John Danaher

Interviewed August 8, 1994 By Volunteer Charles Nelson

Transcribed by volunteer Lorraine Lightcap For Midway Village and Museum Center 6799 Guilford Road Rockford, Illinois 61107 Phone 815.397.9112 Midwayvillage.com

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John Danaher

Today is August 8, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer at Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, participating in a statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens who participated in the momentous events that surrounded World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village and Museum Center interviewing John Danaher. Mr. Danaher served in a branch of the United Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences during that war.

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

DANAHER: Okay. My name is John Danaher and I was born in LaSalle County in Illinois. My birth date is February 14, 1920. My father was Michael Danaher and my mother was Katherine Danaher. I was raised near the small town of Winona, Illinois, about 100 miles south of Rockford.

NELSON: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

DANAHER: I had one sister. She is 12 years younger than I am. She is now a retired scientist. She and her husband worked in a big company that made all kinds of medicine and this type of thing. She has a doctorate and is now retired, but she is 12 years younger than I [am], and [as] one of my friends said, "She not only gets the brains from the family but she also got the looks!"

NELSON: Are there any details about your parents and/or family that you would like to give?

DANAHER: My father and mother lived on a farm. Their forebears had come over from Europe and settled many years ago and the family was into farming for many, many years. I farmed for a while after World War II myself.

NELSON: What was life like for you before the war especially during 1941?

DANAHER: In 1941, of course, things were getting unsettled. I was in college at Illinois State University and I figured that I was going to be taken in the draft. I decided not to go back to school in the fall of 1941. I had enlisted on August 28th, 1941 into the Navy Air Corp. They weren't able to take me until January 2nd [which] is when I went into the service. And I can remember very well when the ...

NELSON: Well, we'll get to that a little bit later. What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the conflict?

DANAHER: It was very, very clear that there was going to be a war. It was imminent, this type of thing, and so I wanted to enlist so that I could choose the branch I wanted to go into. I wanted to fly and so the reason I went with the Navy was, I heard--and I don't know if this is true--that if you washed out of the Navy, maybe the Army would give you a chance. But the reverse was not true, so that's why..., --I really wanted to go to the Army Air Corp. That's why I ended up with the Navy.

NELSON: You did too well on your test! How did you hear of December 7th, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? If so, where were you and what were you doing at the time? What was your reaction and response to those around you?

DANAHER: Well, as I said, we had been to church and then we had lunch in the dining room. I was carrying out the dishes to the kitchen when [the radio announcer] broke in with—they shut off the Bears' game, and told about the Japanese attacking Pearl Harbor.

NELSON: Do you remember who the Bears were playing?

DANAHER: No, I don't.

NELSON: Had you formed any prior opinion or developed any feeling about what was taking place in Europe or Asia?

DANAHER: Well, I don't know, we were very cognizant of the situation in Europe, of course, but I think we were surprised at the Japanese, you know, attack on Pearl Harbor.

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

DANAHER: Yes, I do. But I can't tell you specifically that there was, you know. We read the papers like most other people and, of course, we had the radio. That was before television.

NELSON: Newsreels. You knew ...

DANAHER: Oh, yes.

NELSON: Did you have any knowledge of Hitler's speeches, ideas or actions?

DANAHER: Not that I recall, really. I suppose we did but I don't recall them specifically.

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

DANAHER: Well, I had already volunteered and I had raised my hand and sworn in on August 28th. I was waiting. They told me it would probably be a month and something like this, you know. So then word wasn't coming and I was getting a little concerned. I heard very quickly after the attack.

NELSON: Now your response in entering the military service, was that influenced by family and friends attitude towards the war or the threat to national security or any other consideration?

DANAHER: I don't know if any or all ...

NELSON: You wanted to fly.

DANAHER: Well, I was, —and one of the fellows that I knew and I grew up with, and he had

been already into the Army Air Corp, as they called it at that time. He used to write back these glowing letters, and he was up in New England at the time that war broke [out], and he lost his life going from Australia up to one of the Japanese islands. They had put their planes onto the first carrier that the Navy had, and they were having these P-40s taken up there, and it was sunk and he was lost in the battle.

NELSON: When and where were you inducted?

DANAHER: I started at St. Louis at the air station down there on the 2nd of January, 1942.

NELSON: Did you have any special memories of that event?

DANAHER: Oh, yes. They had us walking duty and it was real cold and snowy down there. You would have thought the Japanese were at the outer suburbs--that they were going to take over St. Louis! But, anyhow, that's where we went. From there we went to New Orleans and then from there to Corpus Christi, Texas, where I took flight training.

NELSON: How old were you?

DANAHER: How old am I? 74.

NELSON: Were you?

DANAHER: Oh, let's see? I was 22.

NELSON: What happened after you were inducted and where were you sent?

DANAHER: I was sent to St. Louis and then some immediate flying and ground school and then to New Orleans and then to Corpus Christi, Texas.

NELSON: What did you think of the training?

DANAHER: Well, I think it was very thorough. They kept you in line. We had a lot of things to learn as anybody involved with aircraft knows. Now, I wanted to be a fighter pilot, of course, like most guys, and I got stuck with the "big and

slow" big, twin-engine seaplanes. We took our final training in the old PBYs, which were out in the Pacific when the war started. Then we went into--when I graduated--we went into flying a big twin-engine seaplane, which was much bigger that the old PBY, I won't say any better, but they got us back. We were at anti-sub, in the Atlantic for a long time and then air/sea rescue in the Pacific.

[Editor's Note: the Consolidated PBY Catalina was known as a "flying boat." November 2018: http://www.worldwar2headquarters.com/HTML/aircraft/americanAircraft/catalina.html]

NELSON: Were you a pilot or copilot?

DANAHER: Well, both. I started out as a copilot and then eventually I had my own crew.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

DANAHER: Oh, yes.

NELSON: If so, how did you use them?

DANAHER: Sightseeing mostly, you know.

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

DANAHER: Pretty limited as far as with other people who lived in the area. Well, there was a few people that had you over for dinner or something like this, but basically, we were with our own group of trainees.

NELSON: Okay, you pretty well explained about your training, is there anything about the training that you would like to add to that before we get you overseas?

DANAHER: No, I think it was pretty routine. We had this one fella...

[Interruption by Nelson, then resumes.]

NELSON: Well, anyway, you got your wings?

DANAHER: Oh, yes, you bet it was. That's why we were going to get married when I got through.

NELSON: You had a fiancée at the time?

DANAHER: Oh, yes. And we didn't know because of weather, all this type of thing, when we were going to actually be [able to have the ceremony]. When I first signed up, you couldn't get married for four years. Then as it got closer to, war they dropped it to two years, and then when war came, they said, "When you get through with your flight training." So that's why we got married in 1942.

NELSON: Where did you go after completing your basic military training? All your preflight training and all this training? Whereabouts overseas did you go?

DANAHER: First, we came back and we went to additional training because we switched from the PBYs to PBMs and down to--into Florida, not too far from Cape Canaveral now. They called it the Banana River Naval Air Station. That was where we transferred from PBY planes into PBM, which was a larger plane, but I wouldn't say any better.

[Editor: Additional information on the Martin Mariner PBM patrol bomber in November 2018: http://www.worldwar2headquarters.com/HTML/aircraft/americanAircraft/mariner.html]

NELSON: More difficult to fly?

DANAHER: I don't think so. I think it had some things that were improvements, that [made it] easier than the old one.

NELSON: Did you have armaments on that plane?

DANAHER: Not during training, but as soon as we were put into [an] anti-sub squadron, and we operated out of Norfolk and all up and down the East Coast in search of German submarines.

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

DANAHER: Well, the first time I went overseas was in the Panama Canal. We were down there [inaudible] from there down to out in the Pacific.

NELSON: By ship?

DANAHER: No, we flew.

NELSON: Oh, you flew?

DANAHER: By this time with a squadron. We were sent down there to protect the Canal from attack. They were afraid the Japanese were going to come over to knock it out and they'd have to go clear around, you know.

NELSON: Even the Germans, too?

DANAHER: Yes, they were more concerned at that time about the Japanese, and because then they would have to go all the way around, you know, South America, and add thousands of miles. So we were there for a while, and then we did anti-subs in the Atlantic off the East Coast from Norfolk; we operated all the way up to Quonset Point, Rhode Island. This type of thing, too.

NELSON: Did you ever see any submarines [inaudible] --any German submarines?

DANAHER: No, I [inaudible] -- Yes, I did.

NELSON: Not at this time?

DANAHER: No, later we did. In fact, I might cover that right now. The sub that's on display up in the Museum of Science and Industry...

[The U-505 German submarine is displayed at the Museum of Science & Industry Chicago. http://www.msichicago.org/explore.]

NELSON: 234? I've seen it there.

DANAHER: Okay. It's up there. It came into Bermuda while we were operating out of there. It had been captured off the coast of Africa.

They were able to salvage it. The Skipper--this is something you won't be able to read about in history books--but anyhow, the German sub skipper, who was in charge, was knocked out during the battle. He claims they brought them into Bermuda. The old gent was down in the local hospital -- the military hospital. He had one leg partially amputated below the knee. One of my good friends had been in for minor surgery down there. I'd go down to visit him and walked right past the door of the old boy. He didn't look happy, I'll tell you. Now, I never talked to him [directly]. My friend, when he got mobile, he went down -- and he used to speak some English [the skipper]. He was worried about his family back in Germany in one of the big cities. They also had a home out at a lake and he was hoping the wife had taken the kids out there. He was captured.

I did see where the skipper of the Guadalcanal, which was a small jeep carrier, that helped to get them. They ended up being friends, but my friend, he would go down and visit the old boy [the German skipper] and he asked him, "Did you ever see any of our planes?" He said, "Many times, but we see you first and then we pulled the trigger."

NELSON: Then they would dive?

DANAHER: That's right.

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

DANAHER: We started off without much help with anything but with the surprise that we were taken into it, but, I think they made great progress. There's no question about it. Boy, the people at home in the factories and so on and so forth that gave us the planes and the guns and the crews....

NELSON: They gave us good equipment, too.

DANAHER: Yes, they sure did.

NELSON: Tell us about your experience of entering your first combat zone. Unless you want

to [inaudible] --this would qualify, I suppose, as a combat zone around the Panama Canal. You've told us that. From there you went to Panama. Where'd you go from the Panama area?

DANAHER: We went back out to Bermuda and then I was sent back to Corpus Christi, Texas, as an instructor down there, getting new crews to go out to the Pacific. While I was there I was asked to take a brand new crew in the Air/Sea Rescue out to the Pacific. So, we were an Air/Sea Squadron that operated out of Saipan, and then at Okinawa prior to the end of the war.

NELSON: How many crew members did you have?

DANAHER: Well, it varies, depending on [inaudible] ... 8 to 10, sometimes 12.

NELSON: Sometimes 12? Why would you need so many?

DANAHER: They had to have people to [inaudible] ...if they got down, and had to have swimmers to get the pilots, this type of thing, so on and so forth.

NELSON: In your combat experience were you ever involved with anyone that sustained casualties? How they occurred and how they were treated?

DANAHER: None of us were captured.

NELSON: Never got involved with that?

DANAHER: No, not with that, no, but we did get up to Japan, itself.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

DANAHER: Well, I think we were concerned just like everybody else. I'm concerned now, going out on the highways(!) But we were lucky; we lost so many good friends, or --you know-- to crashes.

NELSON: Were these people flying PBYs mostly?

DANAHER: No, but I said PBYs early -- most of us that were [there were] in the PBMs.

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

DANAHER: Well, I didn't like it.

NELSON: Didn't like it?

DANAHER: No, I was glad when it was over, but I wouldn't take a lot for the experiences and the people we met.

NELSON: Wouldn't invest a million dollars? (laughter) Did you write many letters home?

DANAHER: Yes.

NELSON: How about receiving letters?

DANAHER: Fine, I corresponded, of course, with my parents and, as I say, we got married after I got through flight training and so [inaudible].

NELSON: Will you tell us a little bit about that?

DANAHER: About what now?

NELSON: When you got married. Did you get some time off?

DANAHER: Yes. We went to Norfolk, Virginia, where we operated out of, and my wife was able to be with me when we were stateside.

NELSON: Did you wife work during the conflict?

DANAHER: No, she didn't.

NELSON: Where did she stay?

DANAHER: Well, you know, where we stayed in places where we were stationed....

NELSON: She followed you around?

DANAHER: Yes, many of our group was that way. In fact, we got friends that we are still [in] contact with that got married at the same time we [did].

NELSON: Where did she go when you left?

DANAHER: Norfolk, that was the first one--all up and down the East Coast and then later on down in Corpus Christi, Texas, and then out to San Diego where we took off ...

NELSON: How were the facilities where you were staying?

DANAHER: Places where we stayed—in most cases was in private homes.

NELSON: I see.

DANAHER: And we corresponded—nice people took us in, you know. In fact, Rosemary got pregnant before I left for the Pacific. We were in San Diego and she was a grandmother herself—the old lady. But, she took care of Rosemary like a daughter.

I will never forget one thing. When we took off to fly out to the Pacific, we took off before dark and flew out during the night. I got there in mid-morning, 16.8 hours it took. That was one of the newer planes that we had. We landed over there and our plane—we landed in the water and then they would put dual wheels on the side and pull us up a ramp to park. We were—this tractor was pulling us and there were three or four young fellows. I walked across there and one of them was a kid from my hometown! I didn't see him again until after the war, and he still lives in our hometown.

NELSON: How about the other guys. Did they write letters and receive letters from home?

DANAHER: Oh, sure.

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

DANAHER: Yes, very definitely.

NELSON: Have you remained in contact with any of your World War II companions?

DANAHER: Yes, we [have] had several reunions.

NELSON: Did you ever have to help retrieve a wounded buddy? (Nelson is reading the question and makes the comment, "I don't think this question pertains to us." Nelson continues with another question).

What was the highlight occurrence of combat experience or any other experiences that you remember?

DANAHER: I think two big things were the rescues that we made. We were Air/Sea Rescue out in the Pacific. We rescued, first of all, one Corsair pilot that was—had to go—well, he was actually shot down, but he wasn't able to get all the way back to base, and had to bail out and that was the day that they dropped the bomb on Nagasaki. We saw the cloud from that.

NELSON: Can you tell us a little about that?

DANAHER: Yes. We were sent up. We took off pre-dawn because we were slower than the Corsairs with the fighter planes – [they] took off afterwards and caught up with us. We were just at the southern tip of Kyushu, which is the southernmost [major] island of Japan.

NELSON: (Interruption). How far is that from Japan?

DANAHER: Oh, I don't remember. Japan, that was Japan.

NELSON: That was Japan?

DANAHER: Yeah. That would be the southern most island.

NELSON: I see.

DANAHER: We were just off the thing. We were sent up there with this group of fighter planes who were going in to strafe and bomb airfields. They left a small group out there with us. It looked like a big mother hen with baby chicks, except the chicks had the sting. So we were just waiting for them up there as they come back out. We were just circling around. We come around 180° and there was the mushroom. We didn't take pictures or if we did the photo ... (Laughter).

NELSON: Did you know what it was?

DANAHER: Of course. They had briefed us.

NELSON: They had briefed you that you might see this.

DANAHER: And this was the SECOND one.

NELSON: I see. Nagasaki.

DANAHER: I know. Excuse me for interrupting but we did pick up one of the Corsair pilots. He had to bail out. He was a young Marine and he wasn't in the water, I don't think, [more than] 15 or 20 minutes.

NELSON: How did you know where to find these people?

DANAHER: Find them? We were right there with them.

NELSON: Okay. When they went down?

DANAHER: Yes, we had him in sight when he went down.

NELSON: Well did every group of fighter planes have your type of plane along with them?

DANAHER: No.

NELSON: Well how about planes that would go down where there weren't your type of airplane rescue?

DANAHER: Right. We did a lot of searching.

NELSON: I see.

DANAHER: I forget how many days. After four or five days if they hadn't found somebody, they kind of gave it up.

NELSON: Did they have a radio or anything?

DANAHER: They had little hand-crank click radios with them.

NELSON: What did they call those—Gibson girls or something like that.

DANAHER: Yes.

NELSON: Tell us about [inaudible]. You had mentioned before a case where four men [were] in a pontoon boat for a certain length of time that you rescued?

DANAHER: Oh, no. That was two P-51 pilots.

NELSON: Okay.

DANAHER: That was right at the end, too. They had gotten lost coming back from Kyushu and had missed Okinawa because of haze, and they couldn't raise anybody on the radio. They were lost.

So what happened is they went east -- they were going southwest. They had missed it, to the south, and they were lost. One plane that ran out of fuel first, he bailed out. Then the second pilot stayed up until his [engine] konked out and then he bailed out. [They] Came down out of sight of each other. It was getting toward dusk, and well, toward the later part of the day, and just shortly before dark. They [inaudible] just before a crest of a wave by the other fella. They tied the two rafts together. One fellow, when he bailed out, had taken kind of a chunk out of the calf of his leg, so they put him in the raft that was best and the other guy had to keep bailing and scooping the water out. They were out there four nights and four days, going on into the fifth night.

They had seen all kinds of planes go over them and none of them had spotted them. They had used mirrors, and so on and so forth. Here come two B-24s coming up from Saipan. As they got past them, one fellow had despaired and had not tried to... because nobody else [inaudible], but the other guy kept flashing, and the tail gunner caught a feeling, I guess, when they started to make the circle. Then they, in turn, called in to Air/Sea rescue. How we were involved? We were on the plane on standby and ...

NELSON: You were flying at the time?

DANAHER: No, we were sitting at Okinawa.

NELSON: How far were you from there?

DANAHER: Oh, about an hour, about an hour out. We were afraid we weren't going to get out there before dusk. In fact, we came back in the dark. We had jet assist to take off by this time, too.

NELSON: They gave you a location where they were?

DANAHER: Yes, the B-24s did. In fact, I met one of those pilots a couple of years ago. We had a reunion and one of the young fellows that we picked out of the water, who had despaired, was the main speaker. So I had never met the pilot or any of the crew of the other plane because we were just airborne. So, after all those years, there were three of us that [inaudible].

NELSON: 'Lot to talk about.

DANAHER: That's for sure.

NELSON: Tell us about how you and the other men celebrated traditional holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas?

DANAHER: Well, they usually had some better chow than other times, if they had it.

NELSON: That was about it.

DANAHER: Yes, it was.

NELSON: Did you get any gifts from home or anything?

DANAHER: Oh, yeah. Like you know, some cookies and I suppose cake but mostly cookies, I think.

NELSON: The next question pertains to going back home. Is there anything else while you're still over there in the Pacific that you would like to add to that?

DANAHER: I would have liked to have fought ...

NELSON: Add to this, I mean ...

DANAHER: No, we wrote a lot of letters.

NELSON: Okay.

DANAHER: No, a lot of letters back and forth.

NELSON: Now what happened when you arrived [back] in the United States?

DANAHER: You mean coming home?

NELSON: Yes.

DANAHER: Okay. We were at Okinawa, as I said, and having been signed up before war starting I got a chance to come home, but I had flown every place I went and I was put on a little destroyer escort as a typhoon was moving in.

Anyhow, to make a long story short, it was a rough ride for a few days but the [inaudible] broke out and the flying fish were out, you know, and we were heading home, and the sun was shining and the Cubs were in the World Series. We listened to them --each day an hour later-- and they didn't win that one, and they've never been in one since! What do you think of that?

But I remember coming into the Golden Gate. We were coming in at mid-morning and there was ground fog, and we could see the Golden Gate [bridge] as we came through the mist, and there she is!

NELSON: Wonderful feeling?

DANAHER: Oh, yes!

NELSON: Tell us about your military rank, your decorations, especially campaign ribbons.

DANAHER: I didn't get anything like this for bravery. We got [inaudible] various things. What am I trying to say?

NELSON: Campaign ribbons?

DANAHER: Yes, campaign ribbons, but

NELSON: Did you get the Air Medal?

DANAHER: No, I don't think I did. See, we were pretty much in a ...

NELSON: Non-combat area.

DANAHER: Yes. That's exactly right. No, I didn't get any big Air Medals [inaudible] or anything like that because I didn't deserve it. We didn't— we were involved in many places and so forth, but the only time that we really [were close] to [an] actual battlefield was in the South Pacific, and I didn't get to it.

NELSON: So, you weren't considered having missions? You were on standby, so any time you could get a call?

DANAHER: Well, we were assigned almost daily.

NELSON: You didn't fly probably [inaudible]?

DANAHER: No, not every day. I think I ended up with a little over 2,000 flight hours.

NELSON: That's a lot of hours. How did you get along with the [crew] members with whom you had the greatest contact?

DANAHER: Well, I had some great teammates. I think more of a team as opposed, to say, [inaudible] in a big group of men. We were relatively small—50 to 60, -100, something like this, you know. Made some fast friends and we're still in touch.

NELSON: Were you housed in the same area?

DANAHER: Maybe just another tent down the way.

NELSON: Would you change anything or do anything different if you had a chance to do it again?

DANAHER: Yeah. I'd like to be a fighter pilot. (Laughter). No, I can't say—pleased—the good Lord was good so ... (Interruption)

NELSON: Well, I think you made a wise decision as you returned.

DANAHER: Returned?

NELSON: Yes, when you returned and came back home.

DANAHER: Well, we were lucky.

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

DANAHER: Well, I don't know. We had plenty of challenges I would say. For example, going to Sergeant [inaudible].

Why, my goodness, somebody would be there for breakfast and killed before lunch. So we were—...and some were very good friends.

NELSON: What was your most successful achievement in the military service?

DANAHER: I think it was very hard work and you could be out in nothing flat, in about two or three days. You could be down.

I think it was pressure in that respect. I think the Navy did a great job of teaching us, and then also when we got out that the junior officers or pilots were brought up [inaudible] so the next few days if you were.... [Nelson interrupts.]

NELSON: Well-trained?

This has to do with the war in Europe. How did you learn about VE Day and what was your reaction to it? Do you remember?

DANAHER: Yes, I do. I'm just trying to think where we were at the time. That was June the 6^{th} .

NELSON: I think that was in May.

DANAHER: Was it May?

NELSON: Yes.

DANAHER: Okay.

NELSON: I think around May the 8th. [Editor: May 8 and 9, 1945.]

DANAHER: Okay, I remember hearing about it at the time, but what the [inaudible] source.

NELSON: How about VJ Day? [Editor: August 14-15, 1945.]

DANAHER: Oh, boy that's going back. Yes, [inaudible].

NELSON: You knew about the first bomb that they dropped?

DANAHER: Yeah. See we were stationed at Saipan, and Saipan is [inaudible] the bomb is the [inaudible] B-29, so we worked a lot with the B29s because a lot of them were coming out over [inaudible], so they would send us out at various stations.

NELSON: Sure.

DANAHER: And when they were going and coming....

NELSON: Did they have a lot of B-29s?

DANAHER: Yes, they did. I don't know the numbers but too many. We would look for them so many times in emergencies. Why, if they had given us a decent report —

NELSON: Where they were?

[Transcript incomplete]

Endnotes:

John Danaher

Birth Date: 14 February 1920, Illinois Enlistment Date: 2 January 1942 Release Date: 10 December 1945 Death Date: 1 August 1997

Source Information found 7 November 2018:

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