U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LCDR (ret.) AARON SEIDLER, USNR

CONDUCTED BY
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The date is April 23, 2015. Today we have the great pleasure of speaking with Mr. Aaron Seidler, former aviator in the U. S. Navy, whose service includes time as a flight instructor, on submarine patrol, also flying air evacuation missions in World War II. Today we'll be looking back over the course of his military career. This session is being conducted as part of the BUMED Oral History Project.

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Q: Mr. Seidler,[1] thank you again for you time today, I really appreciate it.

Now, oral histories are narratives first and foremost narratives and all narratives must have a beginning. I would like to start off with your beginning. I know you were born and raised in Baltimore and I'm wondering if I can talk a bit about that. What was it like to grow up in Baltimore?

A: It was pretty good. My earliest memory is my mother taking me to kindergarten.

[1] Mr. Aaron B. Seidler was born in Baltimore, MD on March 15, 1921. He entered the Navy in 1942, serving in active duty through the end of World War II.

There were a total of 11 of us in my family including my mother, father, and nine children;[2] there were five boys and four girls. Sometimes there were more than 11 living in our home. My sister Irene had become a registered nurse. She was the first one of the nine to get some education and go anywhere. She was a nurse all her life and a school nurse towards the end.

Growing up, I learned a lot of discipline at home and this would make it easy for me to adapt. I didn't always agree with my father, but he was the boss and I respected him. You could disagree with him, but you knew better to keep your mouth shut and respect his authority.

There was a depression in those days; that's worse than a recession. Our family didn't have it too bad because I had three brothers and a father working. Even if they got work only one day a week that money went on the kitchen table. When they got paid my mother would buy food and set aside some for the coal truck during the winter so we were never really hungry or too cold. She would even share a little bit at night with some other families in the

[2] Seidler was the youngest of nine children born in Baltimore to Wolf and Tillie Seidler. His siblings were Joe, Pauline, Morton, Edythe, Lillian, Meyer, Morris, and Irene.

neighborhood going through tough times. Growing up, I never remember being hungry; I always got breakfast and had access to good food. I remember, on Fridays, no one could use the bathtub during the day. My mom had a live fish in there because live fish was cheaper than one that was dead. I found out later in life it was the cheapest, dirtiest fish; it was called Carp.[3] Until my mother was ready to pull that fish out of the bathtub, kill it and scale it no one could use the bathtub.

We had coal in the cellar. Coal showed up every couple of weeks and filled up the coal bin. When I got old enough, my Pop taught me how to throw coal in the furnace and bank it for the evening. He also made his own ritual wine in the cellar for holidays. He bought a little house, about eight feet wide, with a grape vine in the back and he would rent it on the basis that they would take care of it; every two years he would take me down, I guess, when I was about six or seven years old, with a basket and we would pick these grapes that he would use for making wine. He would never let me down in the cellar. My sisters helped him, and some

[3] Oily, freshwater fish.

holiday, being a loud mouthed kid and wanting something to say, I said, "Edith and Lil didn't wash their feet when they squashed those grapes," and then I would have to run like the dickens because they were going to kill me.

Overall, it was a good life and I had fun in a time that was very difficult economically. There were soup kitchens around, which we never went to because we had four guys in the family. If you had a little family things could get tough.

When I was old enough I got to go to college because everybody pitched in. The cheapest school that would take me was Towson Teacher's College.[4] It had just changed from "Towson Normal," which was a three-year, to a four-year school. Big deal.

In over 12 years of public school we saved by depositing money which came from birthdays and confirmations, etc. I was able to save $62. Back then my father had a friend with a garage where he fixed cars. If the owners didn't come back for their cars he kept them and after a year he sold them. He told my father about a 1930

[4] Towson's Teacher's College (now known as Towson's University) is a public university established in Towson, MD, in 1866.

Model A Ford[5] that he had. When I looked at that thing and I thought it was a Packard; Packard was the big deal in those days. He asked me, "How much money you got?"

"Sixty two dollars and thirty eight cents."

"You're lucky. It just happens to cover even the title and the license, which are two dollars. That will be included."

I said, "But I don't drive." So I had to get a friend back in the neighborhood who drove and he agreed to go downtown on a streetcar with me to drive me home in this car and teach me how to drive. That Model A Ford got me back and forth to college until the draft conscription.

Back then, everybody was looking for waivers; all I wanted to do was to serve. I figure if this country is pretty good taking in an immigrant family and all my brothers and sisters, I owe them that, but let me finish school.

Every area had its own draft board and I was in one at Reisterstown,[6] Maryland. I begged them, "No, it's not a

[5] Model A Ford—A successor to the popular and mass-produced Model T. The Model A was produced from 1927 to 1931.
[6] Reisterstown, MD—an unincorporated community in Baltimore County, MD.

necessary war effort education." I was going for elementary education. Then I suckered down, "Let me finish my junior year. Can you tell me my number?"

They said, "You're pretty close."

There was a civilian pilot's training program the government put up free, and it was close by on a street called Smith Avenue. A big national company called Curtiss-Wright[7] had bought this open field and now called it Curtiss- Wright Field. One day, without telling my family, I signed up for three days of flying and two days of ground school at the University of Baltimore, in downtown Baltimore. There was no problem working it out with my college time. I did that for two reasons: I wanted to see if I was competent and whether I liked it. If I didn't like flying or wasn't competent there was no sense going into that. I went to a Navy recruiter who told me about this aviation cadet program. He told me I'm going to do all this great stuff and make you an officer and all that baloney. I said, "I got to know if you're going to keep me out of the draft."

[7] Curtiss-Wright Company—an American-based, global diversified product manufacturer and service provider for commercial, industrial, defense and energy markets. At the end of World War II, Curtiss-Wright was the largest manufacturer of aircraft.

Everybody could manipulate your paperwork in those days. I was a member of the United States Naval Reserve on "inactive duty." I'd never been on duty. That's how he kept me from getting drafted. They were ready to draft me, which meant Army, and I didn't want that.

In the meantime, I learned to fly and got a pilot's license. This was my ticket. The Navy called me up at the end of March 1942. Around this time I got serious with my girl friend and I gave her an engagement ring. This program stipulated that you couldn't get married or be married until you finished the program and got your commission, either as a Marine second lieutenant or a Navy ensign. I told her that and she accepted it. She'd never met my family. I brought her home one night to meet the whole family who were there for some holiday, I said, "Well, I want to introduce my girlfriend." Everybody's looked around at each other, especially my sister Lil who practically raised me. I told them that I gave her a ring but we couldn't get married right now. At that moment my sister turned around and whispered, "You didn't knock her up did you?"

She was the one that taught me to behave myself. I

said “No, it’s not like that.” However, I had another bombshell to drop. Everybody is sitting around this table, and I said, “The draft was bugging me so I joined the Navy and I leave in three weeks.” Well, my father didn’t know what I was talking about so he didn’t get upset, but my brothers and sisters got upset. The mood turned sour and they wouldn’t talk. I said, “What are you mad about? Everybody’s going in. There’s a war going on. I just didn’t want to go in the Army.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to the Navy,”

“Aboard a ship?”

“I’m not going to be on the ship so much. I’m learning to fly and they’re going to train me to be a naval aviator.” They were very upset.

My mother took a liking to this gal and my sisters warmed up to her knowing that I wasn’t going to get married right away. I, somehow or other, went back to the recruiter and said, “I’m ready now,” but I had to wait until my 21st birthday which was March 1942. I told him I wasn’t going to have much time with my girlfriend before I departed.

He said, "How about if I give you until June 1st?" They changed my orders to June 1st and that's when I showed up to the first school over in Anacostia, D.C.[8] It was a washout school, 30 days; you either made it or you didn't. I didn't tell them I knew how to fly, so I made it okay. I then went to Pensacola,[9] which is the Yale of flight training. It was there where I first came across flight surgeons. They examined us every week for practice.

Q: That's right. The year 1942 saw a surge in the number of flight surgeons, but also the beginning of aviation psychologists in the Navy. Many of them were based in Pensacola testing pilots and creating new selection tests for naval aviators.[10] What do you remember about that experience?

A: There was somebody we would see every week. Sometimes they were shrinks and sometimes they were guys checking your

[8] Naval Air Station Anacostia, DC was established in 1917 and originally used as a seaplane base. In 2010, it was later conjoined with Bolling Air Force Base.

[9] Aviation Cadet, NAS Pensacola, FL, 1942

[10] By 1942, Navy aviation psychologists had built a robust program for administering, and designing tests for selection and training prospective pilots and aviation personnel. By war's end, psychologists serving at Navy preflight schools, flight schools, and research activities had developed some 250 different tests for evaluating personalities, psychomotor skills, and training-performance of aviators. The Navy's World War II aviation psychologists also explored the behavioral traits of successful combat pilots and researched better methods for "inter-communication" in flight. Programs like the Combat Criterion and Speech Intelligibility Research would be among the important legacies of these wartime psychologists and help ensure that pilots were "aeronautically adapted" for flight and for flight instruction.

heartbeat. I remember the eye guy. This is how they checked eyes back then. You had two cords attached to an object and you had to get the object even and you had to pull the cords so they came together.[11] They told me I had great eyes.

The shrink asked me stuff about my family. He wanted to know if I disliked anybody. Here I am a young 21 year old punk and I didn't know who he was or what he was doing, but I answered his questions. I told him my father had strict orders, I had to be home every night by 10:00 p.m.; he didn't care what day of the week it was. If you broke the rules in our house there could be consequences. I didn't know that wasn't the stuff you tell a shrink. I'm telling him the truth. But I said I had a great life. I told him I had a lot of fun in my family. I had one brother 20 years older than me, and he was the power behind the throne. He was the guy that could go in a kitchen with my father once a week, drink tea, and convince him to ease up

[11] Depth perception test. The Navy used a special apparatus to test a prospective pilot's depth perception at six meter. The Manual of the Medical Department, U.S., 1942 outlines the procedure as follows: "The rods in the box are widely separated by the examiner and the examinee is required to manipulate the two cords so as to bring the movable rod beside the fixed one in such a position that both appear to be the same distance from him. The test is repeated several times, the rods being widely separated before each trial. The examinee's estimation of depth perception is read in millimeters directly from the scale and entered on the record. The test will be conducted at a distance of 20 feet.

mainly on my sisters, but also on me. So I shared all of this not knowing they were shrinks.

We had to see the doctors every week. Sometimes when the weather got bad and you couldn't fly you would see the doctors more than once a week. They would check my back and check my neck and check my ears. Then the psychos would check me out. This went on and on for the entire training. That was my introduction to medicine.

During training we all went through a decompression tank to see how we would handle altitudes above 16,000 feet. There was a regular doctor and a psychiatrist outside the tank. You would get a little sleepy without oxygen and I remember sitting in there with eight other guys and a few passed out when the pressure got pretty low. I came through great. When you went up to 16,000 you got groggy without oxygen. The teacher that's taking us up had an oxygen mask on, but he wanted to show us what's going to happen to you if you get up too high without oxygen.

Q: How long was the training?

A: It should have been a year. I guess I was good because I got in there about July 1st and graduated the following

January 3rd. I guess six months of flight training should have lasted at least of a minimum of a year for this schooling.

Q: So when you graduated, were you certified to fly any sort of type of aircraft?

A: Yes, I was certified to fly everything that the Navy had except multi-engines. It was after that when I went to my first squadron in Norfolk.[12] I flew from Labrador to Montevideo looking for German submarines as a co-pilot. I only made two trips.

Q: Were you flying PBYs?

A: Not yet, this Squadron had PBMs,[13] Glen L. Martins[14], two-engine sea planes. And then boom, I was just married.

Q: So you were married in '43?

A: Yes, January the 10th.[15]

Q: So seven days after you graduate school and you're allowed to get married?

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[12] NAS Norfolk Patrol Submarines in 1943

[13] PBMs orMartin PBM Mariners were patrol bomber flying boats in operation from 1939 to 1964.

[14] An American aircraft manufacturing company in operation from 1912 to 1961. In World War II, the Martin Company made 534 Boeing B-29 Superfortresses.

[15] Jan. 10, 1943, Pearl E. Seidler

A: I didn't want to, I had misgivings. I learned it was a dangerous business and I started thinking like an adult. I didn't want to leave a widow. A lot of guys I knew were killed.

Q: Had you heard stories at this point about aviators in the Pacific?

A: Yes.

Q: Of course there was Midway in '42.

A: Yes, let me tell you, the original *Hornet*[16] went down and the Japs were mad as hell at that ship. That's the ship that Colonel Doolittle[17] and those guys flew off of. They were taught how to fly "Navy style," took those B-25s off the *Hornet* and they bombed Tokyo. A lot of them didn't make it; a lot of them made it into China and others became prisoners in Japan. They bombed the hell out of Tokyo and

[16] USS *Hornet* (CV-8) was a *Yorktown*-class aircraft carrier famous for launching the Doolittle Raiders and participating in the Battle of Midway. She was in service for a year and six days before being lost in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands.

[17] General James "Jimmy" Doolittle, USAAF (1896 –1993) was an American aviation pioneer awarded the Medal of Honor for little an aerial raid against Japan in April 1942.

it scared them but made the Japanese so mad they went tracking down the *Hornet* and sunk it at Midway.[18]

Q: As an aviator, when you heard these stories, did you want to go to the Pacific?

A: Oh yes. We were crazy, young kids. There were guys 18 years old flying. I just happened to be 21. They didn't mind lying and signing off, but I was still a young punk at 21, 22 years old. I loved dive bombing; that was my expertise. I loved those things.

Q: Did you have to wear any special apparatus to protect you from G-forces?

A: No, our special thing was the "scream." When you pulled out of a dive you had to scream and yell at the Gs that were pushed on your body to let it out. I didn't wear any special apparatus. I had a khaki shirt, khaki pants, a khaki helmet with goggles. That was it.

[18] After enjoying overwhelming victories in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines, the Japanese Imperial Forces, flush with success, decided to lure what remained of the United States Navy's Pacific Fleet into battle and finish it off in a final showdown off the tiny Midway Island. In the Battle of Midway (4 June 1942) the U.S. Navy would defeat the Japanese fleet and immediately change the tide of the war.

Q: What were you dive-bombing in?

A: SBDs.[19]

Q: So while you were flying on submarine patrols did you encounter any subs?

A: No, I never did see any. I was only there a short time and boom, I got orders.

Q: Where did you go next?

A: No, I'd rather not talk about where I went next, skip that. But after that I wound up in St. Louis. I don't know if it was punishment or what, but I went to the Naval Air Station, St. Louis, which was half of Lambert Field, the commercial airfield of St. Louis, which is still there. The Navy rented half of it.

Q: What were you doing in St. Louis?

A: Primary training. I had had only been flying for a year and they said go ahead and be a teacher. Somebody checked my records at the Bureau of Aeronautics in Washington and saw that I attended Towson State Teacher's College. That's how

[19] The Douglas SBD Dauntless was a World War II American naval scout plane and dive bomber that was manufactured by Douglas Aircraft from 1940 through 1944.

I got this assignment. I was there for five months and you never knew who your student was. You're thinking they're all students, but every now and then you slip in a checker. There was a young guy who was a Naval Aviator, and he liked the way I taught. I remember some teacher at the college said, "This is the way you've got to teach." They tell you WHAT you're going to do, WHY you're going to do it, and HOW you're doing to do it, and that's what I told this guy. I must have impressed this guy because I only lasted four months before going to New Orleans.[20] I had my wife with me then and had a car, an old beat-up Plymouth. We drove to New Orleans.

In New Orleans, I was teaching guys that already knew how to fly how to fly and teach "Navy style." Half of the time, thanks to a buddy of mine, I got into a movie project with Robert Taylor.[21] We did the flying scenes for Robert Taylor. Did you ever see that film?

Q: I did. When the plane lands the film cuts to a very suave looking Taylor getting out of the plane giving you the impression that he actually flew it.

[20] NAS New Orleans Staff Instructor, 1943.

[21] Robert Taylor, born Spangler Brugh (1911 –1969) was an American film and television actor who was one of the most popular leading men of his time. In 1944, Taylor made the naval training film, "Flight Sense."

A: Right, and it was my plane. I did the stunts and landing. My buddy didn't like stunts and I loved to stunt. I filmed three or four segments of it in New Orleans then went up to the Naval Air Station in Glenview, Illinois to finish the picture.

From there I returned to New Orleans ands moved to Atlanta and onto of all places Roanoke, Virginia. What's the Navy doing in Roanoke? Well, there are mountains there, and they hired an airline to teach us about crazy stuff with your compass. Thirty of us went there. They had a hotel owned by the Southern Railway that didn't know that slavery was over with. Wow, what treatment. One whole wing was set aside for the Navy. We went out to this dinky little airport and they taught us how to "fly blind" and how to read a compass. The mountain ore would do tricks to the compass and they would teach us how to recognize it and compensate for it. I never thought I would need it, until I got to the Pacific. There are places like Kwajalein and the Manus that are not true islands, they're atolls. They're full of iron ore that do crazy things with compasses. The atolls were big enough for Seabees to give us at least 5,000 feet. If they were smaller we didn't go there. Maybe

Marines did for purposes, but we needed at least 5,000 feet to land planes.

Q: I would like to go back a bit. When did you go through the NAS Alameda?

A: We stayed in Alameda waiting for transportation to Honolulu.[22] I got to Honolulu; I did a couple of normal VR-11 trips, maybe three trips to Johnson Island, Midway, and Kwajalein. There was a layover in Kwajalein. From Kwajalein you flew to Guam. People ask me how I got to those places, I kid and say, "I used my sexton." I don't know how the hell we got there but we did. We never got lost.

Q: So at this point was your mission to evacuate casualties from these islands?

A: No. We were still just a "Navy airline."

Q: So you're the aviation taxi, almost?

A: It's a taxi service. We're flying people, sometimes dignitaries around in the Pacific. We flew Mrs. Roosevelt

[22] NAS Honolulu VR-11, 1944. In September 1943, Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) VR-11 formed at Naval Air Station Oakland. VR-11 provided R5D service throughout the South Pacific and was eventually to become the largest VR squadron with over 700 pilots. VR-11 moved its headquarters to Honolulu in December 1943. In March 1945, VRE-1 (air evacuation squadron) was formed out of VR-11 and moved to Guam.

to Australia. We had to fit the airplane with a fur-lined toilet seat because it was aluminum and very cold. From Washington Mrs. Roosevelt flew non-stop to Alameda. From Alameda she flew on a special plane to Honolulu; from Honolulu she went to Kwajalein and from Kwjalein to Australia.

Q: Was she taking a different plane from each island, or was it the same plane?

A: That's a good question. I think it had to be the same plane because it cost a lot of money to put this toilet seat in there. We had to learn to sit on the cold aluminum. Most of the crew remained the same.

Q: Were these R4Ds[23] or R5Ds?

A: These were R5Ds[24] at this point.

Q: The Army flew the same type of planes only called them different names.

A: Yes. Ours were called NATS—Naval Air Transport. The Army had MATS—Military Air Transport. After the war they were combined.

[23] R4Ds—Navy designation for the four-engine Douglas C-47 Skytrain.
[24] R5Ds—Navy designation for the four-engine Douglas C-54 Skymaster.

Our job was to fly airplanes from one place to another. You had to tighten up your skills on flying. You had communications, which was nil, because there was radio silence. But you had to know about certain things, like we didn't know about radar yet. We had something on our planes that we didn't dare talk about called IFF.[25] We knew what it did, but didn't know anymore about it. Okinawa was about a five or six hour flight from Guam, and I had done it three times. We had no trouble finding it. The only thing is we never knew where we were going to land. Sometimes the Marines would take an area and then they lost it and you couldn't land because it was dangerous. The Seabees went halfway up this island of Okinawa and found a level spot. They'd leveled off trees and gave us 5,000 feet; that's all we needed to land and take off.

Q: The air evacuation missions began when you were on Guam. Can you talk about when you first became involved with these missions?

[25] IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe)— an identification system designed for command and control. It enables military and national interrogation systems to identify aircraft, vehicles or forces as friendly and to determine their bearing and range from the interrogator. IFF may be used by both military and civilian aircraft

A: Yes, I didn't know anything about air evacuation at the time. I had flown one once. A guy came up and asked, "Anybody here got training in PBY?"

I said, "I flew a PBY in Pensacola."

"I need you. I can't fly alone and we're going to Iwo to pick up six real bad Marines and I need a co-pilot."

I flew one trip to Iwo Jima with a guy in a PBY. There were so many ships around that beach we couldn't get in any closer than 200 or more meters. The Marines had some kind of wide skiff of a ship, and it came out zigzagging around all the ships. There were thousands in that harbor off of Iwo, and got out there and loaded six guys, latched them to the deck, tied them down with the stretchers and we took off and took them back to Guam.

Q: Did you have a Corpsman onboard?

A: Nope.

Q: How seriously wounded were these guys?

A: I don't know. They bounced around and they groaned when we landed and then a Corpsman came and took them off the

plane. I never knew what happened to them. That was the first time.

Q: When did you learn you would be flying air evacs to Okinawa?

A: While "over nighting on Guam while with VR-11 NATS, we were introduced to these brand new fancy R5D planes. It was then I learned that I had been transferred to some new Air Evac Squadron called VRE-11. These new R5Ds had been outfitted with 45 hooks for each stretcher. You've got two in the front and two in the back, and I think the guy's keaster was four inches above the other guy's body, it was that tight-four abreast and then down the deck. While flying back from Okinawa to Guam, one of us, either the plane commander or I would walk back just to see if everything was okay. When walking back you would hear moans and sometimes get a whiff of gangrene. On one occasion I walked back there, and this blonde nurse says, "Hey, I need your help." She hands me a needle and says, "I need you to stick this guy right here and just…"

"You've got to be kidding? I've never…"

"You got to do that." She says, "Look, watch how I do it."

I thought to myself, "I can't do that." It was morphine. I didn't know what it was in the moment but I shot a guy with morphine in his keaster. That was the only medical stuff I'd ever done in my life and I'll never forget that.

My job was to fly them back safely and we saw that they got off. When we landed these planes are still high off the ground. The doors weren't up front like commercials. It wasn't built for passengers. It was built for big equipment. They didn't have lifts and they had to hand down the wounded maybe five or feet from the deck of the plane to the surface of a truck that were loading them on. I only made three or four trips in total between Guam and Okinawa.

Q: What was the component of the plane?

A: Pilot, co-pilot, Corpsman and nurse. And the Corpsman and nurse took care of the wounded.

Q: Did you all group together and plan before a mission?

A: We did. We checked the weather and condition of the plane interior. We checked reports from ships of wind and that sort of stuff. The Corpsman and Nurse checked and rechecked their gear.

Q: What was your interaction with the medical component?

A: Very little. Having women on board was pretty new. We were very friendly with the Corpsmen and Nurse.

Q: Do you remember the first time you flew into Okinawa?

A: It was a little scary, but it was a job and we did our homework. We knew we could get there. The only problem we had is we never landed on a field before and we had to find it. Some guys ahead of us named it "Yonton, China." This was not a code word. It was about half way up the East side of Okinawa. One day the Marines had it and the next day the Japs had it, so we didn't go to Yonton but rather to "China." We were really getting beat up real bad until the Fleet came in and bombarded these guys day and night. The Japs wouldn't quit. They believed in death rather than quitting.

But we found this place. How? We were told to hit the southern end of Okinawa and go up the end-I guess that's

the China Sea there, and so many minutes up there start looking for some orange Seabee flags. Sure enough, we saw some orange flags while at 3,000 feet. When we dropped down to 2,000, we saw that they had carved out this nice swatch, and had put metal strip grating down. They had leveled this place off, trees and everything, and put grating down so we could have some grip for our tires when we landed, and taking off it wouldn't slip. And we had no problem with that.

Q: How long was the runway?

A: The runway was about 40 feet wide and 5,000 feet long.

Q: So you needed about 5,000 feet to take off in the R5D?

A: Yes, and to land too. Landing we were light since nobody was in the plane besides us. We weren't carrying anything but four people-two aviators and a nurse and a Corpsman. Taking off was a little different. You needed 5,000 feet. Generally in good flying, you always take off and land into the wind. There's an airfoil on your wings, and the movement of air over that creates a lower pressure on top and a higher pressure in the undersurface, which gives you the lift. The thrust of your propeller gave you air

movement, but you needed more than that sometimes. You needed wind direction. The speed of that wind and the speed of your aircraft made it safe either to land, stall, get down, or to take off. Sometimes when the wind changed you weren't landing into the wind, so you needed to land short and use some heavy brakes.

Q: Was there an evacuation hospital near the runway?

A: Nothing. The Marines brought the patients up in trucks and jeeps. There was a dirt road and they pulled right up to the side of the plane and then they handed the casualty to people on the planes. Some of them were angled to reach up there. Lots of time they were pulling stretchers aboard. [*points to photograph showing the loading of casualties onto an R5D*] See this door? That's the back of the airplane. This is the tail, this is not the front. See those doors? You're about 10 or 12 feet off the ground. Today they got lifts. Back then these guys were on a truck, and two Marines would pick up a stretcher and lift it up like this. The two on the plane would pull the stretcher aboard. And then two guys would take the stretcher and hook them into straps on the plane. [*points to photograph showing the inside of an R5D*]. The early flights had no

lifts nor built steps. After about three or four flights a safer approach was built to be able to hand down these stretchers. These photos show it. I'm telling you, these poor, beat-up Marines were being bounced around on the plane. It wasn't a beautiful sight. And you can see here, that's the back of the plane. Those doors are wide, so we had the width, but you had a lot of area there, at least 10 feet off the ground.

Q: So what are you doing when these patients are being boarded? Are you checking the plane for anything?

A: We had done that already. We checked the plane; we checked to make sure there were no leaks in the fuel tanks. Sometimes we're aboard helping them drag these guys up.

Q: How would you describe the R5D instrument panel? Was it anything different from any other plane you flew?

A: No, just more of it. You had four sets of them and a few extra instruments. It was a four engine plane and there was a set of instruments for each engine. Your eyes were trained to scan the panel and check to see if any of the needles were out of the way. You got to this point of flying that if it wasn't important you didn't do anything.

There are certain things that didn’t make any difference. Oil pressure and fuel made a difference. With fuel you’d want to know what tanks were getting low and then move over to another one, so your eye would scan. I always scanned from port to starboard, and if you caught something wrong, boom, you reacted immediately. If it wasn’t important, okay. But your eye would scan and if a needle was out of the way, you zeroed in on that one. There were four sets of instruments right across, four handles for throttles. You had to grip four of these things; that’s what gave you power. If one engine went bad you could still fly. If you had two engines go bad you could still fly. I flew with a plane with two engines. It was slow, but if you wanted to stay afloat and keep flying, you had to do something immediately with your prop because if that starts spinning wild it’s so violent that it can tear the engine out of the wing. Once that hit you’re done, the wing’s falling off, and you’re finished. You’ve got to trim/feather that propeller. It’s got to be done quickly, pull the engine, shut off the fuel so there’s no fire, and that’s done quickly. That’s what an aviator does that maybe a pilot doesn’t do, but that’s the difference in terminology.

I was in one plane where I had to shut down one of the engines, but we were able to restart it, so it was no problem, but I flew with a guy where two of them went out and we didn't have any heavy load. We flew an R5D with two engines. Now, you had to balance it because the tendency was to pull away, but there are ways to balance it, and you could still land it. It's a little hot coming in, but you had to do something to those propellers or it was going to tear your engine out and your wing apart and you were finished; then you couldn't stay up.

Q: How long would it take you to fly from Guam to Okinawa?

A: I'm going to guess by memory, at least six hours and maybe a little more; and six hours back.

Q: How would you describe a typical flight?

A: It was very boring. You put it on automatic pilot and you turn the knobs to adjust direction. If I went down and I looked with my bomb sight and I would say, "You know, those whitecaps are getting a little bigger. I think that winds have gotten stronger down there. Now, I'm guessing that if the wind is stronger at ocean level, maybe we ought to dig into the wind a degree or two."

My plane commander would say, "Okay, let's try it." And we would turn the knob. Let's say we were on the heading of 270 degrees[26] and we wanted to get into the wind a little bit, so we go to 268 or 267, and we would sit back.

Q: You had mentioned you had a story about one of your flight nurses. Can you share that?

A: I believe it was my third trip. We're flying along, maybe two hours out of Okinawa. My co-pilot and I are sitting up front talking, sitting in front of a tank full of gas smoking-very stupid. We were bored, didn't have nothing else to do. You couldn't drink when you're flying. And all of a sudden two of our fighters-these are F6Fs[27]-appear. We froze. I had forgotten the sign language. I'm trying to tell him, I can't talk, and I thought of this nurse. I went back and asked her to come up front. I said, "Please, it's an emergency. All I want you to do is sit up on this seat and look out the side window at the plane out there. I want you to drop your hair and shake your head bending over so

[26] Flying west
[27] F6Fs Grumman F6F Hellcat was a carrier-based fighter aircraft used by the U.S. Navy during World War II.

that you're sure the guy can see it." She's looking at me as if we're pulling an April Fool's gag.

"Honey, I'm serious." She got up in my seat and shook her head. Thank god she had long blond hair. This guy, acknowledges and flies away. We could have been shot down.

That was the closest call I ever had. Afterwards, I was glad to leave that squadron. But they flew a lot of missions after I left; a lot of them successful. Never lost a plane, I don't know of any aviators getting lost too bad, may have been off a degree or two. Of course, at that point in the war, Halsey's fleet was really wiping the Japs out; that was the turning point of the war.

After that assignment I was in Olathe, Kansas with two of my buddies, enjoying our promotion. When the war ended I thought about staying in the Navy.

Q: You left active duty at the close of the war?

A: Yes, I left active duty, but I still did two weeks every year for six years to maintain flight status. That was a big deal for me. I had worked so hard to get to fly, and I had flight status because I flew two weeks a year out of

Pax River,[28] and then they finally retired me. I think it was in 1959.

Q: What rank did you retire at?

A: Lieutenant Commander.

Q: The transition from war to peacetime, military life to civilian is a difficult one. What do you remember about that time?

A: I could not get accustomed to being a civilian. Nobody cared. Today it's different. They didn't care about my experiences. When I got back, I got a job through a guy I went to college with. I was working six days a week. When I was told I had to work on Memorial Day I thought back on four of my friends who were shark's bait out in the Pacific and felt that I was being told I couldn't memorialize them. I quit and walked out of that job and got another one, and quit that job because these guys, none of them were in the service.

Q: Do you think PTSD maybe played a part?

[28] Naval Air Station Patuxent River, MD

A: I think so. I couldn’t get my head straight. I told you about this cab. I just couldn’t get used to these people. Today, I have people thanking me. I got a Navy cap I wear sometimes when it’s windy and I’ll have someone say to me, “Thank you for your service.” Back then it had never happened. Other than my neighborhood buddies that I grew up with that lived through it.

Q: Was there a war parade in Baltimore for veterans?

A: No, and I had to wear my uniform because I didn’t have any civilian clothes, so it wasn’t a secret; I wasn’t hiding it or anything. Nobody gave a damn about you.

Q: As you look back upon your service, is there anything you would change?

A: Yes, I would insist that every kid in this country, whether they finished high school or don’t finish, serve two years in the military as they do in Switzerland.

Q: Well, Mr. Seidler, I really appreciate your time today. This has been a lot of fun.

A: My pleasure.