

Zane E. Gray

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Zane E. Gray

My name is Phyllis Gordon. I'm a volunteer with the Midway Village & Museum Center which is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens who participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are at the First Presbyterian Church and we are interviewing Mr. Zane Gray. Mr. Gray served in a branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that War. Zane, Would you please start just by introducing yourself to us? Give us your name and the place and date of your birth.

GRAY: My name is Zane Gray. What else did you was?

GORDON: Where were you born?

GRAY: I was born in Rockford, Illinois.

GORDON: And your birth date?

GRAY: I was born on November 8th, 1923.

GORDON: We would also like to have the names of each of your parents.

GRAY: My mother's name was Frances Gray and my father's name was James Atwood Gray.

GORDON: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

GRAY: None.

GORDON: Are there any details about your parents or your family that you would like to give at this time?

GRAY: Pertaining to World War II?

GORDON: Before World War II.

GRAY: My father was—worked in a factory in Rockford and my mother was a homemaker.

GORDON: What was life like for you before

the War, specifically during 1941?

GRAY: Pretty normal. Graduated from high school, worked at an early age--such things as newspaper routes--worked in retail establishments, mostly in sales.

GORDON: What thoughts did you have about the War before the United States became directly involved?

GRAY: There was a lot of patriotic sentiment in the early days before the War. It was before the United States entered the War. I remember war bond drives such things as the association over on East State Street where I worked had a war bond drive, involving people on the street. They would designate somebody as a spy and everybody was supposed to try to determine who this spy was. I won a war bond by catching the spy.

GORDON: I've never heard of that. What about Pearl Harbor. How did you hear about the bombing of Pear Harbor by the Japanese?

GRAY: I wasn't home at the time of the announcement, of course. There were replays on the radio. We didn't have television so it was kind of continuous thing for most of the rest of that day at least.

GORDON: What was your reaction and the response of those around you?

GRAY: Amazement. I personally was amazed that such a thing could happen.

GORDON: Had you formed any prior opinion or developed any feeling about what had been taking place in either Europe or Asia?

GRAY: Well, I don't know that I had any [unintelligible]. All of the songs of the day had to do with facets of the War. Other than that, words that got back to the United States about early activities in Europe. Those are about the things that I remember.

GORDON: Do you recall reading any newspaper accounts about the German aggression in Europe?

GRAY: Oh, yes. The events leading up to the War in Europe, and of course, a lot of our men who volunteered went directly to the European Theater. A lot of my friends were involved in one way or another.

GORDON: Did you have any knowledge about Hitler, his speeches, his ideas, his actions?

GRAY: Well, they were on the news all of the time. News at that point—we didn't get as immediate as we do today. It took a little longer time but when you went to a movie, the news-reels would show Germans marching or taking over in Czechoslovakia and places, things that happened early on in the European Theater.

GORDON: What events led to your entry into military service? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

GRAY: I was what is known as a voluntary inductee. I waited until my draft number came up before I enlisted. But then I enlisted as opposed to just being drafted. I waited until my draft number came up and then I enlisted.

GORDON: Was your response to entering military service influenced by your family and friends, their attitudes towards the War or was it the threat to national security or other considerations?

GRAY: I think I was influenced certainly by everybody around me, including my parents and friends. Everybody had a more of a patriotic stance than you find around today.

GORDON: That's certainly true. All right, now for the basic, when and where were you inducted?

GRAY: I was inducted in Chicago, sent to Farragut, Idaho, where I spent boot camp.

GORDON: Do you remember what year it was when you were inducted?

GRAY: 1943.

GORDON: How old were you?

GRAY: Nineteen.

GORDON: Do you have any special memories of that event?

GRAY: Just the train ride and Farragut, Idaho, was a very beautiful setting but, of course, we didn't appreciate it because we were involved in what is known as boot camp.

GORDON: So that's where you took your basic training, was in Idaho?

GRAY: Yes.

GORDON: What were you trained to do?

GRAY: In boot camp? Boot camp covers many phases of military life, regimentation being probably the emphasis. You get a certain amount of gun training, firearms, airplane recognition and submarine, boats, ships ...

GORDON: What did you think of the training you received?

GRAY: Pretty boring for the most part. There were many men in each company in boot camp. So it was crowded. They were in a hurry to get people trained so that they could go into whatever theater they were destined for.

GORDON: Did anything special happen while you were there?

GRAY: I got streptococcus, a severe case and was sent to sick bay. They were experimenting with sulfa drugs at that time and filled me full of sulfa. I remember that. Other than that, it was just a daily routine.

GORDON: And the sulfa helped you recover?

GRAY: Oh, very quickly.

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

GRAY: After boot camp I was assigned to a signal school at Farragut, Idaho, and why? I don't just know the answer to that. Why they chose signal school for me, other than the test that I took probably indicated that that was what I was best suited for.

GORDON: I'm sure that's true. Did you have any leaves or passes there?

GRAY: I had a 30 day—no I'm sorry—I had a 15 day leave after boot camp then was instructed to report back to signal school at Faragut, Idaho.

GORDON: How did you use that leave?

GRAY: I came home to Rockford and whooped it up.

GORDON: What do you recall about your training camp period? Can you describe anything about the place in Idaho or the friends that you made or your association with civilians there?

GRAY: We didn't have a lot of association with civilians because we didn't get that many liberties. We did have liberty on weekends. I believe it was every other weekend we had 24-hour liberty. At that point we would get on a bus, much like our school buses today and travel to Spokane, Washington, and did the normal things that soldiers and sailors did in those days. Got to amusement parks, dances and things of that type.

GORDON: What was your military unit?

GRAY: Well, I was a signman after graduation from signal school and eventually was assigned to the USS New Mexico.

GORDON: What were your assigned duties?

GRAY: Visual communications is essentially what we did including semaphore, flag hoists, Morse code light, anything, individual communication.

GORDON: After Idaho where were you sent before you went to this ship?

GRAY: I was sent to an outgoing unit at Terminal Island in San Pedro, California, which was a federal prison. We were separated from the prisoners but we stood guard duties while I was there waiting for an assignment to a ship. It was a period of about a month, maybe five weeks.

GORDON: When did you leave the United States?

GRAY: I left the United States on a freighter bound for Honolulu.

GORDON: Do you recall what year that was then?

GRAY: It would have been the latter part of 1943.

GORDON: What were you assigned to do after you arrived in Hawaii?

GRAY: I was assigned to another outgoing unit because the ship that I was to be assigned to hadn't arrived yet. During that time we did various things such as went on a truck to pick up pineapple at the Dole pineapple plant and bring it back to the base.

GORDON: Bet that tasted pretty good?

GRAY: That was very good. (Laughter)

GORDON: What did you think of our nation's War effort up to this point?

GRAY: It was questionable. I don't know if there was any basis of formulation. There was a lot of scuttlebutt about various facets of it but I hadn't had a first hand experience so I didn't know that much about it.

GORDON: But you felt your training had been ...?

GRAY: I wondered, I think at that point, what it all was leading up to.

GORDON: All right. Where did you go before entering combat or did you then embark into a combat zone?

GRAY: Once I was assigned to the USS New Mexico, which was a battleship, it was just a matter of getting acclimated to the life aboard ship. In our division you were assigned a person who would answer any questions or would help you with any questions you did have. The routine aboard ship was a little different than what I had been used to.

GORDON: I'm sure that's true. Can you tell us about your experience in entering your first combat zone?

GRAY: Excitement, bewilderment. We were assigned to bombard, and of course when you've 12 or 14-inch guns blasting away simultaneously and for hours and days at a time you could see the results by looking through a long glass. You could see the devastation it was causing on the beach. I wasn't involved in any hand-to-hand combat, or anything of that sort, but in the meantime there was messages that were going between ships and throughout the fleet.

GORDON: Did you know where you were at that time in the Pacific?

GRAY: Yes. We were in the Mariana Islands, the Gilberts, the Marshalls. It went on from there.

GORDON: Were there other ships in the fleet with you?

GRAY: Oh, many ships. It varied from time to time but there were... we were a division of the 3rd Fleet. We were the flagship of the 3rd Fleet.

GORDON: Can you list for us any other subsequent combat action in which you were involved?

GRAY: Well, I—I went on from that point through the invasions at Saipan, and Tinian and Guam. All of these places had been occupied by the Japanese. That's what we thought we were fighting.

GORDON: Did you return to Hawaii in between these campaigns?

GRAY: Not until we had been at sea for quite some time. At one point, the first ship that I ever saw sunk was the Omni Bay which was sunk off our port quarter in broad daylight. A Japanese suicide came out of the sun and headed for our ship. There was some confusion at that point whether it was a friendly or an enemy plane. Our ship opened fire on the plane but then the plane just veered off and headed for the Omni Bay which was off of our port quarter and the Kamikaze plane hit the Omni Bay and it eventually was sunk by our own fleet.

GORDON: Were they able to save any of the crew?

GRAY: Yes. Some of the survivors, from the Omni Bay, were picked up by various in our fleet. We had some aboard our ship. Two days later, on Mothers' Day which was May 8th that year, we were hit by a Kamikaze plane. Some of those survivors of the Omni Bay were killed at that point.

GORDON: Is there any approximate number of casualties?

GRAY: We had 150 of our own men who were either killed or wounded at that point.

GORDON: How were they treated?

GRAY: They were treated as best we could. The dead were buried at sea. The wounded were taken care of in our own sick bay or transferred to a hospital ship whatever could be done.

GORDON: How did your mental attitude change as this combat continued?

GRAY: I think, mostly I was scared. I had never seen [combat] first hand. I had seen pictures, but they didn't mean a great deal. At least not as much as a first-hand observation of this type of thing.

GORDON: What did you think of the War so far?

GRAY: I thought we'd better get it over with. We'd better get the job done. Everybody was

looking forward to getting back home.

GORDON: Did you write many letters home?

GRAY: I wasn't a good letter writer. No.

GORDON: Did you receive many letters?

GRAY: I received more mail than anybody, I think, in our whole division.

GORDON: What type of things did you like to get in the packets?

GRAY: Oh, pictures of pretty girls. (Laughter). Comic strips, any news of happenings at home or in my home in Rockford. I had people that I had worked with that were corresponding with me. At least it was a one-way street. They would correspond with me but I didn't correspond back.

GORDON: Did most of the other men write or receive letters?

GRAY: Yes, many of them did. Many of them were married men. Many of them had either wives or sweethearts that were very patriotic and were doing their part to keep up the morale of our men

GORDON: Did you forge any close bonds of friendship with some of your combat companions?

GRAY: No, I don't think I was aware of it until later, but yes, there were many very close bonds. You can't help being affected by the friendships that you build aboard ship. You're in close quarters. The ship was built to house a compliment of 850 men and we had 2000 men aboard at the time that I was on the New Mexico.

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

GRAY: Not until many years later. The ship was scrapped after the War and there was an association started of any men that had served on the New Mexico from the time it was commissioned in 1918 until it was decommissioned

and scrapped after World War II which was accomplished, I believe, in 1946. But this association was begun and I was invited to the meetings but had never gone to one of them until they happened to have one in St. Louis. I went to that with my wife and I've gone to every one since. It was [inaudible].

GORDON: Was it a special feeling attending that reunion?

GRAY: Yes, it was. Some of the men that were at the meeting were men who had served on the New Mexico prior to World War II so I didn't know them, but there is a bond there that is greater than you can expect. I personally get a thrill out of going to each one of these meetings. It's like belonging to a Last Man's Club, doing something [inaudible] because it's a dying thing. Each year it gets smaller and smaller. Because there'll never be any more men eligible because the ship no longer exists.

GORDON: Right. After your combat duty on board the ship did you ever have to help retrieve a wounded body and help them to sick bay or something like that.

GRAY: After, we experienced another Kamikaze experience in the Philippines. I did have to help pick up body parts and put them in containers that were thrown overboard. In an emergency you do what you have to do.

GORDON: That's right.

GRAY: Or what you're assigned to do.

GORDON: During your combat duty did you ever capture any enemy prisoners?

GRAY: We had aboard our ship an admiral that may have [inaudible] who was the target of one of the Kamikaze planes that we took. There was a submarine that was captured, a Japanese submarine, that was captured and one of the Japanese prisoners was aboard our ship for a period of time. Admiral [inaudible, possibly Nimitz] and one of the other admirals that was aboard the New Mexico also interrogated the Japanese prisoner on board the ship in his interrogation.

GRAY: From what I could see the Japanese prisoner was treated very kindly with dignity. I have pictures of the prisoner and the Admirals on the deck of the ship. All I could observe were the things that I could see.

GORDON: Prior to the end of the War were you aware that there were any civilian concentration camps, especially in Europe?

GRAY: I had heard about concentration camps and that was about the extent of it. I didn't have any personal connection with them but I had heard the word about concentration camps.

GORDON: What would you say would be the highlight occurrence of your combat experience?

GRAY: The highlight of it was the signing of the Peace Treaty in Tokyo Bay.

GORDON: Was your ship there?

GRAY: Yes.

GORDON: Can you tell us something about it?

GRAY: Not a great deal, because the signing was actually [inaudible]... The signing actually took place on the USS Missouri. We had gone into Tokyo Bay and then back out to sea, close by but not actually in the Bay itself at the time of the signing. But it was a good experience to see Mount Fujiama and Tokyo. I didn't get on the beach but [inaudible]...

GORDON: What was the reaction of the men on board the ship to this momentous signing?

GRAY: It was terrific. We had radio contact with the Missouri and the ships that were involved. It was a tremendous thing. Great feeling to have the War culminated and [to be] on the last leg of our journey home.

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

GRAY: Well, aboard the larger ships, which the New Mexico was, you always had a holiday

menu. I have some of those menus in my mementoes at home.

GORDON: That should be interesting.

GRAY: It included cranberries and turkey and the seasonal things. At Easter time it would be ham and the trimmings. We were always a little more relaxed, if it was possible.

GORDON: When and how did you return to the United States after the end of the War?

GRAY: We had to go back to Pearl Harbor and then, after that, we left and went through the Panama Canal, which was very interesting. The reason that we had to go that route was because of [inaudible] the ship -- in order to be decommissioned [it] had to go back to its home port, which was Boston. In order to get to Boston, you had two choices: either go around the Cape or through the Panama Canal.

GORDON: The Panama Canal would definitely be shorter. Then after Boston were you sent home by train or [inaudible]?

GRAY: After, we were given points depending on our length of service and various other considerations I guess. When you had—I don't remember exactly how many it was--"X" number of points, then you were eligible for discharge. I was discharged at Great Lakes Naval Training Center. So we traveled by train from Boston to Great Lakes and were discharged there.

GORDON: And that would be in the year?

GRAY: 1946.

GORDON: Would you tell us your military rank and any decorations you had?

GRAY: Seaman 1st Class. I had battle ribbons, but that's what they were, battle ribbons.

GORDON: Are those battle ribbons designated for different battles?

GRAY: Yes.

GORDON: Do you know what battles those were?

GRAY: The Gilbert Islands, The Marianas, Saipan, Tinian, Guam, The Philippines, Kwajalein. It went all over the Pacific.

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

GRAY: I got along very well.

GORDON: As you said, it was such close quarters.

GRAY: It is close quarters. It's a daily routine that you go through and when you're living in conditions of that sort, you can't help but make real lasting friends with a lot of the men. There were some that were closer to you than some of the others but there was a bond with all of the men of your ship whether they were in your division or not.

GORDON: That bond was a form of trust?

GRAY: By necessity, yes.

GORDON: Were there things you would do differently if you could do them once again?

GRAY: I don't think so. I think I would do things pretty much the same as they happened.

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

GRAY: Probably the most difficult thing was to realize that you were taking a period of time out of you life; out of your civilian life, that is. And being away from your family and friends but it was a duty that all men in the service had to face.

GORDON: Is there any one thing that stands out as your most successful achievement while you were in the military?

GRAY: I didn't have that many achievements. I wasn't looking for achievements. It was a matter

of doing a job and doing it well.

GORDON: That's right and you did that. How did you learn about VE Day and what was your reaction to that?

GRAY: Oh, there was a [inaudible]. When we received word we were at sea and the word was passed throughout the ship that victory in Europe was accomplished. We had a big celebration. Men were dancing on the decks, whooping it up. You would have thought that Queen Elizabeth came aboard.

GORDON: How did you hear about it, from the radio?

GRAY: Yes, we had contact with the quickest way we could receive the news.

GORDON: Did the Admiral talk to you at that time?

GRAY: The captain of the ship was the one that passed the word. He, of course, was as excited as the men.

GORDON: How did you learn about VJ Day and what was your reaction to that?

GRAY: Pretty much the same except that on a little more boisterous level. The only thing they could do was to gather together. We still had to stand our watches and that type of thing but we sure celebrated any way that we could.

GORDON: What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against Japanese in August of 1945?

GRAY: At that point it was awesome, but at the same time I believe that my feelings were that it was necessary in order to accomplish the goal that we were seeking.

GORDON: Has that opinion changed over the last 50 years?

GRAY: There may have been other alternatives, although the alternatives, of course, might have been more risky. I'm not sure. I don't advocate

killing but in a case of War that's [inaudible].

GORDON: When and where were you officially discharged? Was that at Great Lakes?

GRAY: Yes.

GORDON: That was what year?

GRAY: 1946.

GORDON: Do you have a disability rating or pension?

GRAY: No. No.

GORDON: Do you have any opinions about our nation's military status or its policies today?

GRAY: Well, I hold the military in high esteem. There have been so many technology advances, it's hard to say. I think, probably, our military on a par with the way above any other military force in the world.

GORDON: Well, right now we're closing a lot of military bases at the same time we seem to be heading into Somalia, coming out of Somalia and going into Bosnia. Do you have any feelings about that?

GRAY: Yes, I would like to see us keep our nose out of it as much as possible. On the other hand, somebody has to stand up for the rights of the people of other lands as well as our own. And where it is necessary, where we can be useful, I think that we should offer our services. The question is where do we stand? I'm not quite sure I know.

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

GRAY: None. Never did.

GORDON: What is your opinion of the Veterans' Administration?

GRAY: It's all right. I'm not--I have never taken from it and I never subscribed to it.

GORDON: You've never gone to a Veterans Administration Hospital?

GRAY: Never.

GORDON: Would you like to tell us how your family supported you during your military life? How much did the letters and caring mean to you?

GRAY: My family wrote to me religiously. They--my father--knew the types of [inaudible]. He knew what my sense of humor was. He clipped out cartoons, comic strips and that type of thing and he would clip from the newspaper clippings of any of my friends that had been killed or wounded or whatever, in the European Theater. Any news of that type he would forward to me. It meant a great deal to me. There were other pieces of news that were written in longhand that didn't come from clippings, from clippings in the newspaper. Things of interest that kept me informed of what was going on at home.

GORDON: When you returned to Rockford were there any problems with transition to civilian life?

GRAY: I don't know that I would say that there were problems, other than the normal getting back to the less regimented type of existence where you could do pretty much as you pleased. I think that was the thing that we were all looking forward to.

GORDON: Did you enter [interruption]

GRAY: We talked about it a lot aboard ship.

GORDON: Did you enter the work force right away?

GRAY: Oh, yes. Went back to the same job that I left when I'd gone into the service.

GORDON: Which was?

GRAY: And they were forced to take you back at the same pay that you were getting when you left, which I did. And I stayed at that job for 25

years.

GORDON: Can you tell us what that was?

GRAY: I was a general flunky at a retail establishment really at that point, but it wasn't too long and I was given more responsibility and more responsibility maybe until I was, without the title, I was the manager of the store.

GORDON: Better than a general flunky.

GRAY: Well, it was [inaudible] not that whole lot more pay but it was a job and I enjoyed it.

GORDON: What type of retail establishment was that?

GRAY: It was--I worked for Mid-City Stationers in Rockford, Illinois, mainly in sales, retail sales and outside sales.

GORDON: That's interesting. Is there anything else you would like to share with us before we conclude the interview?

GRAY: I suppose after the interview is over I will think of a million things, but at the moment I think we've covered it well.

GORDON: Thank you, Zane, for this time.

Zane and I were just talking about the Communications Division and how those men had to stand watch. Would you tell us about that, Zane?

GRAY: In the Visual Communications Division as opposed to radio and so forth, Visual Communications deals with light a great deal. Flashing light using the Morse Code. It is very important to the ships in your own particular task force or fleet that these go on 24 hours a day, day and night. We stood watches: four hours on and four hours off. And that went on--there were maybe a dozen men in each watch and one watch would stand watch for four hours and then another watch would take over.

GORDON: It would be kind of hard wouldn't it? Sleep four hours and then get up and be alert?

GRAY: And wash your clothes and brush your teeth, and all the other things that need to be done in your off time, and catch a few winks also.

GORDON: Would you have to be careful about lights at night?

GRAY: Very careful because light is the one thing that you can see for miles at sea, so you didn't dare open a hatch with the light on. You didn't dare smoke on deck. You had to smoke inside always at night. You had to be very careful about any light shining at night. In the daytime also light can be seen for long distances. That's why you use flashing lights for ship maneuvers and that type of thing.

GORDON: This has been very interesting. Thank you, Zane. We were talking about how Zane spent his liberties and why at Pearl Harbor. Who did you usually take your liberty with?

GRAY: Some of the closest friends that I had in the Signal Division. It varied from time to time, but I can remember going into a market and buying a piece of limburger cheese.

GORDON: Oh, no.

GRAY: And going out and sitting on the curb in front of the shop and eating it.

GORDON: By yourself, I hope.

GRAY: Right.

GORDON: What else did you do when you were on leave in Pearl Harbor?

GRAY: Another time a couple of friends and I went on liberty and we went into a restaurant and ordered a dozen eggs.

GORDON: A dozen?

GRAY: A dozen eggs a piece. We sat and ate the whole dozen eggs. The waitress wanted to know if we wanted them fried. One wanted them fried, one wanted them scrambled and one wanted them poached. I don't remember but in any

event we hadn't seen a fresh egg for so long. All we had were rubber eggs and they didn't compare so we wanted eggs.

GORDON: That's interesting that that would be what you'd want.

GRAY: The things that you can't have are the things that you want the most.

GORDON: Any thing else besides eggs that you felt [inaudible]?

GRAY: Girls. (Laughter).

GORDON: Anything else about your leave in Pearl Harbor?

GRAY: Well, they were excellent times. You could walk on Wakiki Beach and look at Diamond Head, the things that you see in the movies and the pictures of the Islands. The Royal Hawaiian Hotel was taken over by military personnel, mainly submarine sailors and the likes of them. But things that would cost you a fortune we were doing on a daily basis, not daily but whenever we could. It was a great time.

GORDON: I imagine it was beautiful.

GRAY: It was better than life aboard ship anyhow.

GORDON: I'm sure. Thanks again for these memories.



Edited December 2018 by Martha Byrnes
Zane Gray died May 24, 2004
Grave at Willwood Burial Park, Rockford, IL