

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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William Wiedeman
Narrator

Natasha Wiedeman
Interviewer

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NW: Can you tell us about yourself and about your parents and what they did?

WW: Yes, my name is William Wiedeman. I was born at Council Bluffs, Iowa. I graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School there. My dad was also William Wiedeman, Sr., and he was an automobile dealer. My mother was a homemaker. I have three brothers, all younger than myself.

My brother, Bob Wiedeman, was also a Navy pilot, as I was, in World War II. After graduation I went to school at Morningside College, Sioux City, Iowa, and then to Saint Mary's College at Orinda, California, just outside of San Francisco.

I joined the Navy and went to flight school at Corpus Christi, Texas. I was assigned to the aircraft carrier, the USS Suwannee (CVE-27). We covered all of the Western Pacific, everything from Okinawa on south to the Philippines and Marianas Islands. We crossed the equator, went down into the Strait of Makassar and the Celebes Seas and took on Borneo where the Japs had huge fuel installations, came back and cleaned up again at Okinawa. When the war was over, the Navy assigned me as an instrument flight instructor for two years at Corpus Christi, Texas.

I took a short time after that and flew for a commercial airline out of Kansas City. After that, I came back home and got married to my wife, Ruby Sturm Wiedeman. I've been in sales all my life. My wife and I had seven children, four boys and three girls. They're all grown and have lots of grandchildren. Now I live in Hawley, Minnesota, retired. My good wife, Ruby, passed away last year from cancer.

NW: What could you tell us about your other brothers and their parts in the military? What was that like having your other brothers in the military also, and the feelings that you all had shared upon entering? It was Eldon and Bob in the military. Gus

was he in the military, too? Could you touch briefly about what areas they were at, and was it the same time also?

WW: My brother, Bob, next oldest to me, he was also a Navy pilot during World War II. And my brother, Eldon, was in the Merchant, was in the Coast Guard during World War II. And my youngest brother, Gus, he was in the Korean War, following the rest of us. He was in the Army as an infantryman.

NW: Did you meet a lot of interesting people while you were in the military?

WW: Yes, one thing that I did enjoy about the military was I met so many nice people. Many of the fellows that I became fast friends with, as we fought side-by-side. We spent several years out on the Pacific on the aircraft carrier where we got to know every man aboard, got to know them personally and their names and where they came from. And they were certainly a great bunch of guys.

We lost 292 men aboard the USS Suwannee aircraft carrier during combat, which was a tough thing to take. But the military life was good. We had good food but not a big variety because we did not have refrigeration or air conditioning onboard our aircraft carrier. But after the war was over I come back home and met many of our old friends. We have a reunion, a USS Suwannee reunion every year, so we meet all of those fellows that are left. Our numbers are getting way down. There are not too many of us left today.

NW: Where is that at, the reunion; where do they hold those?

WW: Each year we have a reunion in a different state. They've mixed them up over the years. So every state has been pretty well covered, or most all the states have been covered. We haven't been to Hawaii or Alaska for a reunion. But it's always good to see the old gang together and see who they married and how many kids they got and how well they've done, so. But we've certainly made a lot of good friends and got to see a lot of the world, a lot of the world along with that.

NW: It's neat that you keep in touch with them and I'm sure you have a lot to tell them about your kids, your seven kids and all the grandchildren, and [unclear] all the years you've been through and [unclear] you know, have such a good story to tell. Are there any like, main parts of, during the service that you'll never forget, like [unclear]?

WW: Yes, our communication with those of us that are still around, we write to each other and then we make a lot of phone calls back and forth. And of course then we have the annual reunion where it's kind of good to see how many kids and grandkids they all have.

NW: What were some your feelings like, leaving the military when you were all done. Do you have some feelings about that you'd like to share?

WW: When I left the military, I was glad to get back home again because I loved to hunt and fish and see all my relatives. I got to spend a lot of time back home and enjoyed all these things for many years since. Being back home is such a treat and, of course, back and got to see my old girlfriend again and marry her. And life has been real good to us.

NW: Did you have to go back at all because from what I remember from all the letters that were sent back and forth and all the stamps that I collected from World War; you were gone off a lot when there were still children back at home, am I correct, or [unclear]?

WW: Yes

NW: So right out of high school – I don't remember what you just told me “[unclear].”

WW: After I got out of high school, I felt I'd probably be drafted. So I went over to Omaha and went to the Navy recruiting offices because I wanted to get into aviation because I'd done some flying at the local airport in Council Bluffs, when I was a student in high school. The Navy permitted me to join the Navy Air Force, which I did. I flew for a short time F4F Wildcat fighters, which was made by Grumman Aircraft. Then Grumman came out with the F6F Hellcat, which was also made by Grumman. I was in another group for a short time where I flew F4U Corsairs made by Vought Sikorsky, but most of the war, most of my hours in flying, a little over 13,000 hours, was in F6F Hellcats out in the Pacific on the aircraft carrier.

NW: How many years was this exactly in the military?

WW: I joined the Navy on May 1, 1942, and I retired from the Navy in 1947, in July 30, 1947. I thought about making a career of it but I was anxious to get back home and see my girlfriend, and enjoy hunting and fishing, and all my home friends that I grew up with. So that was my reason for getting out of the Navy at that time.

NW: So Grandma was your girlfriend before you left, then you came back to her and then got married shortly after?

WW: Oh yes. After I came back from the service, I worked for a time; and one of my old schoolmates, Raymond Sturm, was one of my classmates in high school. He had a sister named Ruby and I met her through Ray. We decided to date and became steady dates and went together for quite some time. We got married on July 17, 1954, at St. Patrick's Church in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

NW: That would be seven years after you got out of the service. So seven years you were together [unclear]? You've got seven beautiful children and that's where I came from. Grandpa is there any other feelings you'd like to share about the service in general?

WW: I think the Navy's a great place for a young person, man or woman, to join. The money is good. The food is good, and it's a good life, and you can have a

lot of physical programs to work on, and you get a good education from the Navy. It's something you can use later on in life anywhere. Of course coming back home was one of the things I have enjoyed and having my own kids to grow up with. If I had stayed in the Navy I wouldn't have been able to see my family as much as I have in the past here. And then I also got 25 grandchildren, which is a real blessing. It's always nice to have them. They're all a great bunch of kids, you couldn't ask for better. As a matter of fact, I got one sitting right here interviewing me. Natasha Wiedeman is my son, John's daughter. And she's now going to Moorhead State University. She's just a very smart girl and very beautiful. So what more could a fellow ask for in life than to have all these great grandchildren.

NW: Thank you. Well, I think we've touched a big, big area. [unclear]. I want to close with this question and you can take it as far as you want, and that is how would you like to be remembered?

WW: Well, as far as how I'd like to be remembered as having been a good grandpa; and my lovely wife that I was married to all those years was a great grandma, too. We both have not only loved and enjoyed our own children so much but we've had a lot of fun with our grandchildren growing up. Grandma always cooked and baked cookies for them and always had treats after school. We certainly have and enjoyed a blessed life, I'll say that.

NW: And for being such the war hero that you are that, I mean, you'll always be remembered for that, that's what counts also, do you have any comments you'd like to say about that?

WW: Well, I'm thankful that I was given an opportunity to participate in the war and that America came out number one. I think war is an awful, awful thing. I saw so many of my buddies killed in action. And some came back handicapped. I hope this war that we're considering to go into with Iraq – I just feel that we'll be able to get in there quick and get out quick without the loss of lives. I feel that maybe it is a necessary thing to get into but it's going to be a horrible tragedy if, if we start losing men over there and women. War is really hell on earth, believe me. I think anybody that's experienced it before will agree with me wholeheartedly on that. We don't like to see people killed. I hope President George Walker Bush will make the right move here and get us in and out quick.

NW: Thank you very much. I would just like to comment that I feel very lucky to have you here for the interview today [unclear] very, very special. Thank you very much.

WW: I thank you for the nice interview and I thank God for bringing me back home alive and all in one piece. Thank you, Natasha.

The following section continued after a break in previous interview:

NW: So you started flying . . .

WW: Yes, when I went to Morningside College at Sioux City, Iowa, there was a little airport just across the river. I went over there and met some fellows I knew that were students over there. They were also students at Morningside College, and they went over there to take flying lessons. So I went over and I signed up and started taking flying lessons. And we flew all small planes like – little Cubs and Taylor craft and I got in quite a few hours of flying – several hundred hours – and I flew INF Wacos and UPF Wacos. Now these were both biplanes and made down in Texas. They called them “walk-oes” instead of “wake-o,” instead of “wake-oes.” But I got in a good deal of time, flight time in aircraft before I got, joined the Navy.

NW: So you think that the portions that you had to do with flying while you were in the service that was pretty comfortable for you to handle those planes?

WW: Yes, I really enjoyed flying Navy planes. I had a chance to fly a number of other Navy planes after the war. And flying has always been something I’ve always enjoyed. I flew a commercial airline for a short time. It wasn’t as much fun as flying a fighter because a fighter you’re always on the move and it is very maneuverable. You really get around fast. Sitting on a commercial airliner as a pilot, when I was a copilot; you sit for hours just flying straight ahead from point to point and there’s nothing, you don’t maneuver your aircraft very much, like you do when you’re in a fighter plane. So I got a little bit bored with that type of flying and that’s why I gave it up. The money was pretty good and the job was a good job, but it was just sitting there flying an airplane straight ahead hour after hour, which got pretty boring.

NW: Were you by yourself in each of these planes? The five of them [unclear]?

WW: In all the fighter planes I was just a single pilot. We were also our radioman and our gunner; we also had a plotting board at our knees. We did all our own plotting and navigation because when you left your carrier it kept moving. When you left, they told us that they’d be going a certain direction on the map and at so many knots per hour. We would go over for two hours when we ran a strike; and then we had to come back two hours. So we had to know where our carrier was going to be when we came back, because the carrier kept moving all that time at 25 knots an hour. That ocean is big and you don’t have anything to look at, no dead reckoning, so you have to look for your carrier out on that large expanse of the ocean. So you better make sure that you find your carrier. So through navigating you had to watch your watch and your time had to be precise, because you would run out of fuel if you stayed out too long. And another thing, when you came back, that carrier was in a lot different place than where you left it. So your navigation had to be right on the money. So the only thing there was to see out there

was your carrier or a lot of water if you had to, that you could land in and, not very likely, you might not get picked up.

NW: Did you have an incident where you had any plane troubles or . . . ?

WW: **Yes, we were off of the coast of Japan and I picked up some ack-ack. My plane went down in the water. I landed it safely on the water because the engine had quit. I had three of my teammates that were flying with me. So when they saw me go down, they orbited over – my plane sank right away and I got out and jumped into a rubber life raft and sat there. And they orbited over me to keep the Japs from seeing me; and apparently the Japs did see me because they sent several motor launches out with a number of men in each one to pick me up. And as they did, my fellow teammates strafed those Japanese motor launches and sank them along with the Japanese people that were in the military in the motor launches that were going to take me in. They sent in a destroyer from our screen, the U. S. destroyer, the USS Daly came in to pick me up. They dropped a cargo net over the side for me to climb up. And as I got up on, as I put my feet on the deck, there was a fellow standing right in front of me.**

His name was Ralph Gaines. Ralph Gaines was from Missouri Valley, Iowa. He said, “What the heck are you doing out here in the middle of the Pacific?” And I told him, “I was sitting out there waiting a long time for you to come by and pick me up. Why didn’t you get here sooner, I’m getting cold.” Ralph and I had a lot of good laughs over that.

Then the doctor come up and he said, “You’re cold?” And I said, “I sure am.” He said, “Well I brought you a little bottle of brandy to warm you up.” And sure enough, he pulled out of his pocket about a half-a-pint bottle of brandy and gave me a couple of good swigs. He said, “That’ll warm you up.” He said, “I’m getting cold, too,” so Dr. Crawford drank the rest of the bottle.

NW: That’s good.

WW: **You asked about the Navy food. Our carriers were built prior to World War II and they did not have refrigeration or air conditioning. It got pretty warm sleeping down in the hold at nights. Our food, because of lack of refrigeration, we had to use all canned or dry products. We had Spam three meals a day, morning, noon and night; because it was a canned product. Our eggs were dehydrated egg powder; that was provided from Ocoma Foods out of Berryville, Arkansas. The powdered eggs were put in trays of water at night and they fluffed up during the night, and in the morning they’d take them off of the trays and slap them on the grill and warm them up. The Spam was cooked on the grill, also. We had potatoes two or three times a day. These were dehydrated potato powder and all of our potatoes were mashed potatoes. They were provided from some big potato factory up in Idaho. We had dried navy beans and they made soup with them. So we had**

navy bean soup three times a day. It was optional. You could eat and have as much of the navy beans you wanted. There was no meat in them, very little seasoning.

Twice a year, Christmas and Easter, we did have canned chickens. These were about 48-ounce cans of chicken provided by Blue Star Foods out of Council Bluffs, Iowa. In each can was a chicken. And that was the only fresh meat that we got in the years we were out on the Pacific. It was all Spam and on those two holidays we had chicken.

They did provide us with coffee to drink several times a day; and they did do some baking. We had some baked foods like pancakes and a few homemade slices of bread once in a while. The flour got weevils in it. So you'd get a slice of bread and you always had to hold it up to the light and pick the weevils out before you ate the bread. So the flour didn't keep very good at sea. The flour came in big wooden barrels.

Our showers were all just fresh water, right out of the Pacific Ocean – salty – so after you showered, you felt sticky all over from the salty water. We did have a small desalination machine that provided with fresh water. It boiled the salt out, but it was just a small unit. It did provide us with enough fresh water for drinking, cooking and coffee, but not enough to ever shower with.

So, that was one hindrance was that we didn't have any type of air conditioning onboard. Lots of nights we climbed out and slept, just with our bunk bag and slept on the deck, deck of the aircraft carrier 'cause it was so hot down in the hold to sleep. So that was one of the good things about the good old Navy that we all enjoyed. It was all those lifetime experiences.

NW: Go ahead. You can just [unclear].

WW: Our last stop in the Pacific was at Nagasaki. There our military had dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, which was a seaport town of Japan. They lowered 12 of us guys in a motor launch; and we had us to go to shore at Nagasaki, and to see what the damage the atomic bomb had done. We waded into the mess that was there, and sometimes the ashes were almost up to our hips, just light ash.

The heat from the bomb was so intense that it just melted buildings and destroyed everything. At Nagasaki had some buildings where there were 18, 20, 24-inch columns and beams in these big buildings and they melted so they looked like a piece of ribbon candy or wet spaghetti. They were just melted down, the heat was that intense.

We only saw one human being there. Apparently most of the local people, the bomb had cremated them I'm sure. We didn't see any signs of bones or anything like that. We saw only one old man, elderly man and he was wading through some of the debris, looking to see if he could find somebody.

And, of course, we didn't understand what he was trying to say. He was shivering like he was cold. And one of our guys gave him his cap, put it on his head for him and helped him but we didn't have any food because we just came over from our carrier to the motor launch. So we weren't able to help him, to speak of; but our admiral onboard our carrier, the USS Suwannee had the motor launch go back. He sent the ship's doctor inland to see if they could find this old man and give him some food and drink and medication. But they weren't able to bring him aboard the carrier because he was in pretty bad shape. It was too bad but they had to leave him, but they made sure he was warm and comfortable and had food and water.

So that ended the war, the atomic bomb; which I'm sure it saved from losing a lot more lives; otherwise the war would have probably gone on for maybe even years longer.

NW: That was the final ending for ...?

WW: That was the end, yes. After that we pulled up the anchor and headed for home. We headed for the Hawaiian Islands first, where we stopped and took on food and fuel and more medication and all the needs were met; so we were able to make it back to the States to San Diego. It was good to get back home again, back on U. S. soil. What a blessing.

NW: Right.