did you end up spending in that type of situation where you were in the fighting holes and standing watch?

John Nelson: Oh, I was there over a year, yeah.

Tell us kind of what a typical day might be like. Were you on the move a lot? Did you do a lot of patrols?

John Nelson: Yeah, and we were in foxholes. They would bring food to us. I was always amazed that our military when we were on the front line in the foxholes, they would bring us a hot meal every meal. Our government believed in feeding us to keep us healthy.

Sure, and were you able to get much mail from back home?

John Nelson: Yeah, we'd get mail, we sure would. I know that was one of the highlights of our day was when we'd have mail call and get mail.

How long would it normally take for a letter or package to get to you?

John Nelson: Oh, it would take several days, yeah. I don't remember exactly, but I know – probably a week at least.

I would imagine it would probably take several weeks for you to get things there. Tell us sir a little bit about the men that you served with, some of the men that were in your unit.

John Nelson: Oh, those were wonderful people. I've even had, I've had some of them, I have a boy from Maize, Kansas, that's been down to see me a couple of times. He was married, too,

when we were there, and when we come back to San Francisco to Treasure Island getting out, his wife met him out there and I met her, and then when we come home, I was home and they came down and we went to Padre Island fishing and things like that. We're still good friends.

That's great, that is great. Were you as a married man were you one of the exceptions where most of the men there were single?

John Nelson: Yeah, probably the majority were, yeah. But there were a few of us that were married, yeah.

Do you think it made it harder on you and the other married guys because you were worried about your wives back home in addition to what you were facing there in Korea?

John Nelson: Yeah, we weren't so worried, we were afraid they would forget us, you know.

What was it like when it got more into the summer time? I guess the weather improved a little bit on you.

John Nelson: Oh yes, the bugs are bad in Korea. It's a pretty fertile country, and summer time it was hot and in the rainy season, they have a rainy season there and in the Philippines and they have six weeks or something like that where it just rains every day.

What about your leadership, can you tell us a little bit about your leadership while you were there in Korea, what they were like, and some that maybe stand out?

John Nelson: Most of them were career military people and exceptionally good. Our plane commander used to, when we were in operations and working hard, our plane commander would come back and deliver us coffee. That always amazed me, but he was proud of us.

Tell us a little bit about your actual MOS because I think that's interesting. You were saying you were airborne, you said CIC operator?

John Nelson: It was kind of a new system that they were using. It was an old Super Connie is the plane that we were on. The airport called it an RC-121. We called it a VW-1, and it had five stations on it, and a height finding radar in the front. We had a plotting board at the end where you could, at the back where they plotted everybody that was tracking aircraft in, and so everybody was aware of exactly what our situation was at all times. We communicated with a ship board who was usually called Jehovah, and really I think we were very efficient. We were good at what we did.

What would a typical day be like because I guess this was a plane, correct?

John Nelson: That's right.

How often would you guys fly? Would you fly almost every day?

John Nelson: We would fly almost daily when we were in combat situations, and that was, the good thing about being a big airplane, we had range and we would usually go back to Atsugi instead of landing in Korea when we were doing our, calling our systems.

How long would you normally fly for? Was it a 12-hour mission?

John Nelson: That plane had a permitted range, I don't know whether you would say it or not, but it had big fuel tanks on the end of the wings, and we could fly a long ways, long hours. We was in 10 to 12-hour flights, yeah.

And I guess for the layman, what you guys were doing then was kind of like air traffic controlling from the sky, correct? You were talking to other friendly aircraft and directing them?

John Nelson: What we were actually doing, we would work out about 50 miles or so from the fleet and then we would intercept things coming in. We'd hold fighters in figure 8 working around, and then when we'd have bogey's coming in, we'd investigate 'em, send 'em in to get a visual of them.

What type of aircraft were you guys usually spotting?

John Nelson: I remember where they had the L-Cat, they had the P-51, the old Mustang, and I never will forget then when we got the jets. We had the F-86 was, boy that was a wonderful airplane.

That is something. So you were, you kind of were there at the changing in aviation where like you mentioned the P-51 which had been used in World War II.

John Nelson: When I started out, we had prop planes, and then we went into, we got jets.

What about the enemy? What type of aircraft did they have?

John Nelson: Big ones, good airplanes. The Russian Mig was mostly what they had and it was a good airplane.

Were you ever in a position where you guys felt like your aircraft was in danger, or were you guys normally able to stay far enough out of range that you weren't a target yourself?

John Nelson: No, we got attacked ourselves at times, but we had no weapons on board other than, well we had the anchor sidearm, but I mean we actually had no, we had to use the jets and the caps that we were controlling.

Sure, call them in. So what was your particular job then? Would you be working the plotting board or would you be on the radio?

John Nelson: I set at a radar screen, and that's what this plane was, function was. We were an airborne radar system, and the plane, I don't know whether you ever saw one or not, looked like a pregnant duck. It had a big ray dome on the bottom of it and a high plane antenna on top of it, and it did, it looked like a pregnant airplane, but it was a good airplane.

Did you fly with the same crew most of the time?

John Nelson: Yes, you were assigned to a flight crew and you were in that crew. I flew with the same pilot, copilot, the navigator, and we had a couple of CIC officers that were officers. We

had about five officers on the plane, and then we had about eight enlisted men, something like that.

So you guys I imagine got to know each other pretty well.

John Nelson: Yeah, we did.

And tell us a little bit about them. Any particular stories that stand out or memories that stand out?

John Nelson: Oh yes, well like I say, I'm still in touch with a bunch of mine. We become life long friends. Bill Davidson from east Kansas, and old boy from Michigan. My plane commander was, a couple of them were from San Antonio, so we had some things in common.

So how long ultimately did you spend in Korea?

John Nelson: I was in Korea a couple of years. Too long.

So when you weren't flying, then you were off in Japan or you were in a fighting hole there in Korea, is that right?

John Nelson: Yeah.

And you mentioned, sir, too when we first started a little bit about some actual combat that you saw there in the fighting hole.

John Nelson: We went down and that was kind of, I inherited that, when we went down there well we were, it went down in where the combat was going on and when we got there, we didn't get moved out very quickly.

What happened to the plane that caused it to go down?

John Nelson: The plane was destroyed, yeah.

OK, so you were hit by enemy ground fire?

John Nelson: Yeah, we were hit by some rocket fire, yeah.

Tell us sir, if you would, a little bit about that incident, how you survived.

John Nelson: Well when we went down, we actually thought we probably all would be dead, but our plane commander did a tremendous job and we survived it. Of course the plane was destroyed, but we all got off the plane alive and most of us then were stuck there in the combat situation for the duration then.

So I'm guessing then obviously you had to jump out with parachutes.

John Nelson: No, we did not. We rode the plane down.

Oh really. OK, I assumed -

John Nelson: I tell you what, I can't hardly see myself jumping out of an airplane.

Well I guess in certain circumstances though –

John Nelson: Yeah it would be, I'm sure it would. That old Super Con, that was a good airplane. That booger was really boogered up, but he got it down and we all got out of it.

Wow, but at that point the plane was destroyed and you were out, and then so you I guess didn't know how long it was going to be before they could get you out of there, right?

John Nelson: Yeah, we knew very little. I had not had a lot of combat training. I was in a flight crew. But you learn pretty fast in a foxhole with a Browning automatic rifle. I tell you what, when you get into these situations of life and death, you will be surprised. Your body does things you didn't think you could do.

Sure, absolutely. And how long did you end up spending in that situation?

John Nelson: We were there a long time, we were there several months. Things were pretty wild then. You know, when the Red Chinese come into Korea, they pushed almost to the coast, pushed us almost into the water, and then we got more troops and we pushed back. They had some real leadership there. Some of them guys I'll never forget. Some of the great calls, when you sit there and your commanding officer says don't shit boys, let 'em starve, I tell you, things you'll never forget.

When you were there and you were going through all that, did you ever have any worries that you were going to get out of it alive?

John Nelson: Well, people all around you going down, you have, it enters your mind, yes. Really you don't have time to worry about it. You're so goddam busy trying to survive that you can't sit there and worry about not surviving.

Sure, and then so when did you finally get to leave Korea?

John Nelson: When I finally got out, they flew us back and my wife come over. I was back in the Philippines and she flew over and we rode the troop ship back together. That was almost like a honeymoon for us.

That's something. So she got to ride on the ship with you.

John Nelson: They put us in a cabin together, yes. That really was a great experience and I had some commanders that did that for me.

Wow, I've never heard of that before in all the veterans that I've spoken to. That's pretty amazing.

John Nelson: It was kind of unusual, it really was.

Were there other spouses?

John Nelson: Like in the Philippines, some of them had their families there. Career people were there, and Sub-Phines, I had another guy that was from my home town and his wife was with him. He was in a different outfit, Ortis McKidgeon, and his wife was there. In fact while I was at Cubey Point, he was there, and I got to go to their house and have a home cooked meal a couple of times.

Wow, how long was the cruise back to the U.S. on the ship?

John Nelson: I don't remember, sir, but it took several, it took a couple of weeks.

Sure, wow. Well that's pretty interesting that your wife got to come out and be a part of that and sail back. Then when you got back to the U.S., how much time did you have left in the Navy?

John Nelson: Well actually it wasn't too long. We were at Treasure Island for a while and my time was up, it's just that at that particular time they were letting a lot of people out and it took a while. I was probably there about a month before we got out.

When you got out, did you have any doubt about what you wanted to do? Were you pretty set on going back to Texas?

John Nelson: Yeah, I had a business. I was ready to go home. I think it was kind of, when I come home, my father who was still living then and had the Texas State Guard and I'd received the Silver Star, and when I come into town, he had the whole, his company on the city yard where they had their real ground and they re-presented me that medal in front of my home town fans. It was quite a day, I remember that.

Well tell us sir, because that's quite an honor. Tell us about the Silver Star.

John Nelson: When I got it, I mailed it to my mother, and of course then I didn't know whether I was going to get out of the thing alive or not, and so they had it, and I got that for the, well I told you about the guy that stood up and he come back down with no head, and I took that Browning automatic rifle and I killed 19 confirmed kills. That's when the captain told me I was going to burn in hell.

That's why you were awarded the Silver Star then.

John Nelson: Yeah, that was what I was awarded the Silver Star for.

Tell us sir if you would a little bit about that day. Was that, I assume you were being attacked by, was it the North Korean forces?

John Nelson: We were in foxholes in the front, and the guy that was in, we were good friends and had been buddies a long time, he was a black boy, and he kind of went out of his head and I tried to pull him down. He stood up and when he stood up, well I reached up to grab him and pull him back down, but the rifle had gone off and when he come back down he had no head, and that will live in my memory forever.

Sure, no I understand. But was it a situation that you were being attacked by North Korean forces? Were they trying to overrun where you were?

John Nelson: Yeah, that's when the Red Chinese come in.

Were you in that fighting hole the whole time or did you have to fall back?

John Nelson: Yeah, we fell back a way, but we rallied and I tell you what, we were a pretty resilient bunch.

Sure, and when you got the Silver Star, did you have any idea that that was going to be presented to you?

John Nelson: No, I had no idea.

Wow. Who was it that presented the award to you?

John Nelson: Well at the time it was in Korea, I think it was the captain that give it to me. But then when I came home, my father had his, the State Guard troops and they re-presented it to me in front of my home town.

That's got to be a real thrill and a real honor to have that, and I'm sure he had to have been proud of you to put something together like that. Do you still have it?

John Nelson: Oh yeah.

Wow, that's great. So you got back home to Texas and your father had that ceremony for you, what did you do at that point?

John Nelson: I had a business there, and shortly after that I acquired, it was one in Beeville, too, and I was pretty successful.

Did you ever join the State Guard? Did your dad ever try to get you - ?

John Nelson: Oh yeah, I was in that, too, yeah.

How long did you spend in the State Guard?

John Nelson: Well I don't remember for sure, it's disbanded I guess. I don't think they even have it anymore.

Oh no sir, there's still one.

John Nelson: There is one?

They still have a State Guard here in Texas. It's not all that big I don't believe, but I know some folks that are in it. Did you ever get involved with veterans groups like the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars?

John Nelson: Yeah, the VFW, yeah. The one in Beeville actually I go, I belong to the post in Mathis where I live, but the one in Beeville has a real nice facility. They have a bar and pool hall. I spend lots of time there. As a matter of fact I go there daily.

Oh that's great. And then I guess your wife I'm sure had to have been elated that you were back home after having been in the war. Did you all have any children?

John Nelson: We have a boy and a girl. The boy is, he's playing pro football, he plays in the Cowboys.

Oh really.

John Nelson: And the girl, she's married and has three kids, and now I'm getting grandkids about the age going in, really now.

That is great. Well that's an exciting and I'm sure they are proud of you and especially proud of your service as we all are. And I guess sir, like I had mentioned before, I know we're kind of starting to run out of time, but as I mentioned before, this interview is part of the General Land Office's way, small way of saying thank you for your service and we have archives here that go back hundreds of years to the Spanish Land Grants. We have David Crockett's land grant that his widow received after he was killed at The Alamo and things of that sort. So we're going to put this interview into those archives. So with that in mind, is there anything that you might want to say to somebody that's listening to this interview two hundred years from now?

John Nelson: Well, just that I'm proud that I was able to serve.

Yes sir. Well sir we're definitely proud of you and on behalf of Commissioner Jerry Patterson and everyone here at the Land Office, we want to thank you for your service. Thank you, too, as well for taking the time to let me interview you today. It means a lot. It's a nice honor.

John Nelson: Thank you, sir.

Yes sir, thank you very much. Have a good day sir, and we'll be sending you the CD's soon.

John Nelson: All right, thank you.

Yes sir, take care, goodbye.

[End of recording]