

Transcription: Eugene Nink

Today is August the 18th, 2009. This is Mike McReaken, and I'm talking with Mr. Eugene Nink at his home in Pasadena, Texas; 408 Yorkshire. Mr. Nink served in the United States Navy during World War II. Good morning, Mr. Nink.

Eugene Nink: Good morning.

Exactly when were you born?

Eugene Nink: Houston, St. Joseph's Hospital, Houston, Texas.

What year?

Eugene Nink: In '29, I believe.

OK, so you're a native Houstonian.

Eugene Nink: 1924.

OK.

Eugene Nink: 1924.

OK, that makes you a little bit older Houstonian. Did you live in Houston all your life?

Eugene Nink: No, my father worked for the Ford Motor Company, and he passed away I guess it was about 1929.

So you were a little boy when you lost your dad.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, I was maybe 5, 6 years old, and my mother didn't want to stay in Houston I guess. Anyhow we moved back up to Smithville, Texas, where her parents lived.

So you lived with your mom and your brothers and sisters and grandpa and grandma up in Smithville.

Eugene Nink: Grew up on a farm in a little community, Pen Oak, Texas, between Smithville and La Grange, and Giddings.

Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Eugene Nink: We were living in Smithville and I was in senior class, and I remember we went to a movie Sunday afternoon. I believe it was Sunday afternoon. Anyhow, we got out of the movie and there was steady streams of cars on the highway, which is kind of unusual, and that is when we found out that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

So you heard it on the car radio?

Eugene Nink: I don't know just a scuttlebutt – we didn't have a car. I don't think they had a radio either. I'm not sure but yeah, it was a steady stream of traffic which was real unusual, but it was, that's where we learned. Of course we didn't know where Pearl Harbor, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was even. But we found out.

So you were 16.

Eugene Nink: Yeah. I had just turned 17 on the 13th of December, so I was just barely 17 years old.

How did you take it when you found out about the attack?

Eugene Nink: I don't know, it was just something that happened. Until we got back to school, I don't think we even had a radio. Anyhow, when we went to school the next day, or that's when we found out exactly what took place. The teachers were all, let us in on it. And so it was just business as usual for us.

Did you try to enlist right away?

Eugene Nink: My mother wouldn't sign the papers and I didn't push it. I said OK, I'll finish school, and I did. And as soon as I got out of school, I graduated in I guess it was May, latter part of May, and then my mother started renegeing. She wouldn't sign the papers, so I had to wait about two more months before she, I come down to Houston and went to the enlistment, downtown Houston, I enlisted in the Navy and brought her the papers and she signed 'em.

So you were still under 17 but graduated from high school, so you still had to deal with your mom.

Eugene Nink: I was 17, yeah. I had to bring them to my mother. She had to sign the papers.

After you went in, where did you go then?

Eugene Nink: I went to San Diego.

That was boot camp.

Eugene Nink: Boot camp, yeah. Boot camp, which was not, they had shortened it. It was real short, maybe I don't know, a month, maybe six weeks. I can't remember exactly. But after boot camp, they sent me to Los Angeles to Chapman College. It was an A school they called it and it was a 16-week school. We learned to be electricians. We graduated at the end of 16 weeks, and was rated an electrician's mate, third class.

What did you get to work on?

Eugene Nink: I never really worked as an electrician, a regular electrician, because I was sent to, I went to a school in Chicago. They sent me to Chicago to turret school. It was just about a month or five weeks maybe, and I learned how to, we had planes that had turrets, and that's how I got into aviation.

OK, so these were the Naval airplanes, the guns, the turrets.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, mostly. It was on the TBM's that I studied on. After that, after Chicago, that was in Chicago, after that I went back to Los Angeles I believe it was, crusading station, no, in San Francisco.

Alameda Naval Air Station?

Eugene Nink: Yeah, and that's where they sent me. From the receiving station they sent me to CACSU-6. Carry Aircraft Service Unit is what it was, and it was in Alameda Naval Air Station. And I started learning how to, learned my trade so to speak.

So you were working on the turrets.

Eugene Nink: Working on the planes and the turrets, mostly with my schooling I kind of had an edge up on a lot of guys. It was really not too complicated anyhow. It was perhaps I was there a month or six weeks just doing the regular check-ups on planes and it was a learning experience. But there was a new squadron forming at that air station. They moved in and they were, it was just starting from scratch. I think they had the pilots, but the crewmen, they were kind of filtering in, and I put in for a transfer to Air Group 18, and they approved it, and that's how I got into the Air Group 18.

So you were within the first group of ground crew and support crew.

Eugene Nink: Yeah. Of course the ground crew didn't consist of, there was two electricians and a couple of machinists mates, maybe three, and then the rest were ordinance men and radio men. They had the TBM's, had the crew of a pilot, a gunner, and a radio, so we got to fly all the time.

So you got up –

Eugene Nink: Yeah, that was a big thing. I remember the first time I flew in a plane.

How did that feel being a farm boy from - ?

Eugene Nink: I was kind of scared, I'll admit that, but it turned out real good and what was kind of funny about the whole thing, I was setting up in the turrets, and the other guy, I guess he was a regular ___man, anyhow we got up there and it was just a short flight, maybe an hour, hour and a half, and this guy got sick. He got airsick actually. Here I had never been up in a plane before, and the pilot of course, it smelled up the plane pretty good, and finally called back to his radioman, he said that was a mistake letting that kid come along. And that guy said it wasn't the kid, it was me. Kind of funny, you know, to me it was. But anyhow that was my introduction into Air Group 18.

Was it unusual for a turret repair guy to fly like you did?

Eugene Nink: Well, it wasn't unusual that we flew, but it was, you know we all were on flight pay, I started drawing flight pay when I got in the squadron. That added our salary pretty good, but the regular crewman were mostly all made of radiomen and ordinance men, and gunners or ordinance men, but I did a lot. I did quite a bit of flying.

How long did it take to get that Air Group ready to go out to sea?

Eugene Nink: Oh, it was pretty good. We didn't stay in Alameda very long. We went from there to, we finally ended up in Seattle, Washington. We went to, oh, I can't remember all, but they had auxiliary fields at a different town, Hollister was one of them, Hollister, California was our first stop. And then there were two more. We stayed there a while and then we finally ended up, it slips my mind, but anyhow we trained I guess six months or eight months, something like that, and we ended up back in San Francisco.

So your training was all along the West Coast getting ready and getting -

Eugene Nink: Yeah, Hollister and there was one other place, but I can't recall it.

This was probably about 1943?

Eugene Nink: It was '43, yeah, by then.

Where did you head out to when you finally got through with your training?

Eugene Nink: Well, we caught the Intrepid in San Francisco. We boarded her there, the Air Group did.

So you were on the Intrepid.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, and that was in late '43 I guess.

You sailed out to Pearl Harbor?

Eugene Nink: That's wrong. We didn't catch, we caught the Intrepid in Pearl Harbor. We caught a carryout, I can't remember the name. Anyhow, we took her to Hawaii, Honolulu, and that's where the Intrepid was waiting for the Air Group and we went aboard. But that was in late '43 I suppose. That's where we caught the Intrepid.

What happened after that? Where did you sail to?

Eugene Nink: We went to Palau – I'm confused on my dates about these things, but that was our first action. We did a lot of training though on the Intrepid. We didn't just go, you know.

So you had more time training on the Intrepid.

Eugene Nink: A lot of training, yeah. Pilots, they were all kind of green, and they hadn't been pilots too long. We had some older pilots, but a lot of younger ones, young pilots. And it turned out they were all, everything went good. But we stayed in Honolulu, not Honolulu, but we went to the big island of Hawaii at an air station, and then we went to another one, Maui maybe, and then back to Honolulu. But our training went on and on. We didn't think we'd ever catch a carrier, but then everybody was getting kind of restless, you know. We were afraid the war was gonna, I hate to say this but we were afraid the war was gonna be over before we had a chance at it.

So you did your training on the Intrepid and your first action was at P- ?

Eugene Nink: Palau.

Palau.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, and the Philippines, and we went to Okinawa and did a little damage, but it was quite an experience.

Who commanded the Intrepid?

Eugene Nink: I don't know, I can't remember the captain's name.

You told me before you were with Admiral Halsey's carrier group.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, but he was the overall commander, yeah, Halsey was, and he was aboard the Intrepid for a while. But gosh, of course we just were along for the ride. We didn't have any, but we went to Philippines and to Palau and we went up to Okinawa, but we were under fire a lot.

I remember you telling me you were at the Battle of Lady.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, in the Philippines, second battle in the Philippines.

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Eugene Nink: Well, it was a lot of Jap planes around, I know that. We took a couple of bad hits. We had a Jap plane fly into the gun crew, kamikaze style. That was about that time the kamikaze damage started up where the pilots, the Japanese would just fly their planes into, or try to. They didn't very many of them make it, but when they did, it caused considerable damage.

They hit your ship several times.

Eugene Nink: But let's see, we had on the port side, we had a gun crew. That was one I was talking about. It was forward of #2 elevator. Anyhow, this gun crew was made up of Black guys, which was kind of unusual at that period, and they were officers, they worked on the Officer's mess, and that's the only place we had any Black guys on the ship.

So this was their battle station.

Eugene Nink: And that was their battle station. And they always did a good job because let me explain something. As a member of the Air Group aboard the ship, we didn't have any duties at all, no watches, no nothing to do with the running of the ship. We were there for one purpose and that was to maintain our planes and fly 'em, and we, yes sir, and another thing, being free like that, we never, every time general quarters sounded, the first thing we'd do is go up on, leave the ready room. We'd always hang out in that air conditioned, we had an air conditioned ready room by the way, in the middle of the ocean, you know, and everybody hung out in there because it was so blooming hot everywhere else. Anyway, when general quarters would sound, we were, I believe we were forward of that #2 elevator. Anyhow we would go and crawl up and get up on the flight deck and take in the show. We'd stand, of course, if they looked kind of hairy and things, some plane was coming in, you know, a Jap plane, we'd try to move behind

something or whatever. Anyhow, we had a kamikaze fly into this gun, I call it a gun crew, but the space where they had, what caliber machine gun was that? It was not a machine gun, it was a little heavier gun. Anyhow, they would be strapped in and each individual, I think it was about 9 guns on this strip.

They were over the water.

Eugene Nink: They were kind of hanging over the side. Of course they had one guy would be maneuvering the gun and firing and the other guy would be putting in ammunition for it. Anyhow, that plane flew right into that gun crew and killed I think it was 8 or 9 of them. It was a big mess.

And you were on the flight deck when you saw the whole thing?

Eugene Nink: Yeah, a whole bunch of us all was up there and yeah, it was a big mess. They flew right into it and of course the Jap plane was kind of, the pilot, he was ejected from the plane onto the flight deck. I hate to say this, but some Marine went over there and cut his head off. Wasn't that something though? And it was kind of messy.

When that plane hit the gun turret, it did damage to the guns, but did it - ?

Eugene Nink: Yeah, it did damage to the whole structure by it, but it wasn't something that we had to get out of action. They cleaned it up and everything, but it was really, and those guys of course, they were strapped in those guns, you know. I wish I could remember what millimeter they were, but they were a pretty good sized shell, but they stayed with it.

And that wasn't the first time that, or that was the first time the Intrepid was hit.

Eugene Nink: That was the first time that set we were on that she was hit. We'd taken a torpedo earlier, but it was a dud of all things. It hit the side on the water, you know, but it didn't do any damage, and that was the first time that our squadron was on it that we took a pretty good hit.

How many of the kamikaze hits did you take on the Intrepid?

Eugene Nink: We took two, three. We took the one on that one plane, it seemed like it hit the side of the ship in the forward part of the ship, but it didn't do any damage. It was going down, you know, but then that one that hit the gun crew, and then we had the one that took a little, a couple of months later that took us out of action was two of them I think. It was two kamikaze's that flew into the flight deck, and they did a terrible bunch of damage to the flight deck, but not the hangar, but the flight deck.

You told me once before those two hits that hit pretty close together at the same time killed a number of men.

Eugene Nink: I think it killed 60.

60.

Eugene Nink: 60 crew, or maybe more, maybe a little less, but I think it was 60.

And again, you were on the flight deck because that was your standard location during the general quarters.

Eugene Nink: No, I wasn't on the flight deck and it almost cost me, too, but for some reason I was down where the, about mid-ships, anyhow, I was down in a space below where the tower is. Anyhow, it was below there, and it was about 30 of us. I still to this day can't remember why we were down there, but there was a reason. A meeting was it or something. Anyhow, that's where we were when that plane came in. It didn't harm anything structurally there, but the smoke just all of a sudden, we were there doing OK and just smoke just appeared, and you couldn't see from here to that light ahead. That's what I think we all made it out, but we had, it was really a mess and I was coughing. I coughed up black stuff for I bet three weeks after that, just breathing all that stuff, and we were all lucky to get out. But that was probably my closest experience.

And those two hits, is that what put the Intrepid out of service for a while?

Eugene Nink: Yeah, we went from, we hung around out there for a few days, and then the decision was made to send the Intrepid back to Pearl Harbor, and we did. We went back to Pearl. This was late in the year. This was in November I guess, or December, first part of December. Anyhow, we went back to Pearl and spent a few days or maybe a week there, and they determined that she had to go back to the States to San Francisco for major repairs. She was banged up pretty good. And of course we in the Air Group, we got to San Francisco and they gave us 30-day leaves and we just went, broke up, everybody just broke up and I went home. And it was the day before Christmas when I got home. My mother had no idea. She thought I was still out in the Pacific.

Just like a movie.

Eugene Nink: She'd like to had a heart attack. But that was the leave that we had, 30 days, and the squadron reformed again, and of course I think they gave us a choice, do you want to stay reforming into Air Group 18 or do you want to go somewhere else? But I chose to stay with the Air Group. A few of us did, not very many, and most everybody just went, I never could keep track.

So you stayed with Air Group 18 and was that the last, did you go back out for new action?

Eugene Nink: No, of course that was in '44, '45? That was December '44. Then '45 come along, 1945, but we went to Seattle, Washington and no, not Seattle – Astoria, Oregon. Great liberty town, let me tell you. We reformed, we called it reformed. Anyhow, our part of it, the bombers, TBM's were stationed, fighters were stationed, one of the air groups, I don't know where they were, and the bomber at another. Anyhow, we made it to Astoria, Oregon and that's where we started reforming and training and good liberty. I still think about that place. It was fun. The weather, it rained a lot in the winter time.

So how long did you stay up in the Oregon area before you got back aboard a carrier?

Eugene Nink: We never did make it back aboard. We stayed in Oregon I guess two months maybe, and then we went to a place in California, and we were, I believe we were in San Diego when the war ended, the war finally came to an end.

That's where you were when the atomic bomb was dropped?

Eugene Nink: Yeah, I think we were in San Diego, but we were on the way, we would have. Our training was going along real good, and of course we picked up a lot of new pilots, not too many of the old pilots stayed with us, and everybody was starting just from scratch. But we had a good bunch of guys.

In San Diego when the war was over, did you stay in the Navy or did you get discharged?

Eugene Nink: No, Air Group 18 was in San Diego when the war ended and they put us on, we got orders to go to the East Coast and they put us on, what was the name of that carrier? We went to, I wish I could think of the carrier that we were on. It was an old carrier, and the Ranger, USS Ranger, and that was one of the Navy's old carriers. It never did enter the war, but it was more of a training. Anyhow we boarded the Ranger at San Diego, just the torpedo squadron 18. I don't know what happened to the other, the bombing and the fighters. Anyhow we went from San Diego down to the Panama Canal back up to New Orleans, and the liberty in New Orleans was pretty good, too.

So you remember your career by the liberty points.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, of course I was all single yet. Anyhow, we picked up, we picked up planes. They had made arrangements for our planes to be in New Orleans and we picked 'em up and flew to Quincy Point, Rhode Island, and they were gonna I guess train or whatever. But the war was over and I had the option of reenlisting and staying in, but I took my discharge.

And where did you go after you got discharged?

Eugene Nink: I went down here to Houston.

Went to work?

Eugene Nink: Not right away. I loafed around for three months. No, I didn't go to work. Let me think now. I was discharged in December I think, and yeah, that was in '46. Let's see.

You reenlisted in '46.

Eugene Nink: Yeah. Discharged in 1945, yeah. I was discharged in 1945, and I reenlisted in March of 1946. There it is, March of 1946. And let's see, I ended up in Honolulu.

So when you went back into the Navy, you were in Honolulu.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, Honolulu, and that was a great time, too. That was the first time I reenlisted, and I went to, that was in 1946 when I reenlisted, and I stayed in about a year and a half, discharged in December of 1947. So about a year and a half.

What did you do after you got discharged in '47?

Eugene Nink: I went to work. I finally had to go to work.

Who did you work for?

Eugene Nink: I worked for a company up in Dallas. I can't remember. I don't know how come I ended up in Dallas, but that's where it was. Anyhow, I came back down to Houston and went to work for Shell Oil Company right out there in the Shell refinery, and stayed there until 1950, and I reenlisted – I did it again – I reenlisted in the Navy.

Was that because of - ?

Eugene Nink: The Korean War.

So you went back into the Navy. Is that when you met your wife, because I know your wife was in the Navy. Tell me your wife's name.

Eugene Nink: Rylma, R-y-l-m-a.

Not Wilma, but Rylma.

Eugene Nink: I reenlisted and they sent me to, I was on a jeep carrier. They put me on a carrier and we took a load of planes over to, yeah, over to Japan. That was at Sitgo Bay, a CVE-86, and we went to Japan with a load of planes and we got rid of them, and then I ended up back in Seattle, Washington, Sand Point Naval Air Station, flies around 895, and it was I don't know, it was more like a commercial. They did a lot of, it was large aircraft, passenger plane, and that was a real good experience.

So you were working on large aircraft then.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, I was working on the bigger aircraft. It was a regular, it was just like a regular airline, and of course I was an electrician and I took care of it.

Is that where you met Rylma?

Eugene Nink: Ah yes.

What did she do in the Navy?

Eugene Nink: She joined the Navy and she was the chaplain's assistant there at the air station. That was a real good job for her. She fitted right in. She took care of all the people. You know how it is, guys are always getting messed up and having troubles and so forth, and she took care of all that business for the chaplain. The guys would get in trouble and break up with their wives. It was a big deal.

So she was kind of like a counselor.

Eugene Nink: Counselor, that's what I would call her, and she took care of all the paperwork and it was a steady job, good job.

Where was she born?

Eugene Nink: She was born in Claremont, New Hampshire. She was a Yankee.

She was a Yankee out on the West Coast meeting a Texan.

Eugene Nink: Yeah, and she would set back but she was a real good athlete. She played softball and soccer and basketball. She was short, but she played right there with the big girls.

How did you meet her? You weren't married so you weren't having problems, so you weren't getting counseled.

Eugene Nink: No, I checked in at that, I can't remember exactly. It seemed like I met her in, it's not the PX, what did we call it?

The base exchange?

Eugene Nink: Yeah, and they served beer there and everything, it was a real hangout for us, and that's where I met her. We knew each other maybe six months, I don't know, until we got married. We had a regular military wedding. It was put on right there on the air station and the cooks and bakers got into it. Of course they all knew Billy and cooks and bakers got in. They baked a cake and we had a regular military wedding.

I've seen the photograph of the two of you at your wedding both in uniform. It was really beautiful. Great.

Eugene Nink: So that's the way it was, and from there we come back to Texas and I worked for Effa Corporation.

When you met Rylma, that was the end of your military career.

Eugene Nink: Her enlistment was up at a certain period of time, and I could've got out anytime. So we decided to, there was a lot of talking, let's stay in the Navy, or I would stay in the Navy, but we chose to, decided to come back to Texas and I had worked for Shell Oil Company, and I still could've still had my, they would take me back, you know. You know how the companies did in those days. But there was a new plant opening up down here, Effa Corporation, they made tetratholid that they put in gasoline. I don't think they do that anymore.

No they don't, but I can remember the ads on television on Milton Berle shows with Ethel in your tank.

Eugene Nink: And they were just a brand new plant and everything, and I put in the application and they hired me. We got hired and that's where we bought this house in '52 I think it was.

So you've lived here your whole -

Eugene Nink: My whole married life.

And you have how many children?

Eugene Nink: Three daughters.

You raised 'em all here in Pasadena?

Eugene Nink: Yeah, they went to school Pasadena at Deerport, we're in the Deerport school district. Yeah, everything turned out good for me. I was a lot better than I deserved, I guess because not that I was wild or anything, but I'm a lot different than that now.

Well, because you're a lot different than you were when you were back then, how do you think your naval service changed you?

Eugene Nink: Oh, it taught me everything I know just about. Gosh, when I went in, I was, didn't know nothing. I just got out of high school and I was raised out in the country until I started high school, four years in high school, but it really gave me a really opened up to the world for me. I enjoyed my Navy time.

Was there any tough part of your naval time that you didn't really care for?

Eugene Nink: No. I enjoyed it all.

Well you must have, because you enlisted three different times.

Eugene Nink: That last time, there was a lot of debate about whether to go ahead and go reenlist for six years, but she was pregnant and so we decided to -

Be together with your family.

Eugene Nink: Yeah.

If there were one thing that you could tell the current group of sailors and soldiers and Marines that are serving now, in the 21st Century, what would you tell them?

Eugene Nink: Gracious, I don't know. Just serve your country and stay out of trouble. That's about it.

Well that's pretty good.

Eugene Nink: Enjoy life.

That's pretty good advice. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we stop today?

Eugene Nink: No, I don't think so. I've enjoyed talking to you. I enjoyed that.

Well, I've enjoyed hearing your stories. On behalf of Commissioner Jerry Patterson and the Texas Veteran's Land Board, I'd like to thank you for your service to our country and for sharing those experiences with us. Thank you Mr. Nink.

Eugene Nink: Thank you.

[End of recording]