

William J. Pirages

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William J. Pirages

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

NELSON: Bill, would you please start by introducing yourself to us. Please give us your full name, place and date of birth. We would like also to have the names of each one of your parents. Did you have and brothers or sisters?

PIRAGES: I was born September 17, 1922, in Rockford, Illinois. My dad's name is Joe. My mother's name is Pauline. I attended school, Whig Hill School, for eight years. Lincoln Junior High School and then graduated from old Rockford Central High in the last class of 1940. I have a brother named Joel and a sister named Della. That's the extent of the family.

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

PIRAGES: Well, my dad was born in Lithuania and my mother's folks were both born in Lithuania. That makes me 100% Lithuanians descent. My dad worked in a machine shop most of his working life. My mother worked in the knitting mills for a few years.

NELSON: Okay. This is the part about entering the military service. What was life like before the war, specifically during 1941?

PIRAGES: Well, right after high school I went to work at Woodward Governor so I was still employed at Woodward Governor during the war. I remember that very vividly the morning of December 7th 1941. We had just gotten home from church, brought the newspaper in and sat

down and turned the radio on when we heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

NELSON: What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the conflict?

PIRAGES: Well, we read the Germans had invaded Poland and it wouldn't be too long before we'd be in it also.

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

PIRAGES: I just answered that.

NELSON: Yes. Okay. You answered the next question, too. Had you formed any prior opinion, or developed any feeling about what had been taking place in Europe or Asia?

PIRAGES: In what?

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

PIRAGES: No, but I figured that after World War I we'd be at it again with the Germans because we were always protecting the British.

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

PIRAGES: Oh, yes.

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

PIRAGES: Oh, yes.

NELSON: What event led to your entry into Military service? Were you drafted or did You volunteer?

PIRAGES: Well, on December 8th, 1941, I went down and inquired about the Marine Corps, passed the preliminary exam but then my folks wouldn't sign for me. So I was 19 years old. So I waited around 'til by April 1st of '42 they made boys eligible who were—used to be you had to have 2 years of college to get into Naval Aviation. I just had high school. Well, they made high school graduates eligible to enlist in Naval Aviation, so I went down again, signed up, got preliminary tests out of the way and came back for my folks to sign and said, "Well, you know I'm going to get drafted anyway so if I don't go now so why not let me go into something I want to get into". So they finally signed for me. I was accepted.

NELSON: When and where were you inducted?

PIRAGES: When was I inducted?

NELSON: When and where?

PIRAGES: In Chicago. It was in April of '42. Went to ...

NELSON: Do you have any special memories?

PIRAGES: Calling me up for civilian pilot training first before I ever wore a uniform I went to Milton College for academics and flew out of Rock County Airport in Janesville for my first flying in a little Piper Cub or whatever they had available. Then I went back to work again, a civilian job, and then they called me up to active duty in October of '42. I went to Iowa preflight school, which is like boot camp where I had plenty athletics and plenty of academics. I was there for about 10 weeks.

NELSON: What did you think of the training?

PIRAGES: Rigid. Very rigid training. We had about 8 hours of athletics every day in addition to our academic studies.

NELSON: Did anything special happen there?

PIRAGES: It was just a real rigid physical training. A lot of running, swimming, boxing, wrestling, basketball, football, you name it. And soccer especially, run, run, run, run.

Then ...

NELSON: How about other training camps you attended.

PIRAGES: Then I went to Glenview Naval Air Station for the first part of rigid flying. I was there 'til March of '43,—preflight. In March I went to Corpus Christie, Texas, at the Naval Air Station. Completed my training, got my wings on July 17, 1943.

NELSON: Was this single engine training?

PIRAGES: All single engine, I could have, if I wanted to get involved in larger planes, I could have, but I wanted—I had my eyes and my heart set on being a fighter pilot.

NELSON: What airplanes were you trained to fly?

PIRAGES: F-4U Corsair. That's low wind-speed job if you remember.

NELSON: I know what they are. Did you have any leaves or passes?

PIRAGES: Yeah. I had a leave after Glenview and after Corpus Christie. But when I went to the West Coast, I didn't have a leave until I came back from overseas. That was in ...

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

PIRAGES: Oh we have a reunion every 2 years. We were in Pensacola, Florida last November. There were 16 of us there. We all acted like we were brothers because some of those fellows I went all the way through primary training, advance training and all the way through operational training out on the West Coast. We got to be like brothers. When we get together on these reunions, our wives are like sisters, we're so close. I don't always attend every reunion.

NELSON: How many people get together?

PIRAGES: There were 16 pilots this last time.

NELSON: Sixteen pilots.

PIRAGES: Well, not all pilots. There were a couple of guys on the line—enlisted men that were there too but mostly pilots.

NELSON: Where did you go after completing your basic military training?

PIRAGES: They shipped us out on a seaplane, Navy Seaplane Tender. Oh, I forgot to tell you Naval training after you complete your training you had your choice of being a Naval pilot or Marine pilot. But basically both do the same thing. I selected the Marines. They shipped us out February of '44 to the New Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific. We were on board a seaplane tender. The cargo was our squadron, which was 40 pilots, about 5 non-pilots or officers, 500 enlisted men and besides that we had a 100-octane gas and loaded depth charges. We were unescorted. So we stayed in this ___?___ for until June when we went up to Bougainville. We flew operational training. We got training all the time when we were in ___?___ and we flew—escort B25 was our navigation plane. We flew up to Bougainville. We went to Green Island for about 2 weeks. They said they didn't have room for us there. That was a hell of a hole of the South Pacific. We had to import fresh water to drink because there were no wells. We took showers in salt water that wasn't very good. They finally sent us back down to Bougainville, which is not too bad there for combat. Our duties there were mainly the bomber ball. Every day was like a milk run.

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

PIRAGES: Nation at war?

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

PIRAGES: Oh, they had made—by that time they had made Jimmy Doolittle had raided Japan with a B25. We thought we were headed in the right direction. It was slow but then we had to rebuild our arsenal after the Japanese sank half of our Navy at Pearl Harbor. Fortunately we had aircraft carriers yet. We made roads in the South

Pacific and on the way up to the Philippines, Okinawa and all the way to Japan. They were slow in our really in our estimation but we were making good progress to end the war.

NELSON: Tell us about your experience in entering your first combat zone. I would say--your first mission or whatever you call it.

PIRAGES: Well, it's—I can't say we were used to it. We had practiced for it for so long. It was just like blowing your nose. It was so easy. We would hit on target, make your dive-bombing run and make a couple strafing runs at the enemy and take off and go home. I will say this. The Japanese had a lot of practice with anti-aircraft by the time we got there so they were pretty accurate. We lost several pilots there. Think it was 16 we got shot down over Rabaul. It wasn't only Rabaul. We bombed New Ireland, we bombed New Britain and northern and southern Bougainville. There were still Japs on Bougainville when we were there. They look at Bougainville was a small island but there were 30 thousand Japs still stationed there yet when we were there.

NELSON: Were you involved with casualties during your combat experience? Can you give me the approximate number and types of casualties and how they occurred and how they were treated?

PIRAGES: I didn't have any casualties. Never got wounded or anything but several of our pilots, like I say, were shot down. One guy was shot down twice. He got—both times landed in the ocean. Marred up his face on the gun sight. Evidently didn't have his shoulder tight and hit the water. Water landings are not as easy as they seem to be. He got his face bashed in both times. He was a handsome guy until then. He is no longer with us. He died a couple of years ago. But if there are casualties—That's what I told my folks. I said, "If you're in the infantry, you get all shot up, you get wounded, you get crippled and you live that way for the rest of your life. If you're a pilot, you're either here or you're gone."

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

PIRAGES: Oh, yeah. We always heard about the Japs. The more we heard about them, the madder we got. We heard on the Armed Forces radio we'd get the broadcast from Tokyo Rose every night. She warned us particularly that those red nosed fighter pilots on Bougainville will be out looking for you. You'll see no mercy if we catch you.

NELSON: Did you write many letters home?

PIRAGES: What?

NELSON: Did you write many letters home?

PIRAGES: Oh, yeah. I'd write about once a week to my folks.

NELSON: How about receiving mail. Did you get letters and packages?

PIRAGES: Oh, yes. Sometimes 6 or 8 weeks after they were sent but we'd get them.

NELSON: What kind of packages did you get?

PIRAGES: Cookies.

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

PIRAGES: Yeah. We'd wait for mail call everyday.

NELSON: Did you forge close friends, close bonds of friendship with many or some of your combat buddies?

PIRAGES: Very close. Most of the pilots were at one of our reunions either within the last 3 or 4 years or earlier. Some are invalids and could not make it to this one.

NELSON: You stayed in contact with them through the years?

PIRAGES: Oh, yeah.

NELSON: Some of this is more geared for the infantry so I'll just kind of skip some of these.

PIRAGES: I might add I had 2 mid air collisions. That's one way of getting wounded. I landed one plane, a bush plane. The second mid air collision I had was over the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. I had a guy sideswiped. We both bailed out of our planes. At 10 thousand feet we bailed out.

NELSON: Was that a Corsair?

PIRAGES: No that was an F-4F. We called it a wild cat at that time. That was our first actual military plane that we were trained in.

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

PIRAGES: Well, being out and getting at when your approach target and you're about 12 thousand feet high and you see the anti-aircraft shells exploding in front of you. You know that the Japs have got your range. You hope that you're not hit. (Laughter).

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

PIRAGES: I honestly don't believe that at any time did we really have a celebration. We may have, just before we left Bougainville. We landed at Hollandia, New Guinea on the way up to the Philippines on New Year's Eve of '44 and I think that Christmas before because we knew that we were going to go into tougher combat we had a decent Christmas dinner. I don't recall us ever doing anything real special for holidays such as Christmas, Thanksgiving or New Years or anything like that.

NELSON: How and when did you return to the United States after the war?

PIRAGES: I flew back to Honolulu on a R4D which is a 4 engine Navy plane and Honolulu to Frisco on a Pan American Flipper.

NELSON: What happened when you arrived in the United States?

PIRAGES: We checked into the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco and it was April 11th. The next morning we got up, hailed a cab with a big black lady driver. She was crying her eyes out. I said, “What’s the matter lady?” She said, “Haven’t you heard? Roosevelt died.” It was also my sister’s birthday so I stopped at a florist and sent her a dozen roses. We proceeded to look the town over. We were sent down to Miramar, processed out and given a 30-day leave.

NELSON: Please tell us about your military rank and your decorations especially your campaign decorations.

PIRAGES: Campaign was the Asian, South Pacific Campaign, the Middle Pacific, Philippine Campaign, air medals and several clusters. That’s about it.

NELSON: How many missions were you in?

PIRAGES: Ninety-nine.

NELSON: (Charlie whistles). How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

PIRAGES: Beautifully. I would say like brothers?

NELSON: Are there things you would do differently if you could do them again?

PIRAGES: No, not really. One buddy and I, we had it planned when we got out we were going to take a trip around the world to see how it worked from a non-military stand point but we never got around to it. Instead my youngest boy went around the world in 1991, solo.

NELSON: Solo.

PIRAGES: Yeah. He was all by himself.

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

PIRAGES: The most rigid training I had was at Iowa Pre-flight School. Guys talk about Navy and Marine Boot Camp but we had the guys that

went through our training after they went through Boot Camp and they said the Boot Camp was a picnic compared to what we went through. It was really rough. I was never used to that real rigid training. We were at it constantly. I lost 10 pounds the first week I was there and I gained 10 pounds back and changed it back to muscle I guess. I was so sore when I got out of bed, I could hardly walk in the morning.

NELSON: Is there any one thing that stands out as your most successful achievement in the military service? How about getting your wings

PIRAGES: That was a great day when I got the wings. It was really a great day when we shipped out for overseas. We thought we were really going to get into it. That’s when the Marines, Joe ___?___ and Pappy Boyington and — I think you remember the Black Sheep Squadron on the TV program. That’s when they were having a real ball in the South Pacific shooting down Japanese planes and I thought, “Boy, we’re going to get into it.” They sent us to Bourgainville. We saw a plane one day, a Japanese plane, and we took out after it but we chased it, chased it, chased it until we were running too low on fuel and didn’t think we would get back to base so we let it go. That’s the only plane we saw in the air. We saw them on the ground and shot them up.

NELSON: How did you hear about VE Day and what was your reaction to it?

PIRAGES: VE Day I was stationed at Floyd Bennett Field in New York in the Fairy Command flying brand new planes all the way across country for use with the fleet during the war. That was my immediate duty after I came back from overseas. I heard about when we were in New York. We celebrated a little bit

NELSON: How about VJ Day?

PIRAGES: VJ Day we heard about it coming back from taking a plane to the West Coast. We were on board a plane and we just landed in Philadelphia to discharge passengers, took off again for New York and the stewardess came down the aisle and said, “The war is over.” We landed at Floyd Bennett Field. A lot of them

landed at LaGuardia, I guess, at that time. We immediately got a cab and went down to Times Square to join the celebration.

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

PIRAGES: I totally agreed with that. We would have lost another million men if we had not made the Japanese surrender with the atomic bomb.

NELSON: Has your opinion changed over the last 50 years, if so, how?

PIRAGES: No.

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

PIRAGES: October of '45. I never did get a discharge. I was given a Certificate of Satisfactory Service that may not withstand the Reserve at their convenience. I was on leave until December when I was officially off duty. I had plenty "leave" days coming. The Korean War started, I got a call from the Government asking how long it would take me to wind up my affairs and report to active duty. At that time I had a service station and it would take me 90 days probably to sell out, straighten out my affairs and I never heard another thing from them.

NELSON: That was for the Korean War?

PIRAGES: The Korean War.

NELSON: Did you have a disability rating or pension?

PIRAGES: No.

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

PIRAGES: Well, I think Reagan did a good job of building us up and we had, as anyone could see, we did a beautiful job in the war against Iraq. Wiping them out in a couple of days. I sometimes hesitate to think—shudder to think what some of our leaders are doing now to the

military. We still have a lot of equipment, a lot of planes, a lot of tanks but their letting us get weak again. We can't afford it.

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

PIRAGES: No, only insurance wise. I send in my payment every year.

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

PIRAGES: Oh, I guess they do a lot of good for the veterans if they need assistance or need hospitalization for any reason and they can't afford it. Civilian hospital or they can always go to the Veterans' Administration (hospital). I never had any dealings with them myself but I know people that have had and are real satisfied with it.

NELSON: Would you like to tell how your family supported during your military life?

PIRAGES: Well, there wasn't much they could do except to keep the mail coming. Send goodies once in a while. That's about all. Of course, there was a lot of praying done. I know that.

NELSON: Over the subsequent years what has this support meant to you?

PIRAGES: To have them on your side and especially the prayers, you were thankful for that.

NELSON: Is there anything else you would like to tell me.

PIRAGES: Not really. I'm no hero. I'm just like the rest of the guys, just sweating it out.

NELSON: Okay. That's fine, Bill. Thank you very much.