

Warren Carlson

Transcribed by Lorraine Lightcap
Midway Village & Museum Center
6799 Guilford Road
Rockford, Illinois 61107
Phone 397 9112

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Navy Pilot

World War II – South Pacific

My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer at the Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events that surrounding World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, interviewing Mr. Warren Carlson. Mr. Carlson served in the branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

NELSON: Warren, would you please start by introducing yourself to us. Please give us your full name, the place and date of birth. We would also like to have the names of each of your parents.

CARLSON: I was born in Rockford Illinois, February 26th, 1916, the son of Axel R. and Sally Larson Carlson. My sister's name is Sigrid Carlson Tenny, Mrs. Robert I. Tenny. She was born January 2nd, 1913. Both of my parents were born in Smöland though they did not meet until it happened in Rockford. They were proud to be citizens of the United States.

NELSON: Are there any details about your parents or your family that you would like to give besides that. This goes into entering the military. What was life like for you before the war ... especially during 1941.

CARLSON: I was employed by the National Lock Company from November 1st, 1938, until June 30th, 1942. When National Lock Company began to make contributions to war preparation in 1941, I was assigned to priorities and received and record keeping of all new orders. Since we had so many orders in process it was next to impossible to accurately determine what shipments were contributing to defense. Thus we kept track of all coming orders of defense and when I left National Lock Company in June of 1942 our incoming orders were about 80% defense. I was assigned to a civilian pilot training at Northwestern University where I took ground school and then pilot training at Sky Harbor Airport. In November I was sent to the University of Iowa for physical training under the V-5 program. The Navy needed navigators in the South Pacific so many of us volunteered and after complete training at Iowa, we

were sent to Hollywood, Florida, for navigation, gunnery, bombing and meteorology.

NELSON: How did you hear of the December 7, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? What were you doing at the time?

CARLSON: I was at a friend's house for dinner on that particular Sunday. So ... but we weren't very much alarmed because we didn't know a lot about Japan at the time. We thought that we would have this war over with in a few months.

NELSON: What was your reaction and response to those around you?

CARLSON: Well, we were all pretty much the same ... being youngsters ... we just figured that the Japanese were crazy in starting a war with us ... that they'd be defeated very rapidly.

NELSON: Had you formed any prior opinion or developed any feelings about what had been taking place in Europe and Asia?

CARLSON: Well, yes. I watched that ... glad to see that the United States does participate in some of those things because then things aren't going to happen like they did in World War II. All of a sudden we're right in the middle of a war and we were not ready for it.

NELSON: Do you recall reading any newspaper accounts of German aggression in Europe?

CARLSON: Yes, I sure did remember that. Hitler was really spreading his wings and unfortunately I wasn't that much interested at the time because I had a German boy who went to the University of Mississippi with me who had been involved in a lot of that.

NELSON: What events led to your entry into military service? Were you already in the service draft or did you volunteer?

CARLSON: I had taken a civilian pilot training course at Machesney Airport in Rockford. In order to take that course I had to promise that I would enlist in

the Air Corps if we went to war and then that's exactly what I did.

NELSON: When and where were you inducted?

CARLSON: Officially I was inducted about November 1st, in 1942, in Iowa pre-flight.

NELSON: Where was this at?

CARLSON: That was in Iowa City, Iowa.

NELSON: Do you have any special memories of this event?

CARLSON: Only that I was building up physically and many times I got quite a kick out of this. They'd use me as an example when they had visitors on the base. I'd have to run and do a lot of things to show them what everybody was doing ... which of course, wasn't true because everybody didn't have the same physical qualities.

NELSON: How old were you?

CARLSON: Now I am 78.

NELSON: How old were you at the time?

CARLSON: I was 26 years old when I went into the service.

NELSON: Where did you take the basic military training? What were you trained to do?

CARLSON: I guess the basic training was when we got to Hollywood, Florida, for our navigation training. There we had ... we got into gunnery and bombing with the Nordien bomb sight.

NELSON: Did anything special happen there?

CARLSON: The most I remember about that Florida situation is how bad the mosquitoes got in the summer.

NELSON: Tell us about any other training camps you attended.

CARLSON: Well, I went from Hollywood, Florida to MAG 15 at San Diego. There I helped train enlisted men in navigation. I was called on then to ferry an airplane from Honolulu to Bella, LaVella.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

CARLSON: Not until I came back home did I have any passes of any kind. I couldn't even attend the wedding of my best friend.

NELSON: What do you recall of this period about the places that you were stationed, the friends you made ... your association with civilians?

CARLSON: Well, whenever civilians that I came in contact they were always very cordial and very good. I have to say that the service men that I came in contact were the same kind of people that I had hoped would be friends of mine for life. Some of them I have stayed close to.

NELSON: What was your military unit?

CARLSON: VMFN 531, which was a marine night fighter squadron, staging out of Bella, Lavella.

NELSON: What were your assigned duties?

CARLSON: Well, after we got there with the airplane the colonel wanted me to help some of his pilots with celestial navigation so they'd have a little better idea than what their training had given to them at that point. It seems like that was a big training program all the way from the very start of this squadron out there because when they got there none of them had had a real lot of practice with the radar equipment or how close to be to a bogie when they started to fire. In fact, I think the first one of our guys that shot down a Jap plane got a little bit too close but he was lucky. He went right through all that debris when that Jap plane exploded. They got all of their training out there in the Pacific—not all of their training, but they got an awful lot of their training in the Pacific and they learned a lot of things for the future. But by the time it was going to be put to use again, the war was over. They were determined to use only twin engine airplanes. However-- They felt that that was the only thing that was big enough to carry all the equipment that they needed...radar and armor.

NELSON: Was that similar to a PBY?

CARLSON: No, it's just a twin engine plane with tear drop tails on the thing—twin tails. It had very high wing loading on it, too, so it was a hot airplane when you landed it.

NELSON: When you were sent overseas, how did you get there?

CARLSON: I went on a carrier with my plane from base Coronado to Honolulu.

NELSON: What did you think of the nation's effort up to this point?

CARLSON: Well, I was amazed, of course, at all the things that were being done throughout the whole country ... and the various training programs and in talking with the pilots, what they had gone through.

NELSON: Tell us about your experience when you entered your first combat zone.

CARLSON: Well, I was one of those people that never worried unless things got hot. I really never got into a position that was bad. The colonel used to caution me about being careful and, of course, and I was. But I just never worried about anything we had to do.

NELSON: Can you list for us, in the order of their occurrence, all subsequent combat actions in which you were involved?

CARLSON: I actually was not involved in any combat myself. I flew with the fellows at night on several occasions but fortunately or unfortunately didn't run into and Bogies at that time. There was one thing about this that I learned, too. Our planes couldn't fly over 20,000 feet and fortunately for us the Japs didn't fly that high so we were able to chase them out of there. One of the reasons, of course, that they were flying an awful lot at night was because on all of the islands building up to Bougainville, Green Island, where our radar equipment was stationed, we had done such a fantastic job of bombing all of their bases that we kept their air fields torn up. It got to a point where they didn't do much during the day at all. It was all at night at towards that time when we were at Bougainville.

NELSON: In your experiences overseas, did you get involved in any casualties of any kind?

CARLSON: I wanted to mention one other thing there. Our mission over Bougainville—the big reason for that was that the Japs were flying over at night and our guys that had been there for several months neutralizing who had been there for several months neutralizing that island had to continually sleep in fox

holes. They were getting pretty worn out with no real rest period. So we neutralized that thing pretty well and they got a break by being able to sleep in a decent place. What was your question?

NELSON: Did you get involved with any casualties caused by the war?

CARLSON: No, I was just lucky that way. The colonel asked me to do something back at my base and I didn't go out one night. We had three planes that were flying alternately over Bougainville. When their night flying was all over with, the three of them started to fly back to [Lavella]. Here's some guys that have gone through primary flight training and the whole works ... flying back in formation just like they did when they were in training. But I think that early morning flying threw them off of their course and they just got too close together. Two planes came together and the planes went into the ocean. We never recovered any one of them. That was the closest I came to casualty.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

CARLSON: I guess that if I had really been involved in severe fighting myself, it would have probably affected me, but it didn't. I just never worried about anything and as it turned out I would have worried needlessly.

NELSON: What did you think of the war so far?

CARLSON: Well, I was glad to see we were making progress, of course, because we were moving up after Guadalcanal and some of those islands in between there. We got through Bougainville and then it was on to [Tarawa] and other places east including the Philippines.

NELSON: Did you write many letters?

CARLSON: Yes, I wrote home at least every other week.

NELSON: Did you receive many letters and/or packages and if so how often? What types of things did you like to get in a package?

CARLSON: Well, when I was on some base in the United States, I did get packages of cookies from home. That was the nicest thing to get and it was one of the few things that you could keep for a while.

NELSON: Did most of the other men write and/or receive letters?

CARLSON: Those that I came in contact all seemed to do a fair amount of corresponding.

NELSON: Did you forge close bonds or friendships with many or some of your combat companions?

CARLSON: No, we were all from different parts of the country and it's only been recently when I finally got to join the group of VMFN-531 night fighter pilots group that I have come in contact with them. Otherwise I've gone almost this fifty years without any contact. My pilot when we went overseas was the first one to call me. "Boy am I glad to get a hold of your address." We had a lot of fun in conversation and made some plans to get together.

NELSON: What was the highlight occurrence of your combat experience or any other experience you remember?

CARLSON: I was a navigator when I went overseas and I guess the highlight then was when I got my wings as a pilot in Corpus Christi, Texas, and fortunately the war was all over. The big thing that happened down there was that we had a tornado come in. We beat the tornado. We flew about 150 planes out of Corpus Christi into some air base close to the Mexican line.

NELSON: Tell us what you and the other men did to celebrate America's traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

CARLSON: I was fortunate in being in San Diego because I had a good friend in Hollywood, California, who had me up there for the holidays. I was up there for Thanksgiving and for Christmas. That was Bert Hassell, the famous Rockford flyer's brother, that I went to visit.

NELSON: When and how did you return to the U. S. after the end of the war?

CARLSON: I was in the United States at the end of the war. The last year and a half or so I was in flight training which I finished up at Corpus Christi. They sent me to Hollywood, Florida, to the Naval Air Station and I was discharged there. That was in February of '46.

NELSON: First tell us about your military rank, your decorations, especially campaign decorations.

CARLSON: Well, the only campaign decorations I got are South Pacific. I was made a First Lieutenant and I was that for about a year and a half before I was discharged.

NELSON: How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

CARLSON: I have to say that I enjoyed most of them. Most of them had a good sense of humor and were fun to be with.

NELSON: Were there things you would do differently if you could do those things again?

CARLSON: I don't think so. I was very fortunate to come out of the war the way I did. At least I did feel like I did some good. To make it any tougher I don't think I would have cared for that.

NELSON: What was the most difficult thing you had to do during your period of military service?

CARLSON: Well, it wasn't getting up in the morning, but I don't really think that there was anything real difficult.

NELSON: How did you learn about VE day and what was your reaction to it?

CARLSON: I probably heard about VE Day either riding to the base or riding in the car home from the base. Of course, we had a radio in the car.

NELSON: How did you learn about VJ Day and what was your reaction?

CARLSON: I guess I was surprised that the Japanese lasted as long as they did, especially with some of the pounding that we'd done and after we had dropped the atomic bomb on Japan.

NELSON: What is your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was first used against the Japanese civilians in August of 1945?

CARLSON: I guess that anyone else that had that bomb would have dropped it on us. It did help bring the war to an earlier close. So I guess it was the right thing to have done. I would hate to see it ever used again.

NELSON: So your opinion has changed over the last 50 years?

CARLSON: A little bit, yes.

NELSON: When and where were you officially discharged from the service?

CARLSON: I was discharged from the Naval Air Station in Miami, Florida.

NELSON: This is in '45?

CARLSON: That was in '45. Yes.

NELSON: Do you have a disability rating or pension?

CARLSON: No.

NELSON: Do you have any opinions or feelings about the nation's military status or its policies?

CARLSON: Only that I think that we have to always remain prepared. I think Reagan did a good job in getting us up to a point where—maybe we were over-prepared for a while but we've got to stay prepared.

NELSON: Do you have any contact with the Veterans' Administration?

CARLSON: No, I have none whatsoever.

NELSON: Would you like to tell us about how your family supported you during your military life and what this has meant to you?

CARLSON: Well, I had a very close and affectionate family. They wrote to me more than I wrote to them. They were very helpful all the way through.

NELSON: Is there anything else that you would like to add to this, Warren, or a conclusion?

CARLSON: No.

NELSON: Thanks a lot, Warren. It was an excellent interview and it's been nice talking to you.