

12-2015

Oral History Interview with William Combs

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Recommended Citation

Paiva, Elizabeth, "Oral History Interview with William Combs" (2015). *World War II*. Paper 3.
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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Professor Erskine

Student Interviewer's Name: Elizabeth Paiva
Interviewee name: William J. Combs

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in one session on November 9, 2015 and lasted approximately fifty minutes. It was conducted at Morning Pointe of Chattanooga at Shallowford where the resident resides in Chattanooga, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About William J. Combs:

William Combs was born in Ringgold, GA in 1927. As a child he resided in Ringgold, GA and then attended Mt. Berry School for Boys in Rome, GA. After graduating from high school he enlisted in the Navy and spent four years abroad, primarily in Manicani Island and Kwajalein Island, during which he was in charge of running the Post Exchange. This interview covered topics such as his life before The Great Depression and his experience as Navy member from June 1945-July 1948. After being discharged from the Navy he moved to Chattanooga, TN. This interview was conducted on November 9, 2015 at his home in Chattanooga, TN.

Interviewer: Elizabeth Paiva (EP)

Interviewee: William J. Combs (WC)

EP: Mr. Combs I just wanted to let you know that I might repeat some questions I asked you last week just so the interview transcript is clear and not ambiguous.

WC: Alright.

EP: Ok let's begin. First can you state your full name?

WC: William Johnston Combs.

EP: Can you tell me your date of birth?

WC: 7-12-'27.

EP: Can you tell me your place of birth?

WC: Ringgold, GA.

EP: Tell me a little bit about your life before the war. Who are your parents?

WC: My dad died in 1941 during the war. His name is Eugene Combs.

EP: What is your mother's name?

WC: My mother was ten years younger than my dad. Her name was Vida Katherine.

EP: You were born in 1927. A few years later The Great Depression started. Do you happen to have any memories from The Great Depression?

WC: No. I remember it was pretty rough, but we always had food on the table.

EP: Were you the only child or did you have other siblings?

WC: I had a sister and two brothers. My sister was born in '24, my brother was born in '30, and my other brother was born in '33. Three years apart.

EP: Did you attend primary, middle, and high school in Rome, GA?

WC: I attended grammar school in Ringgold and then attended school at Mt. Berry. Have you heard of the Berry schools? There's a school down in Rome, GA called Mt. Berry, college and everything.

EP: How did your family manage during The Great Depression?

WC: My dad was in the fertilizer business. And he was able to provide where we could buy food and all. My granddaddy on my mother's side, granddaddy Emberson, was a farmer. And he always had a big garden, and he provided us with food mostly during that time.

EP: During The Great Depression, did you live in a house or an apartment?

WC: A house.

EP: Around 1939, World War II began. What did you hear about the war?

WC: Just what was going on; where the heavy fighting was. Most of it was in Germany.

EP: How did the role of women change during the war?

WC: I don't know if you remember, but up by where Volkswagen place is, used to be gunpowder making for the bombs called a TNT plant. That property used to belong to the U.S. government.

EP: So, this is where you saw women going to work during the war?

WC: Yes.

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EP: Do you remember where you were when the news of the Pearl Harbor bombing came?

WC: Yes.

EP: Where were you?

WC: I was in high school. I remember commotion. It was all on the news. Newspaper articles were all writing about it. And the radio had it too. This was before television you see, and all you could depend on were newspaper and radio.

EP: When you heard about the bombing at Pearl Harbor, what did you feel?

WC: I didn't have any feeling at all really. I was really too young to absorb it. It made me patriotic, and as soon as I finished high school, I joined the Navy.

EP: What was your reason for enlisting in the Navy?

WC: Well I wanted to be patriotic. I wanted to be one of the soldiers. You see the war was still on. I was on Manicani when the war ended.

EP: Where did your surge of patriotism come from?

WC: I just wanted to be like everyone else.

EP: Did you see friends enlisting for the war?

WC: Oh yeah. As soon as they got out of school they enlisted. Most of them joined the Navy. Most of my friends joined the Navy.

EP: Why did you choose to join the Navy?

WC: Well, I was going to be drafted and I didn't want to be drafted into the Army, so I joined the Navy.

EP: Why didn't you want to be in the Army?

WC: I just didn't want to be in the Army. Most of the people getting in the Army at that time they were being trained and going on into Germany to fight.

EP: Once enlisted in the Navy, was there any special preparation you had to go through? Such as exams...

WC: All I had to do was take a physical exam. Army doctors did it at Fort Olgethrope.

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EP: What was the name of two locations you served at while in the Navy?

WC: Manicani Island and Kwajalein Island.

EP: How many years were you at Manicani?

WC: 2 years from 1945 to 1947.

EP: After Manicani Island, what happened?

WC: I came home and reported back to the West coast and was sent to Kwajalein Island from 1947 to 1948.

EP: What was your role in Manicani?

WC: I ran the Post Exchange. That's the supply store where they can get shaving lotion, cigarettes, some stuff like that. And clothing and stuff like that.

EP: What was your role at Kwajalein?

WC: I was in supply also. We had small ships that would come in there and get groceries, supplies, and I would tell them where to get them and showed them where to get trucks and then take them down to the dock. They got all their supplies. They would be short on rations and they could get all kinds of meat and flour and all kinds of stuff like that. And things called condiments too. Anything they were short on or needed they could get.

EP: Who is "they"?

WC: The people that came on ships.

EP: So the supplies were being taken from Kwajalein Island out to the American troops that were being stationed...

WC: They would come onto the island and get their stuff and then go back to their ship.

EP: Is this the position you wanted in the Navy?

WC: Well, it's what I ended up as.

EP: Did you want a specific role in the Navy?

WC: Well, I was pulling night guard duty and I wanted to get off guard duty, so I took a supply keeper exam and passed it. That's how I got promoted to what I

was.

EP: Why did you want to get off guard duty?

WC: Well, they rotated sometimes, sometimes you had day duty and sometimes you had night duty.

EP: So, as a guard, what did you do?

WC: Village people, Filipinos, would steal stuff. We guarded the supply warehouses.

EP: Was there only one warehouse supply?

WC: There were many warehouses we kept supplies in. We had guards at each warehouse.

EP: Did you take the supply keeper exam on Manicani Island?

WC: Yes, I took the exam on Manicani.

EP: Did you have to take another exam for supply keeper on Kwajalein Island?

WC: I came home and then went back to the Navy base in San Diego and then from there, I went to Kwajalein, I didn't go back to Manicani. I continued my role of storekeeper and issuing supplies to ships that came in. So, a ship would come in, and it would be low on certain items and come in there into Kwajalein, and we'd issue stuff, and then they'd take it back to the ship.

EP: So, you talked about the Filipino people on Manicani. Did you get to interact with the Filipino people?

WC: I had Filipino girls working in the clothing store. They were issuing stuff.

EP: Did they know English? Was it hard to communicate with them?

WC: They knew English. They learned English.

EP: At the Post Exchange, what types of things did you sell? Can you be specific?

WC: Certain clothing had to be worn, that included underwear. Shirts and pants had to be the same. All the clothes and pants had to match.

EP: Are the clothes that you are describing the uniform the men had to wear?

WC: That's basically what it is. They had two different kinds that they had to

dress in. They had a dress uniform and a work uniform. The work uniform consisted of dungarees and a dungaree shirt. Other day you had to have the Navy white uniform.

EP: For food were there fruits and vegetables? Meat?

WC: Everything was commissary issued. They had cold storage places for all of it. ...buy fresh vegetables. Most of it was canned. We had canned eggs. Labels were on top of the cans.

EP: The food was coming from the States?

WC: Yes. Most of it was coming from the States or Pearl Harbor. Lot of it was coming from Pearl Harbor; it was the closest one. And then they'd fly stuff into another island called Samar Island and fly stuff out from the air base other there.

EP: How big were the warehouses that stored the supplies?

WC: Main part was about 12,000 feet.

EP: At the Post Exchange, how did men go about buying what they needed?

WC: They used money. Used American money and they could go through... On payday, you could withdraw whatever you wanted to on payday. Most of 'em didn't use a lot of money. They let it ride so they had a lot of money when they went home.

EP: When you entered the service in June of 1945, how old were you?

WC: Seventeen.

EP: About how long did it take you get to Manicani after you enlisted in June 1945?

WC: I got there July of '45.

EP: What was the feeling like when the news came to Manicani that Japan declared surrender August of 1945?

WC: This happened at night, about three o'clock at night. And everyone on the island was asleep in bed. We heard all this noise; the ships had their lights on and blowing their horns, and we didn't know what happened. And then everybody found that the war was over. Finally found out what was going on.

EP: How did the island find out about the surrender?

WC: A radio transmission came through. The one's on the ship got it at the same time and one's on the island got it by antenna. The ships got the news before we did. That's why the ships were making noise and woke us up. Nobody believed, really believed it. They just didn't really understand it. They knew that the war was over, that the Japanese had given up, so everybody was excited. There were two different kinds of Navy people. There were people who had joined and people who had been drafted, and those that had been drafted had a different rating.

EP: What do you mean by rating?

WC: If they joined, like I did, then all of them in there were in for so many years period. But then, the Navy reserve people were USNR had to have so many points. They get so many points for time over seas and the number of years they had been in service. And guys started trying to figure out how many points they had so they could go home. But those who had enlisted and were in the regular Navy had signed up for certain time and had no choice. But the guys that were in the reserve had points for so many years, had been years over seas, mostly getting points for being over seas, were trying to figure out how many points they had to figure out if they were gonna go home.

EP: By today's standards, being a soldier at 17 years old is pretty young. Were there other soldiers around your age or would you say you were one of the youngest?

WC: I would say I was one of the youngest, but there were a lot of them that were like me. And see, after the war, all of a sudden, people who hadn't been there very long... See, there were two types of people. People that were regular Navy, that was me, I signed up for so many years. And there was Navy reserve people that had been kind of drafted and were in the Navy. They had made points. You got points for overseas, points for years, points for being in a battleship area, and the reserve people were getting out soon as they had so many points. They were sending them back to States and then all of a sudden all the people that were left were people that had reenlisted and wanted to stay in. But the ones who had enough points to get back to the States, they just left and all of a sudden, there was a whole bunch of people there. I guess 60% of the people were like me and for certain times, full tour. If you signed up like me... I signed up when I was 17 and got out the day I was 21. I was discharged. The island was full of people like that, young people.

EP: Did you find it hard to bond with the older soldiers?

WC: No. Most of the older soldiers were cooperative really.

EP: What was your daily schedule like?

WC: I went to bed around ten o'clock every night and woke up around six am cause I run the Post Exchange. I got to eat early so I could open up the store and come get what they wanted. They can get cigarettes, clothing, anything they needed.

EP: How would you compare your time at Manacani to your time at Kwajalein?

WC: Manacani was easy. At the time the war just ended, Manacani was easy. I had no problems. Now, when I had almost two years there, I got to come home and then report to the base in San Francisco and then re-assigned. They sent me from there to Guam and from Guam to Kwajalein. Guam was a big station. A lot of people went there and then were sent to other islands or other places.

EP: The war ended August 1945, so after that what happened? Did the men come onto Manacani to go home?

WC: Yeah. They just repair ships...

EP: So even after the war ended, they kept repairing ships?

WC: Do you have the book?

EP: Yes I do. (Referring to "We Remember Manicani" by World War II veterans and members of The Manicani Island Association.)

WC: (Turned to page 230.) That right there is what you call an ABSD, advanced based supply depot. And that is a battle ship in there. And what the... People lived in these wall and had a... People would cook in there and everything. They would pump water into these pontoons. Each one had a pontoon and would pump water into each pontoon. They would take a large TB, a tugboat, and get the big ships in there. And then they would pump the water out and let them dry...dry surface and work on them.

EP: Did you ever get to go on one of the ABSDs?

WC: No.

EP: So you had friends that worked on the ships?

WC: Yep. Everyday. Figured out stuff at night what they needed to fix the ships. Then they'd send craftsmen... See this little boat here. They'd send out people on those small boats to work on 'em.

EP: So, when your friends would tell you about their stories about working on the ships, did they enjoy working on the ships or did they want to be out on the battle frontlines?

WC: Well, they were doing stuff to keep ships available to stay in battle. In other words, they were doing repair on ships and sending them back out to sea. Before Manicani was established, they had to go all they way to Pearl Harbor.

EP: So Manicani became the midway point instead of having to go back to Pearl Harbor?

WC: Yeah. They were getting repaired on Manicani.

EP: Referring to the map on page 120, where did you live?

WC: Hold on. I've got to find the church.

EP: Chapel, 9. (Referring to the key on page 119).

WC: (Found barracks on page 120 and pointed to the barracks.) So the barracks are right there and I was in the first barrack.

EP: Living in the barracks, how was it? Was it beds lined up one after another?

WC: No it was double deck. One on top and then another on bottom. All the way up there and you had space in between.

EP: So you didn't have your own personal little rooms?

WC: No. It was everybody in there.

EP: About Kwajalein Island, why were you sent to Kwajalein? What was going on there?

WC: Well that was the supply place. I don't know if you remember, but they dropped an a-bomb...

EP: Yes it was to test the effects of the bomb on the area surrounding the land where the bomb hit. Right?

WC: Correct.

EP: One of the ships that sank at Kwajalein was the USS Pennsylvania. Do you remember this ship sinking?

WC: Yes.

EP: Do you remember what happened?

WC: Well they dropped an a-bomb and they wanted to see the results of what happened. So, they had to wear special clothing. There were a couple of guys in my barracks that had to wear special clothing and shoes. Kept these special isolated.

EP: Were you scared that one of the bombs might affect you in some sort of way?

WC: No. Most of the people on there went out after they had dropped the bomb.

EP: What month did you get discharged in 1948?

WC: July 1948.