

YONGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1819

Fredrick Shaffer
Interviewed

By

Elaine Fowler

On

June 12, 1996

Frederick S. Shaffer

Frederick Shaffer was born in Warren, Ohio, November 25, 1920. He attended Rayen High School and Miami University.

Frederick entered the Navy in 1941 as a mechanic and transferred to the air corps. He was discharged in 1945. He received two distinguished flying crosses, nine air medals and ten battle stars.

He married Nanette Navin May 8, 1954; they had two children, Susan – 41 and Timothy – 34. He is a member of the St. Dominic church. He worked for Conrail for thirty-two years, retiring February 1982.

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Interviewee: FREDERICK SHAFFER

Interviewer: Elaine Fowler

Subject: World War II

Date: June 12, 1996

EF: This is an interview with Fred Shaffer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Elaine Fowler. At 4343 Chester Street, Youngstown, Ohio on June 12th at 1:30pm. Mr. Shaffer what do you remember about your parents and family?

FS: Well, I was born in 1920. I've always thought of my parents as a guiding theme, they gave me religious training, I grew up just like a normal child.

EF: When did they, or did they come as immigrants or were they born here?

FS: No, my mother was born in Niles and my dad was born in Cortland, Ohio.

EF: How interesting. Did you have brothers and sisters?

FS: I have one sister, she's two years older than I am.

EF: When you were growing up and you grew up in Youngstown?

FS: No, in Niles. I grew up in Niles.

EF: Did you have any particular games that you might have played with the neighborhood children?

FS: Just regular games that kid played, used to play kick the can and stuff like that. And football.

EF: What was it like when you went to school? And where did you go to school?

FS: Well, I had the normal schooling. I graduated from elementary schools, my dad was transferred, I started in Mansfield and we moved to Hartford, and then back to Niles. My schooling was just regular schooling.

EF: Did you go to college before or after the war?

FS: Before the war. I was in my second year when they war started in December and I came home for Christmas vacation, and then I enlisted in January. Then I was in the Navy within January of that year of '42.

EF: What was your first assignment? Where did you go for basic?

FS: Norfolk, Virginia. In fact I went up to Cleveland for my final. They read a bunch of names and they said that these men will go to a naval air station in Chicago. And they started with my name and they said these men will go to Norfolk, Virginia. So, I often wonder what would have happened had to change.

EF: In Norfolk, what did you do? What ship did you go out on?

FS: I was assigned to air group nine, which was supposed to go on Essex's Carrier Nine. We had to wait for them to build it, because it was built in Newport News. So, we trained in naval air station in Norfolk. Then when we went aboard ship we flew out to the ship and we went right to Pearl Harbor. After about in January, let's see, we were out there in '43.

EF: So, Pearl Harbor had pretty much been cleaned up by that time.

FS: That was our base.

EF: So, you were out of Pearl Harbor mostly?

FS: We trained out there and then our first combat mission was Marcus Island. Then we went to Marcus Island, and then came back to Norfolk.

EF: What did you do aboard ship? What was your duty?

FS: I was an air crewman. All I had to do was, I flew with the same pilot and all we had to do was eat, sleep, and fly. That's all no other duties.

EF: Oh, nice job. What does an air crewman do?

FS: Well, we were a gunner and radiomen on a dive-bomber. We were with the pilot.

EF: Did you have to have any training for this?

FS: Yeah, we had to go to gunnery school, we had to go to learn everything you had to know and learn about flying you know. So, a lot of the guys went to regular school, but you had to learn; in other words the air group or the squadron trained you as you went a long.

EF: Was that the only battle that you were in?

FS: No.

EF: Did you or were you in several?

FS: We went to Marcus, Wake, Naha, and all your early battles in the Pacific.

EF: I understand you got several Flying Crosses.

FS: Yeah, two.

EF: What were they for?

FS: Well, I got citations from Admirals for that.

EF: So, you were just on board an aircraft carrier and that was the Essex's.

FS: Yeah.

EF: And then you went to a mission's plane.

FS: The first strike we made was Marcus Island. Then Wake Island, then Rabaul, New Britain, and Tarawa. Then we got off the Essex's we were given rehabilitation leave and went aboard the York Town. Then we went three strikes in Tokyo, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.

EF: My goodness. Of the places did you get to go into the island?

FS: No.

EF: You never got to go off the ship?

FS: No never, never. We'd fly in at 20,000 feet and dive bomb and then come back and land on the carrier.

EF: My goodness. What was it like landing on a carrier?

FS: It's what they call a controlled crash, you'll take off and then come around and they land every thirty seconds, they land a plane. We had 100 planes in our air group and we could land them in about an hour. It's every thirty seconds.

EF: WOW!

FS: There's a plan that flew in.

EF: What was that?

FS: That was a SVB.

EF: An SVB? Okay.

FS: Just a pilot and a gunner.

EF: There were only two people on the plane?

FS: That's all.

EF: And those were dive-bombers correct?

FS: Yeah.

EF: What exactly does a dive-bomber do?

FS: It dives, the pilot picks a target and the pilot dives and then releases a bomb and you come right down like this then you go up. And there is perfect accuracy it's not like...

EF: So, basically you go down and then up again. How much ammunition did it carry?

FS: They had, the pilot had a thousand rounds in twin fifties. And we had two thousand rounds; we had twin thirty's in the back.

EF: And it only carried one bomb or did it have more?

FS: Yeah, one bomb. Then some times they put 250-pound bombs on each wing, but they carried one to a thousand pounds.

EF: Goodness. You were at Wake Island. In October, what did you know, did you know that you were going in...

FS: Oh yeah, before they strike we'd be officer would tell you about the currents and islands before you went in.

EF: Okay, so you left the Essex's and went to the York Town. The York Town is a transport is it not?

FS: No, it's a carrier.

EF: It's a carrier also?

FS: It's the same, there were thirteen ships of the Essex's class and they were exactly the same, the only difference was the number. If you'd be on the Essex's or you'd go on the York Town it would be identical, the same thing, and the same class ship.

EF: Okay.

FS: It would be the same.

EF: You served not only in the Pacific; did you also serve in the German invasion?

FS: No.

EF: You were totally in the Pacific?

FS: I never, our home base was in California, and when we'd come back to there, in fact when we'd come home on leave the ship would leave and they'd play *California here I come*, and we'd know we were coming back.

EF: You'd know you were going home. So, you were always in the Pacific. I see that you engaged in some of the first strikes at Tokyo. What was that like?

FS: Well, it was nothing there. In fact there were no fighter planes there at all, the Japanese after Midway and all they just wiped out, so there were never too many Japanese planes. They didn't have pilots; all their good pilots were gone. The only thing you had to watch was antiaircraft fire.

EF: What about, did you have any problems with kamikaze pilots?

FS: Oh yeah. In Okinawa we did. In fact they picked them up when they were taking off back at the destroyers and they'd tried to get the carriers. But they'd shoot them down before they'd get far. But they caused a lot of damage.

EF: So, they were more after the carriers than they were.

FS: Yeah they were after the carriers.

EF: Okay. They were trying basically to destroy our aircraft rather than?

FS: Yeah that's what they wanted to get at.

EF: Because they were doing so much damage. At Iwo Jima, you were the support, was that like helping the Marines get across?

FS: That's right, in fact I saw them raise the American Flag on Mount Suribachi, we were flying by there when they raised that flag. I fly the flag because I am patriotic for fifty years I've always flown it.

EF: I guess that was an impressive site to see.

FS: Oh it was, see that's what Marines, we always said that we take off our hats to the Marines, because you know after one time the water would turn red around these islands, just from so many Marines were killed. But we'd come back land on the carrier get a shower, have a cup of coffee, and you'd have to do the same thing again tomorrow. But those Marines were held on the beach, they were held down and they'd have to be wet, and that really took courage for them to do that.

EF: When you were aboard the Essex's what was a typical day like?

FS: Well, like we were in our ready room, and we had an air-conditioned ready room, and all we did was if we were on a flight schedule we'd fly, if we weren't why we had more games going and we had a radio, but that's all we did and we had no duties at all.

EF: You just had to stand ready. Did you have to fly every other day?

FS: Well, I think...

EF: So basically you would have different activities to do, but mostly you had to stand ready for the flights.

FS: That's right yeah.

EF: And the days that you flew you... so you flew quite a few in a month you would fly approximately ten to fifteen flights, in fifteen days, is that correct?

FS: Yeah. I have my lost combat flight; the skipper said you don't have to fly anymore.

EF: So you flew the last date at June of 1945. You had 649 hours?

FS: Yeah, all together.

EF: 81 carrier landings, three shots.

FS: That was when they had our plan on the hanger deck, one day we came up the deck edge and we didn't have enough room so they shot us off with the catapults.

EF: And then we had night flights of 22.5 hours.

FS: Yeah.

EF: Combat missions 44, combat hours flown 163.6 hours, and your pilot was Dance?

FS: Yeah. My first cruise was Clark and the second cruise was Dance.

EF: And that was 234.3 hours.

FS: I have a picture of; see there's what they give you for citing everyone of your metals you have a citation.

EF: And Admiral Halsey gave you this citation.

FS: Yeah and then later on I got a permanent one from President Truman.

EF: This is the air medal?

FS: Yeah, that's the real one here. Then later on they give you a permanent one from the Secretary of the Navy.

EF: Louis James Bristol, very good. You had nine?

FS: Yeah, I have a whole book full of those with the citation.

EF: What was rehabilitation leave?

FS: Rehabilitation was a thirty day leave you got after when you'd come home, you'd get thirty days in route so that let you come home for thirty days and then you go back again and report. So, the one rehabilitation leave then I had to report back to the west coast. Then we went out again to Pearl Harbor. Then we went on the York Town.

EF: How long were you aboard the York Town?

FS: Well, let's see about two years maybe.

EF: About two years. In October of '44 you were on the York Town.

FS: Yeah, and then I was on the Lexington for February.

EF: And what is the Lexington?

FS: That's a carrier just like, but I was only on there for the carrier strikes on Tokyo. Then we went aboard the York Town in '45 in March and in June the war was over.

EF: What was it like whenever you heard that the war was over?

FS: Pardon?

EF: What was it like whenever the war was over? Where you aboard a ship or?

FS: Actually I was home. When the war ended I was home on leave.

EF: What was it like?

FS: Well, we were out at; in fact we were in Girard at the Mahoning Country Club. And they came in and somebody was carrying an American Flag and the war was over. Oh I tell you the only think I thought was if you write and ask for an extended leave, but I had made a mistake and where I sent it went to Alaska so, if he said if you don't hear from you have to go back.

EF: Well, that was a great time for all. But it was nice that you were home. But you had to go back to be released?

FS: Yeah that's right. And they you've got to have points, but I had the DFC that was one of the five highest medals and all you had to do was request and you were relived, you didn't have to have points. So, I asked to get out so then they went to Toledo and I was released.

EF: In Toledo?

FS: Yeah.

EF: Why did you not have to have points to be released?

FS: Because if you had one of the five highest medals you didn't need points, you just got out on the strength of the medal.

EF: Oh, I see. So, what was the one you got out on?

FS: On the D.F.C. the Distinguished Flyer Cross.

EF: Okay and you got how many of those, just one?

FS: No, I had two of them.

EF: Two of them. Okay. What was it like in Pearl Harbor when you were there?

FS: Well, we'd anchor right; we'd tie up right there at Ford Island and leave off the ship. Then we'd fly out from Ford Island. That was a landing they had an airport there. If we were going to go on a strike the ship would leave and then we would land there and make a strike.

EF: I see. I see that you were aboard the Hornet in San Francisco.

FS: Yeah.

EF: What was that like?

FS: That was like transportation, the hornet took us out to Pearl Harbor.

EF: So, that was basically just transportation.

FS: They brought a lot of cots on the liter deck and then you'd just sleep there.

EF: Okay, that was just one of those transport areas. Is there any significant thing that happened to you or that you saw that sticks out in your mind? Other than the marines?

FS: Well, the only thing was when I shot a plane down. We were going to revolve and we'd pulled out and we were going down St. Georges Cannel and these nine planes these nine Jap's Zero's picked on us, because we hadn't picked up with the rest of the fleet. So, I thought first time I see a Jap I'll get shot down, but they'd just come in just like the machine gun we use to have. So, finally one just exploded in the air, the Japanese had a lot of magnesium in their planes and they'd catch on fire really easily.

EF: Magnesium is supposed to be lighter?

FS: Yes, light metal.

EF: So, they were trying to?

FS: They were trying to shoot us down.

EF: Of all the time what was the most major event in your life during this war period?

FS: Well, probably would be shooting that Jap, it was either him or me.

EF: I guess so. Looking back would you change anything?

FS: No, I don't think so.

EF: You really had a good experience?

FS: Yeah.

EF: Okay. How, what was your food like on board the ships?

FS: Food was good, except we were out for 102 days one time, when you figure there was three meals a day for 3500 men and I still to this day wondered where they carried all the food. Because we didn't have that, we'd run out of fresh stuff, but the meals on the whole were pretty good.

EF: Was there a lot of comradely and joking?

FS: There was a lot of friends. Stills hear from guys that were in our squad.

EF: Did you have a unit or were you a part of the unit or were you just a flyer?

FS: No, I was part of VB9. That was fighting squadron nine, fighter-bomber nine, torpedo nine, and bombing nine. That was composed of 100 men.

EF: Did you have any loses in this crew?

FS: Oh yeah, we had a lot of boys that were killed. I mean you'd take off on a hop and they'd just never, they'd count the planes when they'd come in and you'd just never see them again that's all, they'd just disappear.

EF: You would never know. Out of the 100 what's the typical, did you lose many everyday or was it?

FS: No, it was flying in itself is dangerous a lot of pilots were killed taking off or landing. But in the actual combat they'd be missing in action, but we lost... see there's a list of men that were killed in action.

EF: So, there's and you were in group nine?

FS: Yeah, air groups nine.

EF: It looks like you have fewer casualties then some of the others.

FS: Air group one is the one that lost.

EF: So, something that you were doing was right. Now did you have to fly in groups in certain formations?

FS: We flew in sections three plans. There'd be and then we'd all get together. And then the fighters would fly in two sections. There would be two and two. When we'd fly three sections and there would be twenty- four planes in our air group. There was like fifty fighters and the same number of bombers. So, when they'd put an air group up our air group there were about 100 airplanes all together.

EF: Oh my. That would be an awesome sight to see.

FS: Oh boy and noisy too.

EF: I can imagine. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to talk about? During the war that you can think of?

FS: No, I don't think so.

EF: So, basically you had a very good experience?

FS: Yeah, I am glad.

EF: Lots of medals. You were in for six years I mean four years.

FS: Yes four years.

EF: What rank were you?

FS: I was first class rating. This is why I stumble around; we crashed onto a carrier one time and I was knocked out and then after the war I was in CrileHops-Veterans for nine months and I couldn't walk or talk, but it all came back outside of my equilibrium.

EF: Wow! So, what caused the crash?

FS: Well, we missed all the cable and were running into the carrier. See there's nine cables across. So, there's a hook in the back of your plane and catches this cable and stops you, when we came in too high one time and we floated and we floated over all that and hit the barrier.

EF: So, some of the TV things that we see and movies that are really true that you do hit that barrier. Do you have much fuel when you come back?

FS: We could stay up for about five hours. That was and if we went a long ways they used to have a droppable tank that they used to put on the wings. And incidentally they were made by McKenzie Muffle in Youngstown; it was stamped right on there made in Youngstown, Ohio.

EF: Did you have to dump the fuel that was left over?

FS: We'd take all the fuel use all of it and then dump it before we'd get to the target and then we could maneuver and the fighter planes would do the same.

EF: So, you couldn't land?

FS: So, we could stay up for about five and a half hours, but after that they started running out of fuel.

EF: But you couldn't land with fuel?

FS: But I know one time Admiral Michner was the Admiral, and we chased this destroyer too far out and we had to come back and it was pitch dark. And at night the whole taskforce would, in fact if you opened the hatch on the deck the lights would go out. The

pilots were trying to land on destroyers so Admiral Micher turned on all the lights, just like a football field. And that's the worst thing to do, because if a Jap Carrier or submarine and see that, but he did that and when we landed we had about ten gallons of gas and that's all we had.

EF: So he made the ship a sitting target?

FS: Yes.

EF: Just so that he could get the men back.

FS: Yes, so he could get the planes back.

EF: That was interesting, how long did it take you to land then? Everybody landed?

FS: Oh about an hour.

EF: So, he took a big chance?

FS: Oh yeah. But he was the boss.

EF: Well, I want to thank you for your time and I really appreciate this.

FS: Oh gee thank you.