

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

# Max Atkinson – Life During WWII

By Max Atkinson

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## Box 1 Folder 3

Oral Interview conducted by Wendy Wilson

Transcript copied by Maren Miyasaki May 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

WW: My name is Wendy Wilson, I am interviewing Max Atkinson, A World War II veteran who served in the South Pacific. Brother Atkinson, would you like to start by telling me about your early life?

MA: My parents—my grandparents are original settlers of this valley right here. My great-grandfather was with Thomas E. Ricks when they settled Rexburg. He was the first town marshal of Rexburg, first dentist in Rexburg. But so my ancestors were here, and had some nice farms. But in September before they got married, they decided to go to California to look for work. So they were married in Rexburg, went to California, and I was born in El Segundo, California, July 2, 1923. My father worked for Standard Oil Company there. During the Great Depression—which started in 1929 but got worse and worse and worse—by May of '35 my father was unemployed, so we put nearly everything we had on a four-wheeled wagon with a car, a 1928 Dodge—and I was the oldest of the five children—and we proceeded to Idaho with that car and all our possessions on a four-wheel wagon. My great-uncle had the family farm and he was losing it to this mortgage company. And so he told my dad to come back and take over the farm, which he—my father—did. And so we come back to the farm, lived way back in the brush without electricity, no telephone, no radio, nothing like that at all. An old house. Had a pump outside to carry water in the house for everything we needed. My mother washed on the scrub board. We had a food cellar off the kitchen to put the milk in, to keep it as cool as possible. And that's the way we lived. We grew up there. Went to a little country school, had two rooms in the school. We had the five, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade in one room while I went to the eighth grade there. And so, it was a happy life and good life, but it was a hard life, especially on the women. You couldn't imagine what it would be like, scrub board and . . . everything. You had to cook on a wood stove. You can't conceive of that hardly today, anyone, living like we did at that time. Had no money, but the government program were coming into effect about at that time. The farmer's Home Administration was a program. So my father went to this given agency and borrowed enough money to take over the family farm. He has to buy some sheep and other things like that. And my father was an excellent farmer. The farm became very, very successful. And, uh, . . . is that enough of my early life?

WW: Yeah, um . . . how much, how did you learn about what was going on overseas—the developments that led up to World War II—and what were you thinking?

MA: Very, very little, really. I went to high school in Rexburg. And it was in, what, September of 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland. We heard about that. And it seemed like from that point on, it was just a matter of time until we were actually in World War II, that we would have to go to war to save England and France and so forth. And so the nation just edged slowly toward war. You know, in the Pacific, or there in the Atlantic there, submarines were sinking American ships, you know, and all that kind of stuff, and, um, it was just a matter of time; everyone seemed to sense it, that we would soon be at war.

WW: And at Pearl Harbor, you were a freshman at Ricks College; you were 18. What was your reaction when you realized that Pearl Harbor was bombed

MA: It was quite a shock, tremendous shock, but we knew we were at war, we knew that our nation would declare war; we had to do everything we could to win, both in Europe and in the Pacific both. The two-front war, actually. Our nation could fight in Europe and in the Pacific at the same time, but they emphasized Europe. They said let's deal with Germany first, and then come and defeat Japan. That was the strategy, but they emphasized—when Germany was defeated, then they took on Japan. But we fought Japan the whole way through at the same time anyway. But the emphasis was on Europe during that time; they got most of the manpower, and the airplanes, and things.

WW: How did you learn about Pearl Harbor?

MA: It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, and there was no snow that day. And there's just—I remember so vividly going rabbit hunting on Sunday, forgive me, with my friends. And as we were going home, we went up past the Lyman Chapel and some young men in a car stopped us and told us about it. And so we went home. And then the next day was Monday, December the Eighth. I was at the college. In the top floor of the Spori building was a library at that time. And all 200 of the student body were there, if you could imagine that, 200 of us. And I stood on the floor—there wasn't enough chairs—and listened to the radio as FDR asked Congress to declare war on Japan, which Congress did the next day. And then Germany a couple of days later, when they declared war on Germany and Italy; it happened so quickly right through there. So I just went to school that quarter—they were on a quarter basis then. And so when after that. . . well, I had to help the harvest a lot that fall too, and I didn't get home. I missed lot of classes and things; I did get good grades, though. But from that point on, I stayed on the farm. Helped him with the cows and horses and things, dressing up a lot of cows and things like that. And so that next year was '42—why, that's about it. Stayed there and worked on the farm. In the draft, there was 1A, and, you know, different numbers like that, and 2A and 2C. No, 2C was a married man, and 2A I had, because of my farm—my father needed help; I was the oldest son, so I got a farm deferment. But as the war went on and on, my friends all went in the service and I knew I had to go. And so I finally in, it was in July of '43, why I went to the draft board and told them I wanted to enlist—you had to go through a draft board—and so I enlisted in the navy in '43. I think my date is August the Fourth that I went into the navy.

WW: Before that, you wanted to get in the air force, but you had to be twenty-one or your dad had to sign the agreement.

MA: He wouldn't. I took the paper—I took that air force test; I must have had a very good grade, because he wanted me. He says get your dad to these and come back, and we'll send you off to the air force; and he wouldn't sign them. He says, "I couldn't." It wouldn't feel right you know, if something should happen to me, I guess.

WW: Was he afraid that something would happen to you or did he just need you there so much?

MA: Well, both. Both, I imagine. We were doing our farming with horses then, see. Well, we did have tractor finally. We had a tractor in '40, the year I graduated from high school. First tractor in the neighborhood, a good tractor. . . But I wound up in the navy. And they sent me to Camp Perry, Virginia, right near Williamsburg, for my basic training. In fact, we went into Williamsburg one night. Do you know where Williamsburg is, Virginia? That Colonial. . . You've heard of it before? In September '43, I was in Williamsburg. Beautiful restored. . . it wasn't much then; it's been restored much more since then. And we finally get some basic training there; and then they ship us to a place called Quonset Point, Rhode Island, for advanced training. And we did a lot of training there, in equipment and—I was inducted into what they call the CB's, Construction Battalion, but it was under the navy. And then I come home on leave, about First of November, somewhere in there, somewhere. I was home for about a week and I had to go back. I was just back a few days and there was a sign on the bulletin board asking for volunteers to go to California, and guess who was the first name at the top was. And so immediately, they sent about thirty of us to California, for training there in what they called the pontoon battalions. You know how the landing the landing craft are? It was something called a Landing Ship Tank, an LST. 325 feet long, about 25-hundred ton displacement. The bow would drop down in front, and on board they would have tanks and guns and trucks and everything like that to drive out and up the beach. But often the beach—they couldn't get close enough to the beach to unload that—about seven or eight feet of water was as shallow as they could get in. So they put pontoons on the side—I showed you pictures of it didn't I?—and they'd drop the pontoons in the water, and then bring the pontoons around the front of the ship, make fast the fore LST and then they could drive that up the beach. So we'd unload all the guns and things up on the beach. Now also, we also had LVT's aboard the ship also, landing vehicle tank; they'd go through water and up on the beach and on land both, like a tank. And we'd have a lot of those on there also; that was our first wave that always went ashore, our LVT's. There was a corral reef around most of those islands, you know; they'd go up over the corral reef, and out through the lagoon and back up on the beach like that. So we took training at Pearl Harbor. We got to Pearl Harbor in February of '44. The saddest in my life, I think, is when we left California on that ship—transport to look at the ocean, the coastline disappeared. Whoo! Would I ever see the united States again? That was a sad feeling. I remember that moment that—watching the coastline disappear. Whenever would it be that I could come home again? Won't tell you about my seasickness, you don't want that I'm afraid. But everyone had to go through that. It wasn't bad, really. We wound up in Pearl Harbor, where we took more training and we built pontoons. And then about the First of June—that's all in that history I gave you, by the way, everything I'm saying now. And um, we just set sail west; no one knew where we were going. Then we hit a place called Eniwetok, that's famous in history, are you aware of that? First hydrogen bomb, I think, exploded in Eniwetok. It was a re-supply base; took on fuel and water. You see, an LST didn't make any water, so water was carefully rationed on ships. You took salt-water showers; and it would make your hair thick. Of course, you'd drink the fresh water and everything like that. 'Course we had a lot of shots before we left, for all the different diseases in the islands. I started taking Atabrin tablets about that time, too. Everyday, you took an Atabrin as a synthetic. . .oh, what do they call it for malaria? Quinine. Synthetic quinine was called Adatrin, so

everyday we took an Atabrin tablet to—you see, on the island there, was malaria; it would protect us from getting malaria. Finally they told us that we could land on a place called Saipan, and so that's what happened. When they'd land on those islands in the South Pacific, they were difficult. But the earlier islands like Tarawa, when they landed there, so many people died. The navy had to find a better way of getting them up on the beach. So Kwajalein was the next one. And they got some islands near Kwajalein and bombarded it for thirty days before they went ashore on Kwajalein. When they went there, the Japanese soldiers were shell-shocked; there was no resistance whatsoever. The thundering, the thundering. But those invasions were something to observe when they would go up on the shore. They took these landing craft called LCI's, and open deck in the middle, and loaded it with rocket launchers, three-point—three-and-a-half inch rocket launchers. They'd line a bunch of them up parallel and move them towards the beach. And the first rock would go off at the beach and they'd just sweep inland about half-mile and just strip everything naked. A rock would hit on every square yard of beach as they went inland like that. Even before that, though, the battleship would shell and shell those islands also. The night before we landed there, the battleship shelled all night long, and those shells were going over our heads from the battleships as they hit on the beach. And that next day, airplanes strafed the beach as well; and they'd rocket the beach. And when they went ashore, they went into a wasteland, literally a wasteland. There was no Japanese anywhere along the beaches; they'd been killed. But then further inland, they'd shell the beaches, you know, with mortar and guns and things. I think the biggest shock I had was to go up on that beach that first day. Right behind the beach was a pile of dead bodies, ripped up like cordwood. I don't know how many were there now, but there was a lot of Japanese dead bodies just piled up. Maggot, flies, you can't imagine the stench, that horrible smell that would—on those islands when you went in there. Oh! The only food we had were K-rations, and we couldn't drink any of the water; we had to take water in with us to have water to drink; the water there was completely bad. I don't know what else to tell you about it. That tape of mine would tell you about as much as I am telling you right now. You might take and listen to that.

WW: Is there anything you wish the military would've told you in basic training?

MA: Oh, I don't think they could've prepared us any better than they did. You just knew it was going to be bad from the previous invasions. You know, Tarawa and Kwajalein; you knew it was bad. You see, the Japanese, their religion was Shinto, and they believed the best thing to do was to die for the emperor. And so they died. . .right down! And on Saipan, I think there were 25,000 soldiers, they estimated, and I think they took 25-hundred prisoners, or is it 200 prisoners? Very, very few prisoners. On Saipan there was a big cliff on one end of the island, and the Japanese all went down and jumped down and killed themselves, many of them did. Ever heard that before? Suicide cliffs on Saipan. The native people, they're called Chamoros, on Saipan. Chamoros, S-H—C-H-A-M-O-R-O-S, I believe, Chamoros. They were the natives. They were lighter skinned people; they were not oriental at all, more like the Filipinos. And they were handsome people, good people. And we saved a lot of them. They made a Japanese prisoner of war camp. It was just a village green was what it was, in the middle of town there. And we put a barbed wire fences and they put the prisoners inside there, and then they'd come right

over—The only water on the island that was any good was out of cisterns. Every house had a metal roof. And pipes catching the rainwater and drain it into a big cistern by the house, in the middle of the yard. They'd drink that and use that for everything they wanted to—a lot of rain, of course. And so it was that water—we would wash in it; we wouldn't dare drink the water on the island. But they had those Japanese prisoners, there right by where we camped. And they would come over to our cistern to get their water. One day, one of these prisoners talked to me in perfect English. He says, "Can you help me?" He says, "I was born in Hawaii. I went back to Japan before the war started and they put me in the Japanese army." And he was—he says, "I'm actually an American citizen," but he was in the Japanese army. So I get an officer and they took him; I don't know whatever happened. But I caught a horse on the island, right around there, and made a rope halter on it. I rode that horse around the prison camp and I see those prisoners smiling while I was riding around there, like a cowboy—a western cowboy, you know. They finally took that horse away from me; but for a few days, I had a horse. Is that a little sidelight or not? WE spent just about a month on Saipan. And so while we were on Saipan, there's an island right next to it called Tinian. A very famous island in history and one of the most famous of all, and you know why? There was an air base on that. One day a plane landing, a called the Enola Gay. Heard of that airplane before? It took off at Tinian when they dropped the bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Where did I get to? They set up a lot of 155 millimeter canons on Saipan. I don't know how many days they shelled Tinian. Just night, mainly night, and one would fly over our head "voooooom, voooooom." All night long they would shell Tinian in preparation for the invasion of that island. The Japanese had a few airplanes and they were flying over at night. They'd wake us up at night. You know, air raids and things like that. The night they were showing the first movie on Saipan, it was out in the open with a screen and it was called Mae West, When the Heat's On. Right in the middle of it here comes an air raid. So everyone went looking for a foxhole immediately, of course, and I jumped into a foxhole and broke my ankle. I finally had to get surgery on it.

WW: How long did that take you out of action?

MA: I wasn't out of action. They just bandaged me up and said keep going until I get back to Pearl Harbor. But eventually, I had to have surgery on it: I have three screws in my ankle.

WW: Left ankle?

MA: Right ankle. It's got screws in it. It's stiff; I can't bend it. It's solid, my right ankle is. What else? Memories of Saipan? A lot of Dengue Fever went through; people would get real sick from something like a two-or three-day malaria; but when everyone would seem to get some Dengue Fever, it was soon gone. And cockroaches, do you want to hear about cockroaches? They were everywhere. You couldn't believe the cockroaches on those islands. We took an old Japanese schoolhouse, and cleaned it up, and we were living in it. And at night, cockroaches were everywhere. You'd hear somebody just scream—they had some mosquito netting around us, of course—they'd scream and open his bed and there would be a cockroach in bed with him, you know. More fun. One

night there, I was on guard duty maybe 150 feet behind the beach and here come an air raid diving right down on us. The lights were on, on the unloading pier. So of course all the lights were out immediately, and I hear that plane “zeem, zeem, zeem, zeem” right down at me. And he dropped a bomb, but it was maybe a hundred yards away from me. But, I heard that bomb that night when they—the Japanese took off at Tinian and some of those Japanese islands near there to bomb us and to keep us awake at night. Shall I keep going?

WW: Yes. You’ve been a member all your life. Have you ever had any times when you—when the Spirit tried to instruct you and keep you from doing something or tell you to do something that saved your life?

MA: He helped me so much. I can’t believe it. I shouldn’t be here in many ways. The first night on Saipan, we were all in foxholes, and they had shells dropping around us, you know, and dirt coming in on you like that. You heard the expression, “There are no atheists in foxholes,” haven’t you? We had one member of our group—he kept saying his father was a Jew and his mother was a Catholic, and he was nothing. And he went completely to pieces in those air raids. In fact two or three men went just bananas in those air raids; you couldn’t control them. And yet those who had religion were all right. We had a lot of Catholics with us. And they were such good people. They had not trouble at all; they didn’t get scared. But the more religion you had the much better off you were in those conditions. It was the atheists that had trouble; they were scared most.

WW: This reminds me. I learned yesterday that back when you were training back east at—I think the first place you were assigned to—someone—some officer or somebody—asked you “What’s your religion? And you said LDS or Mormon. And they were like, “What? And they put down “P” for Protestant.

MA: That’s right, uh huh. See, everybody had a dog tag and on it was your religion, in case you’d get killed, what kind of funeral to give you. And your blood type was also on it, in case you needed blood transfusion or anything. Of course, your name and all that was on your dog tags. And here was this chaplain sitting there. One by one we’d come up and tell him. And “Catholic,” “Protestant and I says, “I’m LDS,” and he looked at me funny and I says, “Mormon.” And he looked like he’d never seen a Mormon before. I don’t think he’d ever had. He looked like I’d almost slapped his face. Shocked him, though, he was. He finally says, “P, Protestant.” And so my dog tags always had “P” on them. I went to church whenever I could in Pearl Harbor; although it was a few months we were training, we couldn’t go to church on Sunday. But if I could, I would go down to the stake center on Beretania Street and go to church when I could. In downtown Honolulu was a stake center, a beautiful, beautiful building. I’ve got pictures of it upstairs. I only went there a few times, ‘cause it was quite a ways away from where we were based to—but occasionally I could get down there to go to church. But from that time on, I never had a chance to partake of the sacrament, for months! Never went to a church meeting, I think it was in my life story when I finally got off at Tinian—after the invasion—but we haven’t got to that yet. But they put us on the flagship of the fleet, U.S.S. Cambria. It was a Sunday morning; I wasn’t on there very long. And here comes

this announcement over the loud speaking system: “LDS church services are in the library in just a few minutes.” And I hurried down there. So I partook of the sacrament on that U.S.S. Cambria. Had admirals and generals and everything on it. Met a boy from Rigby, Idaho, and we could talk about a lot of people in common, and I read his “Dear John.” Do you know what that was? There’s a song on it called, “Dear John.” He was so upset about that; and interesting, she never married. I saw in the paper that day where she was going on a mission. Beautiful woman; she never married. I saw her in the temple; she’s worked in the temple. I don’t know; it was just one of those things I guess. Well, Saipan was over. Well this is important as far as the war is concerned. For two or three days after we were on Saipan, all the ships left. Battleships, everything left except a few destroyers circling the island. At night they would fire star shells. And they’d go off up in the sky, then float down with a propeller. It would come down real slow. But light up the island so you could see at night. And if the Japanese were starting to do something, why’d they get a start shell and you could shoot and see what you had. The night of the Bonzai Attack, that was the worst night I remember as well. You know what a Bonzai Attack was? Well, they’d get pushed in a corner; they’d get all the way up and then charge to their deaths. They were hitting on drums and firing guns; and I heard that attack that night. They never got to where I was, but I heard it coming. But they stopped it before they got the beach where I was. They’d come down the island and I was further out along the beach. That’s why many of them died, in the Bonzai Attacks. Die for the emperor. Get us a one-way ticket to heaven, they thought. I don’t know if I like that or not, it’s weird; but they would do things like it. Kamikaze is a part of that, you know that? Idea to die for the emperor. “What’s funnier than a stowaway on a Kamikaze?” That was a joke. That wasn’t very funny though, was it? It was funny back then. Anyway, they told us the entire Japanese fleet was headed our way. They’d get up all the Japanese ships they could from the Philippines and place them to stop the invasion of Saipan. So between Saipan—out on the ocean between the Philippines, those two navies come together in a great—one of the great naval battles of all history. Battles of the Mariana Sea, I think they called it. It was a bunch of air carriers, was what it was, against carriers, like Midway. But we destroyed the Japanese fleet at the Marianas that night; what was a big part of it was destroyed that night. But the next day or two, all the ships were back again. Our ships. The hospital ships came back and the supply ships all came back ‘cause the Japs were completely defeated and chased away. What if the Japanese had whipped our fleet there that night, what would’ve happened? To us? On that island, stuck out way in the middle of the Japanese Empire? It was only twelve-hundred miles south of Tokyo, Saipan is. That’s not very far with an airplane.

WW: How did you come to take Tinian?

MA: Well, they invaded it, just like they did Saipan. You’d have to read about the invasion where they feinted at one side and landed at a different place with landing craft. It was Tinian—it wasn’t as much of a battle as far as—like Saipan; the losses weren’t very much on Tinian. I could let you read about it in my book up there; my master’s thesis was The Evolution of Amphibious Warfare in World War II. I took all the amphibious invasions and explained what happened, the landing craft. You see, in every place in World War II, the battles started over water. Normandy, Italy, North Africa,



Sicily, they were all amphibious invasions, everything was. In the Pacific, of course, everything was amphibious invasions. I was involved in the invasion of Leyte and Lenggayen. I went ashore D-Day in both places. October Twentieth '44 at Leyte and January Ninth '45 in Lenggayen. I went ashore D-Day both places back in the morning. Both places.

WW: How did your religious beliefs help you with coping with what was going on?

MA: It was the only way I could have possibly made it like I did, my assurance and the faith I had. That I could make it. You did a lot of praying, that's all there was to it. And hope for the best. A couple of times I—I was close so to being killed a few times; you can't believe it. You know the closest I came to being killed? I was up on Lenggayen and we were on the beach, but there were some fishponds behind the beach and behind was a little Filipino village where we stayed at night—They raise fish just like we raise crops there—and there was a trail between the fishponds; you'd go walk along single file or maybe two abreast. We would walk along this trail to get to this Filipino village. As we were leaving the beach, someone says, "Careful, there's a new army unit back there, and they're pretty jumpy." So we were walking along this fish trail, and our chief petty officer was in front of us, and we heard somebody say, "Halt, who goes there." And our chief just suddenly said some smart remark and it was almost just "kahpowh, kahpowh, kahpowh." And we all just dove into the fishponds. You could hear bullets go by. 'Cause the sentry started shooting at the American troops that night. I mentioned friendly fire. It's surprising how many people were killed by friendly fire. One day at Leyte Gulf one day, when the Japanese fleet was coming from three directions, this plane off an aircraft carrier came in there. He had no place to go to land; so he came in the harbor, and all the ships started shooting at the American plane. Finally, someone says "it's American." And he beached on the ocean not far from where we were at. He came by our ship and his hands were out over his head like that; everybody was shooting at him. You get spooked at that time; you shoot at everything you can see; you don't take time to look sometimes. And so we fished him out of the water and put him aboard our ship; and he told us that the whole Japanese navy was headed our way. You know the battle of Leyte Gulf, the naval battle? It's the greatest naval battle in the history of the world, the battle of Leyte Gulf. From down the south come the big Japanese fleet, and two Japanese fleets were coming from the north down toward Leyte where we were at, at that time. But fortunately we got them stopped and they didn't come on down, or I'd have been isolated again in the Philippines. Anything else?

WW: Weren't you assigned as a signalman on the ship?

MA: Yeah, I was a signalman. But before I went in the service, I was working the amateur radio at the time, so I knew the Morse code perfectly. And when in boot camp I started learning the semaphore. And so when I went into California, they put me to work as a signalman especially. Ever seen a 12-inch ladder on a ship with a flashing light? Seen that in movies or anything? I could read that as fast as they could send it. Dah-di-daw Daw-di-daw-di-daw. I think that's "CQ," the international call letters. And so I immediately could read signal lights. And then I picked up the semaphore quickly; and,

of course, the flags are always very, very important on ships. You know those flags in the navy? Well each one of those flags is a letter, a phonetic letter: A, B, C, and so forth: Alpha, Beta, Charlie, and so forth.. Well, they would run those flags up, and you'd look up what ship, and look in the codebook to see what the message is. So three or four flags up on a staff could have a whole big message. "Begin signal practice," or something like that. You see, when I went on those invasions we were put on an LST, and I went—became a part of the crew. We were passengers, but we were the main team to help the crew on the invasion that landed on the beach. And I was getting a message from the ship one day—and they didn't have enough signalmen in the navy at that time—and so I could read the message coming just as easy as could be. And somebody told the captain, "That boy down there is reading that message," and no one else can read it. And they calls me up to him, and I read it to him; and he says, "You've got a job.": And so from that point on, I always stood on signal watch on that ship. A watch in the navy was every four hours; They'd have a different time, one to eight bells—each shift has 8 bells in it—"clang" and you know what time it was. Four bells and half the watch was over. And so we'd stand watch at night, and I was a just regular crewmember. Had advantages; got to head—got to stand at the head of chow line; you had to go down to eat 'cause you had to get back on signal watch, all the time. So that was interesting. I was usually on watch from four to eight o'clock in the morning; I don't know why I was stuck on that one, but I was. They had a loud speaking system, and in the morning they play records—music to get everyone up over the—and announcements and things. Every morning, I had them playing my favorite song; and they played my song, "Away beyond the Hills of Idaho." You heard that song before? You never hear it anymore.. It was a beautiful old song about Idaho. Should I sing it to you? The best I could? "Away beyond the hills of Idaho, where yawning canyons greet the sun," and on and on. And so every morning everyone knew I was on signal watch. 'Cause during the day, everyone would say, "You were on signal watch weren't you?" because that song got them up in the morning. "Away Beyond the Hills of Idaho." They all knew I was from Idaho. So I stood the signal watch, and I was up on the signal bridge. And you could always see what the other ships were doing around you, 'cause you always traveled in convoys in LST's; you did twenty-five. Let's see. . . you'd be in about three different columns, one behind the other, one behind you. And you'd have destroyers around the outside, for watching for submarines—escorts. And out in the front was a destroyer; there was always a commander of the whole convoy. And so in this whole convoy, we'd move across the ocean. And LST had a top speed of about 9 or 10 knots; so it wasn't very fast, but we went; we made it across the ocean okay. That's a little sidelight I guess. Want some more in Morse code? What's your name?

WW: Wendy.

MA: Di-daw-daw Dit Daw-dit Daw-di-dit Daw-di-daw-daw. Wendy. And so when I came back, I was instructor in the signal school in Pearl Harbor, when I was able to come back to the United States. So I did all right that way.

WW: You were assigned to be in the invasion force of Japan?

MA: Yes, we were. We took training at Pearl Harbor, for LST's and pontoons and the whole bit. We had winter clothing issued to us. They told us we'd land on Hokkaido, which was the northern Japanese island. The First of August, they were supposed to leave; the whole American fleet everywhere was going to invade Japan about that time. They told us it probably would have taken about a couple of million American casualties. Now, that's the way they told us then, I don't know. How would the Japanese people with their Shinto religion? Would they have surrendered, or would they all have literally died for their emperor? And so—But the fleet was ready to go; it was called Operation Olympic, is what they told us. But we were ready to go; in fact, we had our shots all ready. Boy, when you had to go anyplace out in the navy, you got shots—:bing, bing, bing, bing.” “All right, which arm do you want them in?”—for malaria and everything you could possibly think of. But as I mentioned, that August the Sixth, Hiroshima. August the Ninth was Nagasaki. And in the middle of the night on August the Fourteenth, over the loud speaking system, it came over that Japan had surrendered. And so we talk about celebrations. Flashlights—searchlights flew, and guns fired. And everyone got as drunk as could be. I laid in my bunk that night, and I stayed there all night; I didn't even get out of it. I just prayed and thanked my Heavenly Father the war was over. I wanted to get home and be the best little boy you ever saw; and I was able to come home. But it was one of those nights—you couldn't picture it in your mind that—what happened that night as celebrations went on in Pearl Harbor and stuff like that. I was there from August—actually they surrendered on August the Fourteenth, but it wasn't official; there were still some things to work out. And that was a Sunday. And so I remember—about two or three days later—I went to downtown Honolulu. I was in the U.S.O. drinking a milkshake, listening to a song I liked to listen to: “Don't Fence Me In.” Ever hear that song before? Cole Porter wrote, “Don't Fence Me In,” and it hit me just right. And I was listening to that, and I heard over the loudspeaker, “It's official now. Japan has officially surrendered.” Now the word came out on August the Fourteenth, but it wasn't official. There was some question about whether they'd really surrendered or not. The emperor goes on the radio and says, “Japan surrender.” Did they surrender or not? It took the government a couple of days to actually surrender. And so it was the middle of the day sometime; I remember drinking a milkshake at the U.S.O. in Honolulu when word came that Japan had officially surrendered. “O, give me land, lot of land.” It's a beautiful song; you'll hear it someday. Don't fence me in, ride to the cottonwood trees, and all that kind of stuff, on your horse, and stuff. And then it was September the Second, in the harbor at Tokyo, onboard the battleship Missouri, where Japan officially signed the peace treaty. Admiral Nimitz was there, MacArthur was there, and that officially ended the war; not until September the Second. I should be careful there, because our wedding anniversary is September the Fourth. I think it's the Second that they surrendered officially. We've been married fifty-five years now. That's a few days isn't it? I waited there for about another couple weeks, and they sent me home. When we came home, I went to San Francisco harbor. You could hear foghorns going—you know fog up and down the coast all the time. We were heading there, and there's the Golden Gate Bridge. Most beautiful sight I've ever seen was that Golden Gate Bridge that day. We sailed up in the harbor, and here come a boatload of girls on a small ship and on the side it said, “Welcome Home Boys.” And they sailed around us and cheered and clapped their hands, and a ship was just going out. And they went over and circled

that ship; and the other side, it says “Good Luck Boys.” They could say goodbye and they could welcome you home. So we landed there at Alameda naval air station and went to Treasure Island and had a physical examination and just walked past a doctor; that was good enough. And about two or three days later, I was on my way home. Went into a hotel in San Francisco with some friends and called my folks; said I need some money. They wired it right to me, and I had money immediately. And when I went into the service, my base pay was—what—15 dollars a month the first month—I think it was 15 dollars a month—and I took six-something out for insurance. Then they raised it to 50 dollars a month not long after the war—but that was the lowest rank, 50 dollars a month. So they took your insurance out, about six or seven dollars a month. So it wasn’t a lot of money, but everything was paid; food, clothing, and everything were provided for you. So all the time I was overseas, I sent—a lot went home to my parents. When I finally get my ranking and things, I sent 50 dollars a month home for about two years. When I got home, I had some money in the bank, and I didn’t spend it foolishly either. That really helped me get started, that money I’d sent home. I got into Frisco and took the train home. And by the time it was October. They were digging potatoes; my mother sent me up in the field there digging potatoes. In those days they put everything in sacks. You don’t remember that at all, do you? They picked the potatoes in baskets and dumped them in potato sacks and lift them on a truck. In fifteen minutes, I had to sit down; I was tired, weak, out of shape so bad. He was a man than I was at the time, but I got used to it later on.

WW: What was the impression of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito during the war?

MA: Well, terrible. The movies, they did a number on those people. Hollywood did it pretty much what I’m trying to say. Every movie that came out would make them look terrible, terribly bad. Hirohito, you know, the old emperor, and Hitler, Mussolini, the unscrupulous Mussolini, you know, and Hitler was all the things that he did wrong, you know. They’d made fun of them, of course. So it was propaganda. There was a lot of propaganda on our side against those people. They did the same to us; there were people against us. But the Japanese people around here, they didn’t dare go to town for a long time after that. See, I went to school with some Japanese boys in Rexburg, and they were telling us they had Japanese school out in Burton, out west of Rexburg there. So they’d go to school during the week, and then Sunday and Saturday, they’d go to Japanese school; what were they being learned—what were they learning? They had a teacher that came from Japan to teach them; what were they being taught, like the Moslems in this nation today? And so the day after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese schoolhouse burned down. Who did it? I don’t know; nobody knows who did it. I think the Japanese prob’ly did it; just to wipe out that part of it. You know the Lorenzo Bridge down by the river? Lorenzo, between here and Idaho Falls at that time. Boy, they blew up the bridge, you see, is what I’m trying to say. Tremendous and terrible anti-Japanese feeling. They’d go into town, and people hoot at them; and they wouldn’t sell them things in stores or anything about that time. ‘Course they took and put them into those Japanese camps about that time. But I have some good Japanese friends. Of course they more than made up for it in the Japanese units in World War II. They sent them to Europe, see. In Italy, the most decorated unit in World War II is a Japanese unit, I think. And they fought

bravely on our side. But, the war started like that; now who could you trust? Every Jap could be a traitor, you know; they could go and blow up a building or something, blow up a railroad train or something. But as the war went on, that fear left. And Pearl Harbor was awfully bad. See, Japanese is the most dominant race in Hawaii; everybody had to have Japanese blood in them there, almost; and so it was not much fun in Hawaii for the Japanese during that time. They actually knew, though, that there were Japanese spies in Pearl Harbor sending word out where the ships were in the harbor about that time. You see, one of the things that saved this nation was that when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, there were no carriers there. You see, we only had about, what, four carriers when the war started; and they were all out in the ocean; they had left the day before. If Japan had hit those carriers, the whole World War II would've been different, but they missed the carriers. Just the way those things happened on them.

WW: You were talking about the negative propaganda about the enemy leaders. What was your impression that you were getting through media or Hollywood about Roosevelt, Stalin, Churchill, and Macarthur?

MA: Oh, yeah. They were the greatest heroes. They come out as the good guys; there's no question about that. Now Stalin, people always wondered about him; they never really trust him, but they used him, I guess, as much as possible. 'Course Churchill became a great hero. And Macarthur was the great general of the Pacific, but nobody really liked Macarthur, but he was a brilliant general. I was on the beach of Leyte the day he walked ashore there, "I shall return," I was on the beach. They called him "Dud-out Doug." When he left the Philippines, when Japan attacked, he went to Corregidor, the island in the harbor. My uncle was there and told me about it; he was a prisoner of war of the Japanese. The night he left on that PT boat, he could take his personal possessions or take the nurses with him. He left the nurses there and took his personal possessions, and so he always had the nickname of "Dug-out Doug" Macarthur. That's not a very well known fact, but Macarthur was not a very popular man in the Pacific. But he was a brilliant general; he was very careful; and to that degree, he was a very brilliant general. See, when they fought in the Pacific, he took the southern force to the Philippines, where Nimitz was in charge of the central forces in the Pacific, Admiral Nimitz was. So there was two directions—two units headed towards Japan. As soon as we started against Japan, come Corregidor and than Bataan Death March, and when that happened, boy, did we ever hate the Japanese. 'Cause every Jap was a—would just slaughter everybody they could find, they were the most wicked, evil people you could find, the Japanese people. I've—there's still apart of me. . . I won't buy a Japanese automobile, or anything made in Japan. Does that shock you? Much of that's gone, but I still got a bit—lot of anti-Japanese feeling in me, from what—things that happened.

WW: Did you know people who went to the war and didn't come back? Either people you met in the navy or people you knew from Idaho.

MA: I lost a good friend on Tinian, the name of John Deluca. He was such a good friend, such a good man. He was shot in the head and killed on Tinian. After he was shot, I picked up his helmet, and it had brains inside of it. I remember John so well. He's the

one closest to me that was killed. But I don't—there's a lot of very gory things you could talk about, very gory things.

WW: Do you know how families in general coped with people not coming back?

MA: I can't answer that one; I don't know. I'm not familiar with that one at all. Bonnie? She went upstairs. I don't know what to tell you there, 'cause I was overseas. But I'm sure it was a big shock. It had to be a big shock. [To his wife] She wanted to know how people coped when the word came back that their sons had been killed in service. Do you remember?

Bonnie Atkinson: A great hurt. And I remember the whole community was shocked. They felt quite a shock. And a great loss. A sadness just would blanket the town when they heard that.

MA: A mother could put a gold star in her window, couldn't she, if she lost her son? A gold star mother they called them. If you could see a house with a gold star, you know they lost a son in the service.

WW: Did you get any rank while in the service?

MA: Yes. When you're apprentice seaman, you go seaman second class, seaman first class, then you become a coxswain in the navy, which was the same as sergeant; I was that. If you ever look at a navy uniform, some stripes are on the right sleeves and some on the left sleeves. Those on the left sleeve were the technical ones: like radioman and mechanics and things like that. And ones on the right sleeve were the deck officers: desk and petty officers, boatswains, mates, and coxswain, and things like that. You'll see them on both sleeves if you ever watch movies about the war back in those times; you can tell pretty much what their role was there in the navy, if you look at it that way.

WW: Did you stay on the land most of the time or on ship most of the time?

MA: When we were going on an invasion. It was on the ship all the way to the beach. When we would land, we would stay on the beach and unload supplies until the beach was secured and they didn't need us anymore. They'd put us on a ship and send us somewhere else to get ready for the next invasion. When they left Leyte when the invasion was over, they went over to Hollandia and New Guinea, then down to Solomon Islands to Bouganville where took on an army unit—That's where I mention Bouganville—we picked up I think it was something like the 72<sup>nd</sup> army division, or something. We took them up to the invasion of Lengayen Gulf in January of '45. It was on the ocean, but we'd go onto the beach and secure things, and when the beach was secure, then we'd leave. About that time, you usually took over a harbor somewhere; they never landed at a harbor; they'd take the harbor from behind, and they'd secure the harbor from behind, and then the ships could go in there. They didn't need us anymore on the beaches.

WW: Is there anything else you want to tell us about the technical aspects of taking an island or a beach?

MA: They just hit the beach with everything they had. The Japanese finally quit trying to defend the beaches; they couldn't do it. But they would go inland a ways; when Americans would set their perimeters, then they would attack and charge. But they always had guns up in the hills; and things would fire at—about on the beaches and things. The Japanese had a mortar; it was an excellent weapon. Do you know what a mortar is? It's a pipe about that big around, about three or four inches, about this high. It sits on the ground; and they could aim it with little wheels and things; and it would shoot a projectile out. It would go 200 yards and hit with tremendous explosion. The mortars were very, very bad weapons; but they, uh, the Japanese used an awful lot of mortars to shell up and down the beaches, so they could get them captured and things.

WW: So it was about eighteen inches long?

MA: Maybe two feet, two feet long; probably about that high. We had them both. Americans used a lot of mortars too. But flamethrowers were a good weapon we had at times. The Japanese liked to get into caves and come out of caves at night and fight. You threw a flamethrower inside and cook everything; and you didn't have to worry at all. The smell of burning flesh was terrible.

WW: And star shells—you mentioned those—they're just for the purpose of illuminating the area, not actual weapons?

MA: No, they just illuminated things. The destroyers would fire them way up in the air. It probably took them five minutes to float down; they had a propeller in there. You see the propeller sweep around you as they would come down. But it really light things up at night. Every so often, if they needed the help, why they'd "whoosh" and they'd light up the island. And the Japanese would have a very hard time attacking at night with star shells going off.

WW: You also mentioned before, on your other tape, that you had to have signs and countersigns.

MA: Oh, signs and countersigns; oh, you bet. Everyday it changed, and they would tell you in the morning what it would be for the next twenty-four hours. At night so you could recognize each other. You might use a Walt Disney character, and you had to come back with another Walt Disney character. Or a city, or something like that, that everyone would be really familiar with. And at night, you'd hear, "Who goes there?" Then they'd say the name of a Walt Disney character, and you had to give it back. If you didn't, guess what they would do—or could do. If they didn't know the sign, then you were an enemy; that's all there was to it. 'Cause everyone was supposed to know the sign and countersign. Remember Normandy, when they all had the crickets? In D-Day, ever seen that movie, do you remember that? To identify themselves, they had a cricket

in their hands that they could identify each other with. But we didn't have those in the Pacific.

WW: so you had to do it verbally?

Ma: Verbally.

WW: Wasn't there an incident where you kept giving a sign and the person wouldn't give a countersign? And then they went and disappeared?

MA: I still don't know what happened that night. We hear them coming toward us. We were on guard duty, and we heard a rifle click, and we gave the sign there, and there wasn't a sound. We gave it again, and there wasn't a sound; unless he turned around and walked away from us. And before that happened, they had told us watch out for Japanese infiltrators. To this day, I don't know who that was.

WW: I would guess they would've been a Japanese infiltrators; but, I would be wondering if they were, why didn't they do anything.

MA: I don't know; I couldn't answer your question. But those—we always memorized those signs and countersigns and things like that to—at night—now we had star shells; you wouldn't need them as much, 'cause you could see, but it was black. And it got black on those islands as well, at night. A very dark. . .

WW: Could you tell us about rationing?

MA: As soon as the war started, tremendous shortages came out in many things. You couldn't buy a new tire for your car, 'cause the rubber all came in from Southeast Asia, and Japan stopped all that. There was once a tremendous sugar shortage, and you couldn't find butter or meat or anything like that; and gasoline was very, very short. So you were given stamps. So many particular stamps would get you so many pounds of sugar; and every car had a sticker on it: "A," "B," "C," how many gallon of gas you could use in a week. You got an "A" stamp, you only got something like five gallon a week, or something like that. "B" stamp, you got something like ten or twelve gallon. There was a national speed limit of 35 miles an hour. No one wanted to go above 35 miles an hour; if you did, you were an enemy of the nation; you were anti-war. Could you imagine a 35-mile-an-hour speed limit in this nation today? Busses went 35 miles an hour; everybody obeyed that 35 mile—that's the time you get the best gas mileage; and so your gas would take you further at 35. And so to protect that, they had gas stamps and meat stamps. I mentioned sugar; It was very scarce, sugar. As soon as the war started, of course, they started making synthetic; time the war was over, we had all the rubber tires we wanted. But it was all synthetic; no more was it natural rubber at all. There's that little aspect of it.

WW: Why was the food supply disrupted? They were still making that inside the United States, weren't they?



MA: I don't understand it myself, completely. But everything was to go towards the war effort. And they just uh—I don't know, the servicemen needed it, I guess. And they just did that to make sure everyone had whatever they wanted.

WW: During the war, weren't they retrofitting car factories make planes and tanks?

MA: Oh, yes! There were no automobiles made from '42 to '46; they stopped making automobiles completely; you can't find a model of those years, because every car company went into making tanks, jeeps, trucks, airplanes. Ford made airplanes, back in—by Detroit. And I don't know what the other companies went to, but they made things for one of the big tanks and everything like that. 'Course the shipyards went to work in building ships: the number of ships it would to fight that war. Everything went over water, of course. They built Victory Ships in four or five days in some of the seaports and things like that. But this nation mobilized, I think, more than any other nation ever in history. This nation pulled together to fight that war. I don't think any nation ever fought a war like we did. So patriotic. Everything went to the war effort to win the war. But it was the home front that won the war.

WW: During World War II everything was disrupted with the economy. Did the mail service get disrupted nationally?

MA: To my knowledge it was never disrupted at all; stayed perfect all the way through. Nothing did really interrupt the mail, I guess.

WW: Other than when you went out on the ship? So the only disruption you got of mail was when you were in the South Pacific?

MA: Yes. We left Pearl Harbor about the First of September. We were going on a six-week invasion, but they changed our orders and sent us to the Philippines. When we went back to Bouganville; they had a few letters there—not much—but they had some mail there for us. When we get back to Pearl Harbor six months later, there was all our mail; six months of newspapers; my mother would send me all the little newspaper foldouts. So that was my Christmas; it was there in March when they got back to Pearl Harbor.

WW: Didn't they send an absentee ballot to you while you were in the service?

MA: Yes, they did. We got our absentee ballot.

WW: When did you get that?

MA: It was about the middle of November, about a week after the election was over. We were in Bouganville two or three weeks. In fact, I mentioned I ate Thanksgiving Dinner there in '44. It was just prior to that, somewhere between about the Fifth of

November to the twentieth of—to Thanksgiving, somewhere in there. Do you know how many years ago that's been now? Fifty-eight years, fifty-eight years ago.

WW: And you sent the absentee ballot in even though it wasn't going to count, and went ahead and voted for Roosevelt?

MA: Like you said, I voted for him; but he was already declared the winner when I sent it back; but I did.

WW: Did you think he was doing a great job?

MA: Oh, yes! He was winning the war! What more do you want, eh? He was our wartime leader. And he planned it; he was the Commander in Chief of all the armed forces. He decided the invasions. Of course, he listened to a lot of good counsel and advice from generals and things, but he was the ultimate power. When would we invade the Philippines, or D-Day, he made the decision when to go. He made the decision, but he left it to the local commanders to make decisions too. But he was the commander in chief. Now when he died that April of '45, why it was sad; the whole nation wept when FDR died. Then Truman became president, and he became an excellent wartime leader as well. You see, Truman made the decision to drop the bomb in Hiroshima. And nowadays, they say he made a mistake. Never tell me that, because anyone involved at that time in the end of the war—in dropping the bomb—thought it was the right thing to do. It ended the war; it saved all those American lives; my life, maybe. But know today, history's being rewritten, that we dropped the first atomic bomb, which was not the right thing to do. Should we have dropped the bomb or not? That argument's still going on. Would you think he was right in dropping the bomb or not? Should we drop a bomb on Iraq? I don't know; I don't think they would do it.

WW: This is the conclusion of the interview. This is now October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002.