

History 21: The Podcast \_\_\_\_ – Lyle Bradford  
Episode Transcript

Moderator: Sara Given

Anoka County Historical Society  
Selection of Lyle Bradley's (LB) Oral History  
Interviewer: Dave Niles (DN)  
Date of Interview: May 22, 2003

DN: Lyle, where were you born and raised?

LB: I was born in Dubuque, Iowa and I was there until I got my, about my first half year of college at the University of Dubuque. Then WWII, of course, was underway, and I decided to join the Marine Corps. This would have been 1942, the fall of '42. Two of us were boxing and we just took a little break and we decided both were going to join the Marine Corps. We were both interested in aviation but at that time you had to be a college graduate before you got into aviation. Anyway, so we went down and signed up in the Marine Corps the next day and they said stay in school, so we both stayed in school. The next week they changed the rule, you only had to be in college to get into aviation. So I went up and talked to one of the guys that was involved in that and he said, "If you pass our tests we'll take care of the Marine Corps." So that's what got me into aviation. I came to Minneapolis the day I was 18 and went through the testing program down here and passed it. Bob Peet, the other guy, came up with me and he didn't pass because he had a very slight lisp.

DN: What kind of testing?

LB: Well, first of all, we went through the physical. You had to get through the physical exam first, but there was no problem there. I remember the doctor checking my pulse said, "Good God," he said, "I don't know if you're alive or

dead. You've got a 42 pulse." So he even called one of his buddies over, you know, and he said, "What have you been doing?" Well, I was on the college cross-country team at that time so I was in very good shape. After going through the physical then they gave us a mental test and I thought they were relatively easy so passed them. Then the rough part was the interview. After you went through all those tests they put you in a room and I remember, there were three Lt. Commanders, if I remember right, one of them medical and two of them regular. And they started asking you very embarrassing questions. They asked things about your drinking habits, about your sexual habits, all kinds of really, very personal questions. And what they tried to do, I made the mistake, I came in chewing gum and my God, you'd think I'd committed a felony just for chewing gum. So anyway, but that was the idea. And I saw guys come out of that room crying. That was their purpose, to break you down and rattle you. Anyway, I got through that okay and I guess I passed.

DN: After you passed the testing what happened?

LB: I had to report to Aberdeen, South Dakota. In Aberdeen we were in the CPT Program, Civilian Pilot Training Program. We didn't have uniforms, we just wore our regular civies. Then we started flying with civilian instructors in light planes. I remember the plane that I check out on was the Iraqa(sp?), a fore and aft plane, and the instructor I had was an alcoholic. Terrible instructor! He almost killed us twice. But anyway I got through that okay and then from there went to Iowa City for pre-flight. That's where we really got involved with the military.

They treated us wonderful, boy, the food there was just second to none. But it was a long day. We started at 5:30 in the morning, we were out doing pushups at 6 o'clock in the morning, and long before breakfast we had a good days work in. Then went all day long. We had activities all morning, then in the afternoon for the first 3 hours we had Code, we had several different classes, then in the

afternoon from 4 to 6 we had sports.

DN: Is that where they taught Marines, I mean, did they learn by books, Marine discipline?

LB: It had nothing to do with the Marines. This was all Navy, and the Marines and Navy were all together. We all went through the same program until we graduated. Then you had a choice if you wanted to go Marines, and of course I had my eye on that Corsair, I had dreams of getting into Corsairs and so that's what I wanted.

DN: So, then you graduated from pre-flight and then what?

LB: Then came up to Minneapolis and we called it E-base. I'm trying to remember what E meant, but it was called E-base. It was really the primary flight training and we had the old bi-plane, the N2S Stearman. Oh, what a wonderful airplane. I still enjoy flying that occasionally. But open cockpit. We were here in September, October, and November. It was cold in November. We had to fly with sheepskins on and face masks, and so on. That was just a delightful three months because we flew an airplane that I really loved. Then from Minneapolis, and by the way, we had a wonderful swimming pool down here in Minneapolis and we did a lot of swimming. We had swimming classes, and so on. We had a lot of course work, a lot of course work on code and a lot of things on recognition.

Oh, I'll tell you one thing on recognition. I'm a nut on birds, I do a lot of bird spotting and I run classes on birds, and so on. This happened in pre-flight in Iowa City. They called me in one time and they said, "Do you realize it's a court martial offense to cheat on tests?" I didn't know what they were talking about. I said, "I haven't been cheating on any tests." "Well," they said, "you go through these recognition courses and you get them all right all of the time."

No one does that." I didn't know what the dickens they were talking about. See, when they would flash these pictures of airplanes up on the wall for a hundredth of a second and we had to know every airplane from every country in the world that was involved with the war. They said, "We have 15 new slides here and you'd better get them all right." There were three, I don't know what they were, Lieutenant Commanders if I remember, or something like that. They flashed these on the board and I got them all right. They had my records there and were going through them, and they said, "Well, look at this guy here, here's his former biology teacher says he's so good on birds, and a former Scoutmaster said he was our Bird Merit Badge counselor at age 12,"<sup>0</sup> and so on. I'd been interested in birds ever since I was a little kid. Anyway, they finally figured that was the reason. But I was always very good on recognition. So, we had a lot of recognition, every place we went we had recognition of airplanes, we had to stay up on it.

We went to an all-Marine unit at Green Cove Springs, Florida. That's where we got involved with military frontline fighters and we were flying the F4F. That was a frontline fighter at the beginning of WW II. Terrible airplane. It was noisy, it was hot, it was dangerous. We'd take off and we'd have to roll up the landing gear by hand. On my first hop I was doing that and trying to fly, you had to take your hand off the throttle and fly it with the stick, and my sleeve got caught in the gun charger handle, took the wheel off. You're doing this on your first hop, you know, and you're not quite relaxed. So, geeze, I was all concerned here and I flew right through the tops of some trees. My instructor told me later on he just put his hands over his face and said, "This is it." But anyway I made it through. Then I had a battery explode, all kinds of things happened. I still have a few scars on my face where the canopy collapsed. That airplane, I had no love for it whatsoever. We got through that.

DN: Was that plane actually being used in combat?

LB: Yes, at that particular point it was just being phased out and the Corsair was coming in.

DN: Was the Corsair only used in the Pacific Theater?

LB: No. A matter of fact, it's interesting. The British were the first ones that used the Corsair on carriers. See, the Navy turned them down. So, the Marines got all the Corsairs. I had been reading about it so that's one of the reasons I joined the Marine Corps, because I liked it so much.

DN: Okay. So you got assigned to the Bennington. This is about when?

LB: This would be about December, early January, I guess it was, of '45. I joined Squadron 123, there were two Marine squadrons on board that carrier, and there were two Marine squadrons on, let's see, there was a total of eight squadrons, so they had one carrier in each task unit that had the Corsairs.

It was interesting, we went out as a replacement team. One of the reasons why was the Bennington had lost six pilots in a matter of two hops about a week before that. They had hit an island called Chi Chi Island that's close to Okinawa. On one dive three pilots, they picked off three airplanes. They had really heavy anti-aircraft guns. That was one of the primary fields the Japanese were using for their kamikazes. So what I did, and we all fit in the three pilots that had been killed. Guess where we went on our first mission. Right back to that island. So we were a little nervous about that because they had a very effective anti-aircraft. So we circled up there for a couple hours, just waiting and keeping an eye on the field, and so on, before we went down. We didn't lose anybody that day. Anyway, so that was my introduction to combat. Maybe this is jumping ahead a little bit, but on a mission that we had to Kumamoto, Japan. Have you been to Japan?

DN: No.

LB: Okay. Kumamoto, Japan was a huge aircraft production at Kumamoto. So they briefed us on one of the missions that we were to hit this place at 7:00 o'clock in the morning, right at the change of shifts for maximum lethality to workers and so on. We were the, see a fighter escort comes low, medium and high, and we were the middle, we were the ones that were escorting all the SV2C's, the TBM's, and so on that had heavier bombs than we did. I had rockets on my plane. But anyway, so we went in, and we were the first ones in and we had to hit that exactly at 7 o'clock.

As I came around like this, I was on the right side and I looked down, here was a locomotive coming around the mountain, the hill, and I thought, geeze, what a perfect thing for rockets. So I went down like this and I opened up and I hit the locomotive with one of the rockets and it exploded almost, I went right through the stuff, you know, through the explosion. Anyway, so then we rendezvoused after that and I saw this long Jap plane down there so I tally-hoed the plane and nobody else could see it. They gave me the lead, see I was a Second Lieutenant at that time and we had a major that was leading the division. His eyesight wasn't too good. So he turned over the lead to me so I shot this plane. As soon as I opened up it just exploded, this plane.

Anyway, now later on I was recalled to Korea, five years later and I was sitting in a railroad station in Nara, Japan, that was the city that was supposed to be the capitol ahead of Tokyo. There was a Japanese man sitting across the counter from me. He was glaring at me. I thought, well, he could be about the right age, Japanese veteran, mad, and so on. He got up out of his seat and he came around and I didn't want to get caught off balance, so I turned like this. He came up, and in perfect English, he said, "What kind of airplane do you fly?", because I had my wings on.

Anyway, this started a very good friendship. He invited me over to his house that night so we went over, we killed a bottle of sake, and his wife had fixed some wonderful rice cakes, and so on. He was a medical doctor at that time, so he took me into the schools there at Nara, on several trips, into his home and his hospital, and so on.

Anyway, the reason I jumped from the plane that I shot down, I asked him what kind of plane he flew, he was a Japanese pilot. So he got the recognition books out and he said, "There's the plane." And that was the same type of plane I had shot down, a twin engine Nick we called them. So I told him a friend of mine had shot one of those down. "Oh," he said, "where was he?" So I pointed at the map and he said, "That had to be from our squadron because we were the only ones in southern Japan that had that plane. He said, "When was it?." "Well," I said, "I can't remember exactly," He had a list of all the pilots that had been in the squadron. So then I went back and checked my logbook and the next time we were together I told him the date it was shot down. He wanted to know the name of the pilot and I said I didn't remember the name of the pilot. The last time we were together I told him I had a confession to make, I said, "I was the guy the shot down your friend." He got another bottle of sake out and we had a toast to his departed friend I had shot down. It's a strange world. That was an interesting time.

DN: What was your typical week like on the Bennington? Were you flying every day?

LB: We never flew, I don't think we ever flew more than three days a week, maybe four a couple of times. But we were gobbling up all of this ammunition and all of the fuel so fast that the ship could only stay up there, so you'd go up there three or four days and then you'd have to come back and reload and go back up. So, 50% of the time, I read every book, I think, we had on the Bennington. We had a bridge game going 24 hours a day. We had a poker game going 24 hours a day. Some guys played Acey Deucey, which I didn't like. Anyway, we

did a little singing, we had a tape recorder, not a tape recorder, a record player there. I remember we played "Surrey with the Fringe on Top" and songs like that. And I remember we listened to Tokyo Rose a couple of times, we managed to pick her up. I thought she did a great job for morale, it was sort of interesting listening to her. It was good to hear a woman's voice, you know.

I really enjoyed flying on a carrier. I did not enjoy living on a carrier. You're too stacked up on top of one another. There were 27 of us in a room that was the size of an average size latrine. We were six deep, well, you know about being on ships. There was about 12" between cots. We had to squeeze in there and you never wanted to raise your head too fast. But anyway, and then of course, this guy who was put on a pedestal so much, Halsey, decided to send us through a typhoon one time and in one fell swoop he did more damage to the fleet than the Japanese had done in a whole year.

Admiral McCain, that's John McCain's grandfather, begged him to hold off on these missions. He didn't do it. I met Admiral McCain, by the way, by accident. When I got on the Bennington, I figured I never wanted to get caught when that ship had either been hit or the lights were out, and so on. So I got myself squared away so I could find my way to the Ready Room or the topside by three different ways from our living quarters. Of course, you were hardly there anyway. So, anyway, I'd close my eyes and go down the hall and feel my way. I ducked down one of the watertight hatches and I caught my head right into this guy's head. I opened my eyes and I think he had three stars on him. Gee, Admiral. He said, "Boy, Lieutenant, you sure have a hard head."

Well, the end of the war, it was interesting, I had gone on leave after we came back from the Pacific and I had a 15 day furlough. One of the guys from the squadron off the carrier was named Harvey Jensen. Harvey Jensen was from Soldier, Iowa. He had gotten married while he was home. So he called and



said he had happened to run across the 1941 Packard and was driving back to El Centro and asked if I wanted to drive with them. So, I was from Dubuque, Iowa. So anyway I jumped on the train and went through Perry, Iowa to get to Soldier. Perry, Iowa, going through there about 6 o'clock in the evening. The horns were tooting, and so on and I couldn't figure out what was happening. Anyway, that was the end of the war. So I met Harvey out there at Soldier and the three of us jumped in the car, he and his new wife and myself, and we drove in this coupe, it was a coupe that we drove all the way to California non-stop. We'd drive down the road and we wouldn't even stop to change drivers, just keep the car going and one person would lean over and hang onto the wheel, and slip. We shouldn't have been doing that. I'm sure if we were caught we would have been in trouble.

But anyway. you get over-confident sometimes when you're dealing with driving and flying, and so on. And if you examine the accident rate and these things, the accident rate is highest between 200 and 600 hours. If you have 200 hours in your airplane you're the hottest thing that ever sat in a cockpit, you can do anything, and the accident rate just soars. After you get 600 hours in you realize there are a few things you don't know and the accident rate plateaus. When you get a couple of thousand hours it goes way down. Sort of interesting the way that works. Human beings, just like automobiles, the big rate comes in young drivers. But, they're invincible. I suppose we've all gone through it.