

JOE C. DENMAN, JR.

Interview 79c

July 19, 2006 at Lufkin City Hall, Lufkin, Texas

Angelina County Historical Commission Speaker

Patsy Colbert, Transcriber

ABSTRACT: In this speech to the Angelina County Historical Commission, Joe C. Denman, Jr. reminisces about his time as a Navy pilot during World War II. A member of the Navy football team in 1943, Mr. Denman earned his wings and trained as a Corsair pilot landing and taking off from carriers. He was never sent overseas, but stayed in the Navy after the war, graduating from Texas A&M and participating in Naval Reserve activities until the mid-1950's. Mr. Denman describes his training, his planes, and some of his experiences while in the Navy.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): This is a recording of Joe Denman addressing a meeting of the Angelina County Historical Commission on July 19, 2006. He was speaking in room 202 at the Lufkin City Hall. My name is Jonathan Gerland.

Joe Denman (hereafter JD): I'm going to start out I'm going to take you back a little in time and then we will go from there. I was born here in Lufkin. I'll date myself because when I was about 8 years old there was a little fire engine truck down below in the lobby. And I rode in the parade because my father was Mayor of Lufkin at that time. And so I date back pretty well in Lufkin and this is home actually, although I consider Diboll home too. I spent so many years in Diboll.

But let me tell you first. I'll go back now to 1941. In 1941 Lufkin had the No. 1 team in the state in football, we were rated No. 1. Unfortunately we did not know it until we played Nacogdoches, and the day before we played Nacogdoches one of our players they found was ineligible, which we had to forfeit all of our games that year. Although we won, we lost that game by one point the next day, Nov. 11th.

But anyway back in 1941 my main interest was several things, football, girls and dreams of flying. Even at that age I loved to fly. And actually I got my license when I was 17 years old by a Mr. McQueen who was teaching flying here in Lufkin at that particular time. Basically Lufkin, Angelina Hotel, Pines Theater, hwy 59 went right up through the middle of town. And the big thing in Lufkin, on Friday night we usually all hung out on the corner up there by Trevathan Drug's. Pines Theater was the big event on Sunday. We always took the girls to the show on Sunday and after the show we usually went over across the street to Bug Barrett's to get us a coke or what ever we could afford. A lot of times the girls paid for it I might add too. (laughter) Sunday movies was a big time and that happens to be where I was when I came out of the movie on December 7, 1941. I came out of the movie and they said that we had been attacked at Pearl Harbor. I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was. And a lot of the other kids didn't either I might add. But we were all very patriotic at that particular time, still am. And a lot of us wanted to go into service after we got out of high school.

My parents neither one had a college education. When I was a little boy they drilled me “get you a college education. That is something they can’t take away from you.” So I was fortunate. I was offered three scholarships to go play football, TCU, Rice and Texas A&M. I choose to go to Texas A&M. I was at Texas A&M, the draft then was 21 years old right away, and I was at Texas A&M when they passed the 18 year old draft and I came home at Thanksgiving and asked my mom and dad to let me join the service because I wanted to try to get into the Air Corps. I was thinking about the Army Air Corps. But anyway two of my buddies I played football with, Lynn Hill and Dusty Dew, some of the names may not be familiar to you but they were both Lufkinites at that time. So we decided that we, Mother and Dad gave me permission, so the three of us caught a bus and went to Dallas to join the Army Air Corps. We got up at the Army Air, post office and going in to join the Army Air Corps, and I looked and there was a big nice bulletin board there with a Navy pilot standing in front of a Corsair with Navy with navy whites with gold wings on it. And we looked at that and we decided, ‘you know the girls would like that.’ So we went in and joined the Navy. That was just kids as you well know at that age. We were all just 19 years old at that time. But anyway, the three of us joined. I might add we went into a class of 26 when we were called up. And of the 26 only six of us made pilot and out of the six, three were Lufkin boys. I always thought that spoke well of our school system at that particular time.

When I was called up to be taken in to the Navy, there was a man on the board, named Mike Bungalow. Mike Bungalow had been a coach here in Lufkin in the early ‘30’s and was coach at TCU when I was offered a scholarship. He actually was the one who offered me a scholarship and he was on the interview board. And I tell you that part because his name is going to come up later in the conversation.

So anyway, when I got called up my first school was the University of Texas. A Navy pilot had to become a navigator as well as a pilot. ‘Cause we were flying over water and you had to find a ship over water you had to be able to navigate. So our training took about 18 months where the Army’s training only took about 12 months. So we ended up going off and spending six months there and from there went to Kerrville, Texas. At Kerrville we started flying small Porterfield’s, Steersmen Packard Cruisers and anyway I was due to leave in about two weeks after finishing flight training. One day I came in from flying and the skipper had orders for me to report to him. I went to see the skipper and the skipper said, “Denman you’ve got orders to report to Dallas.” I said, “Well Skipper am I being washed out or what?” He said “No your record is good, that is not it. I don’t understand it. You are the only one of your class leaving early.” So they put me on a bus. The next morning my orders were cut to go to Dallas. I reported up there to the Navy department, went in the room and I didn’t know who was there, except this is the picture. (on the floor, thank you.) This is the picture of the five guys that were in the room. One of them was named Kay Hill, he was All American for OU. Bob Bradley, fullback, SMU. Harold Kannuson, he was the all state from San Angelo, and Grover Walker who was all state from Jacksonville Texas, and I played against him in high school and myself. I’ll pass that around, you may want to look at it. But anyway, these five guys in the room, I didn’t know who these guys were, you know, just a bunch of kids

in the room. And in a little while an officer came in and said, "Gentleman, we wish for you, the reason you've been called up early from your respected places, we would like for you to go to Georgia and play football for the Navy this fall." So we were called up to go play football for the Navy. (laughter) And I might add we had an awful good team. We only lost one game out of nine games. And it was a great experience too.

This guy Grover Walker right away became a skipper for a carrier after the Korean War and he was also in the Vietnam War, he was a skipper of a carrier and a good friend of mine, he has passed away since that time.

But anyway after Georgia I went to Memphis, Tennessee. And flew Yellow Perils, these were by-planes, two wings, open cockpit, winter cold, and I mean they put us in the flight suit, you couldn't even move around it was so cold. After that I was sent down to Corpus. Corpus we ended up in (unintelligible). That is where we took our instrument training and our badge training and I finally got my wings then in 1943. When I applied for my wings I asked for, I wanted to fly that Corsair that stood in front of that post office that day. Fortunately I went, horsepower, this particular aircraft, has, the engine in it had 2700 horsepower. I went from a 450-horsepower, AT6-SNJ, sent us down to Green Cove Springs, Florida to fly this airplane. The fuel tank here was 450 gallons, had a rubber bladder type of tank and then to show us how safe it was, they took us out on a raid, filled with gasoline and shot it with 50 caliber bullets to show you that it had sealing power and it would not explode. Armor was primarily behind you and under your seat compartment. It didn't have much in front except the gasoline tank as far as armor was concerned. Spent there 3 months, we started training and that is when I became part of my air group there. And this is a picture of part of my team. I had eight pilots, I mean seven pilots. We made up two divisions and we flew together, all together.

And by the way, I'm going to back up. I forgot to mention about Mike Bungalow. When we got to Athens, Georgia to play football with Georgia I was in the line in my skivvies that's is shorts. And going through the line, my main officer came up to me, which I recognized him, because I had seen him a couple of times. And he said "Cadet Denman, step out of the line." I said, "Yes sir." He said, "Follow me." And he took me over and introduced me to the head football coach, who was Coach Rex Enright, who was one of the top coaches of the country, of South Carolina at the time the war was involved. So anyway going back and leaving Green Cove Springs we headed to Chicago. And the people of Chicago were great to us. I mean you couldn't buy a drink or wave boys, stand for a drink. If you were in the service you could go in a bar and get you a drink or beer or whatever you wanted. But the people were great to us. They would not let you buy a drink. And in fact I spent one Christmas, not Christmas, Thanksgiving, with a family in Chicago, which was just great to me. And from Chicago we went to Glenview, which was checked out on a carrier. Now this carrier was not like you see in TV and movies or anything. This was a paddleboat. I mean it had the paddles on it. And they converted that carrier to...for us to practice landings on. And I tell you it was a postage stamp. But anyway we were trying to put this thing down, 2700 horsepower on that postage stamp and it had to qualify. We had to make eight landings and we didn't qualify at night at that time. We did later, but at that time this was all day qualifications. This aircraft, you've

probably seen them, there is a hook on the back end here. And that is what you stuck your hook when you landed, that is what caught you and stopped you. Anyway at Glenview, after Glenview we were assigned to an air group squadron and that is when the bottom picture with my air group spotted this 153. This cap I have on is the same number that I have on my new airplane. I just bought a new airplane and I was able to get that number put on my airplane.

This is me flying with the, super imposed, with the airplane I just got rid of. And this type of plane and the type of plane I'm flying, or have been flying until this new one. This is a picture of a chair landing of myself. That little man down in the corner is what they call LSO. He is the man that stood on the corner, like this was the carrier and he stood on this corner with two paddles that basically lay just like a ping-pong ball table. And he would give you signals when you were coming in. If you were slow he would do you like this. If you were high he would do you like this. When he gave you a cut he'd do like that. That is when you shut the throttle to land yourself.

I flew basically three aircrafts in the service. I flew this one, which is my favorite. I flew Hell Cats, which was a very good fighter. Also flew Bear Cat, which was another good fighter. What the Navy did after we became a air group, we were going to train for the invasion of Japan. And there is a bay in South Carolina that is very similar to Tokyo Bay. And that particular bay, we were training with a group of Marines. And we trained for about six months with them. And in the mean time we were doing anti-sub duty on convoy. We would pick up a convoy leaving port, we were at New Jersey at that particular time. We would escort till they got out to sea and joined up with their fleet. But then we would come back into town. We made a couple of drops I did, in the service. In fact recently they was on Discovery about a submarine they had discovered off of New Jersey. We went out one night, and the way they did, there was a bomber in the Navy used called TBF. That is what President Bush got shot down in. Had it full of radar and each of us pilots in Corsair's flew wing on him and when he told us to drop we dropped our bombs. We carried two 500-pound bombs each. And we, I made two drops on submarines not knowing if we got them or not. The next day they'd find debris and all but they said they may be just making like they got shot at, hit.

Going back now to the training down at South Carolina, when we got down to South Carolina we started doing night carrier landings. And I tell you, it's not a pilot I know, a Navy pilot rather, I know that made night carrier landings that didn't tell you he was literally scared to death at night. Because you think about it, you come down, like this was the carrier, you're coming down 500 feet above the carrier, you make a turn, out here you're dropping down to 200 feet, then when you drop down to 200 feet when you get here, the carrier is only 100 feet out of the water. You make a turn and due to the way this plane is built you stayed in the turn until the LSO gave you a cut. And when he gave you a cut you landed. And at night that was scary. I guarantee you, had four little lights on each side of that carrier. And I remember very well my feet being on the rudders and doing just like that when I was coming in to land. And every pilot, that did it, they said the same thing.

But anyway we finished our training with the Marines and so we decided then, they decided that we would get a new carrier, called Kearsarge CV 33. Went to New York, Christmas ship and we did a shake down on the carrier. Then they sent it on around to the Panama Canal and had us take our plane direct to San Diego. So we flew all of our planes to San Diego. Got to San Diego put them on a carrier and we were on our way to Japan. We had been out to sea two days when the atomic bomb dropped. And so after that they brought us back to San Diego, took us to shore, took our planes off and sent the carrier overseas to bring our troops home.

At that time, I'll say this: I was disappointed in a way because I had been training now for two years. And to do some job for two years and then have, the chance not to do what you've been trained to do, it was disappointing. But as I grew older I realized I was probably blessed rather than ...

After the war was over during the time I was in the service and in the war, my mother, my father passed away. I was the only means of support for my mother so I decided I would go regular Navy. I went regular Navy and flew up to Washington. The skipper gave me an airplane flight to Washington. Went to the Pentagon and first I started out and ended up with a little Wave. I don't know if any of you remember what a Wave was. She was an enlisted gal with the Navy. I ended up with a little Wave. She had made the decision for me to be in the Navy. I'll never forget her. She was real cute I might add. (laughter) Any way, they said the best way to stay in the Navy to make a career was to go in what they called ferry command. And a ferry command is where you ferry aircrafts around the country and put them in storage. I brought probably fifteen planes like this down to Houma, Louisiana. There was a big hanger at Houma, Louisiana that was left during the war. And they would take this plane and stand it up on its nose and store them in there. And they were pulled out later for the Korean War and used in the Korean War.

I stayed in that and then decided, my mother re-married and moved to Waco. So I decided I wanted to get out and go back to college and get that degree. I wanted to go back to A&M I might add. But my mother wanted me to stay at Baylor with her in Waco where she was. And that is where I met my wife. And that was, I was blessed when I met her. She is a peach of a gal and she put me through school. She finished Baylor at 19 and here I was a freshman. And I know her daddy naturally thought she was a complete idiot. Because just a couple of kids, no money. I think we had \$146 dollars between us. But that didn't matter; we were in love.

But anyway, I had a wonderful career, flew in the Navy Reserves until 1950. I had two emergencies, one weekend I went up, we flew once a month. One weekend I went up and she had went to her home, which was in the country and I went down and buzzed her. Ya'll don't know what you mean buzz. I mean, this little town, I was practically on the deck and we went across her house. And then I started back and up around Hillsboro the engine quite on me. So I maydayed Dallas and told them I was going to leave it at 3000 feet but fortunately I was able to get it started. What had happened, your supposed to, tap hangs soft when you fill them and they had looked at the gauges and the gauges were stuck on full. I ran out of gas is what it amounted to. But I had enough to get back to

Dallas. They may-dayed that I would like to make a straight in approach across the lake in case I had to put it down I could put it in the water. And I did land on the roll out after I landed it quit on me again.

One month later, I was flying a F6F, at that particular time we were practicing landing a Carrier landings at an airstrip close to Eagle Mountain Lake. On the second pass after I took off I'd already pulled my wheels up and my flaps were still down fortunately and the engine quit on it so I ditched it in the lake there. Walked out the end of the wing, water about this deep and walked out on to shore. Anyway Beth said we were close to graduation so she said, "let's quit." So we did. We quit flying for the Navy at that time.

I might add, the fellow that I mentioned to you before, Grover Walker, was in my group at Dallas, he stayed in. He ended up going to Korea and making the Navy a career.

Now I'm going to tell you a couple of stories of interest. I think were very interesting. Number one, the Navy taught me to be, they taught you two things. At dinner when you are having a meal with anybody, you never talked about politics, women or religion. That was a no-no. That was a rule they had. You don't do that in the Navy. They taught us to be a gentleman. Fortunately my mother taught me good manners. The Navy expected you as a gentleman to have good manners. And it paid off in later years I might add. But anyway, I was on a cruise down in the Bahamas 5 years ago. And so Beth and I went down one day at lunch to have lunch and so they asked us would we like a private table to sit at. We said we would like to sit, we've meet a lot of nice people. We sat down at this table and this couple came up, small talk, and finally I asked them where they were from. They were from Wyoming. "Where are you from?" I said "Texas." "Where about in Texas?" I said "Lufkin." She said, "Well my father used to be a coach in Lufkin." And I said "really." She said "yes." I said, "What was your daddy's name?" She said "Mike Bungalow." And Mike Bungalow and my dad and mother were very close friends. And it's the same one that was coaching at TCU and the same one that got me to go play football at Georgia. Anyway I told her I said, "Nancy, you are not going to believe this, so hang onto your seat. I said I knew your dad very well." Anyway her mother evidently had had a drinking problem, and had destroyed all of his scrapbooks and everything he had. So when we came back, went to Diboll and they helped me research it and get as much material as I could about Mike Bungalow. And they did a great job I might add. And I sent it to her, because she didn't have a single thing about her dad when he was in Lufkin Texas.

The next story, things happen to me on cruises I guess. This past cruise which Beth and I just came off of a couple of weeks ago, when we got on the ship, we families, 15 of us, we had all six little kids from 5 to 11 at one table next to us. The grown ups were over here. Well my back, was kinda by a rail, and there was a couple behind me and we got to visiting. He said, "Where are you from?" And I told him. I said, "Where are you" and he said Chicago. I said, "well I'll tell you something, you people in Chicago were the nicest people in the world I ever saw when I was in the service." And I told him about my experiences with the people in Chicago. The night we left we were sitting there having dinner and the maitre d' came over to the table and said "Mr. Denman, this bottle of wine

is for you.” And I said “mighty nice of you, thank you very much.” And he said “No it’s not from the ship, it’s from that gentleman over there.” Well he had moved from where I met him the first night over to another table by a window, which they had asked for. And, so I went over and I said, “Did you send that bottle of wine, for why?” He said, “Because I want you to know that Chicago people are still nice people.” (laughter) So those are two great experiences I have had on cruises with people.

I love the Navy career I had. I love my career with Temple too. And I love living in Lufkin. That is my story.

Questions: Did you finish at A&M; did you go back?

JD: Yes, sir. I went back to A&M. Beth and I went back to A&M. I was a freshman. I went back on a GI Bill, which was great. I made \$50 extra a month by going up to Dallas and flying on the weekend. And I came back; originally I thought I wanted to be an aeronautical engineer. But I ended up going back and took architecture. And I want to tell you this; I was not a good student in high school. I was a C and B type of student you know. I never studied, never took a book home. But when I went back to A&M I learned how to study the first semester because I was on probation because I was making such poor grades when I left A&M. They wouldn’t let me take but 12 hours. After the first semester they let me take 18, and then I started taking 21 hours a semester the final year. But I wanted to get out of school.

Question: Do you (unintelligible).

Yes sir sure was. Yes sir sure was. You may remember Tommy Hudgins name, remember that name. Tommy and I both went to A&M on a football scholarship. He was on basketball I take that back. Tommy didn’t go for the military part. I kinda...you know all boys in military then, it was pretty good on hazing too. Tommy didn’t go for a lot of that so he decided he would go to Rice. He left after the first week. When I kinda took it with a grain of salt, kinda enjoyed being in the service, so to speak.

Question: You took flying lessons under Mr. McQueen?

JD: Yes ma’am.

Question: Well, did Wayne Atkinson take it from him or do you know?

JD: I don’t really know, sure don’t.

Question: Course you know he was shot down in the Philippines. I guess before Pearl Harbor or during Pearl Harbor. And he was rescued I think by submarines.

JD: Yes, I think so. Oh, I did forget to tell y’all one thing. It is kind of interesting, a sideline of some of my business, career. President Bush, not the one that is president now, but the older President Bush, one day I was at that time President of Texas Forestry

Association, and he was a senator and he wanted to get a group of business people to go down and do an environmental fly over down in the Coastal Canal. He invited me and someone from the oil industry anyway, there was only about six of us. But Bush was on the aircraft. Well listening to him I knew he knew something about flying, so I asked him I said "Were you a pilot?" He said "yes." And I said "In the service?" And he said "yes." "What branch?" "Navy" "What air group were you in?" He said, "I was in BT153." He was the torpedo pilot in my air group and I didn't know it until then. (laughter) And he tried to come to some of our reunions but when he was President he just couldn't work it out. But he always would send a nice letter to it. Of my group there were 8 of us in the group and the oldest one at that particular time was named Pappy Laport. He sang with Les Morgan's Orchestra. Some of you may remember Les Morgan's Orchestra. And Pappy was, the reason we called him Pappy was because he was the oldest one of us. He was 25. (laughter) But we were just a bunch of kids. And we did kinda like she said, we thought we were all bullet proof. We didn't, I didn't think anything was going to happen to me.

I got one of these in inverted spin and they always said if you get in a vertigo spin with one of them, leave it don't try to stay with it. Try twice and if you can't get out of it, that was called a dogfight, that is what meant of inverted. See a normal spin is this way. In vertigo spin you are upside down spinning. And that's when they tell you to leave it. So I adjusted my canopy, this part here. When it did it took off about a third of my tail. And evidently that made the plane change air control on it because my nose dropped through and I pulled it out and I didn't have to bail out of it fortunately. And Chance Ball then carried me back down there, and I went to an interview with them. They did a detailed interview of what had happened, particularly about the tail and all. And about 3 months later they discovered by putting a little triangular piece in this left wing, it wasn't much longer than that, but it was triangular and it was built into the wing and it stopped the spinning cast. After that it was a great airplane, as far as combat.

We carried two "Tiny Tim" rockets that were 12-inch rockets, 13 feet 6 inches long under the belly. They had to drop down before, to miss the prop before they fired, then they'd fire, carried five, 5-inch rockets under each wing and six, 50 caliber machine guns. We were like a light cruiser when we took off. And we were so heavy we couldn't take off, we had to be shot off. The way you shot off, came up to the ramp and they hooked onto you on both wheels to a shotgun, the best way to describe it, but it was a hydraulic ramp is what it was. And the pilot, the man on the side who was the signalman, he'd do this to you. Then you revved it up, pushed it forward to full power, lock it and take your hand off of it. If you leave your hand on it, inertia would pull the prop off. So you take your hand off, put it in your lap and then salute him, and you went. And a lot of people think, boy that must have been something. It really wasn't that bad, tell you the truth, 'cause you got to flying pretty quick.

Question: How many rounds of 50 calibers did you have?

JD: I think we had 400 in each round, in each gun.

Question: 450 rounds? That was a lot of weight.

JD: Oh yes sir, yes sir, in Tiny Tims. And if we got into real trouble what we did, the first thing was jettison the Tiny Tims, try to get rid of them. And that is the reason this BF stands for Bomber Fighter. The Navy was able to eliminate one aircraft on what used to be a SBD. It's a dive-bomber, and what they did they eliminated one type of aircraft by putting us on as bomber fighters. And we were bombers first and the minute we got rid of our bombs we became fighters. That is what the BF stood for.

Question: I have a question

JD: Yes ma'am.

Question: First of all I am like the young lady that introduced you. I don't know a lot of history here in Lufkin so I have to read and being a part of this organization has really shined a light. You are to be commended for this information that you have shared.

JD: Thanks.

Question: It has really helped me, otherwise I'm constantly reading about Lufkin. I think Lufkin is a very unique town. But I want to make sure that I understood you correctly. Did I hear you say at one point that the plane was stood on its nose?

JD: Yes, what they did when we took it down to Houma, Louisiana for storage, you stored them this way it took up so much room. What they did was drain the fuel out and put oil in the engine so there wouldn't be corrosion and other reasons. And what they did was just take the aircraft like this, and they'd stand it, took the prop off and stood it up on it's nose and then they could stack more of them in the hangar.

Question: Thank you. I know the rest of y'all know about this but I don't. They mothballed the fleet, too.

JD: Yes that is right, put them in mothballs for future use. That is what they would do, just like the ship's mothballs.

Question: And then of course, they re-activated them for the war.

JD: Oh yes, when the Korean War came along they pulled every one of them out from Houma and put them on carriers.

Question: How many of them were stored there?

JD: I would say it must have been at least 200 in that hangar.

Question: Really?

JD: Uh-huh. It was a big blimp hanger is what it was. During the particular war, they had blimp hangars on the coast. And they actually did sudden duty, heavy submarine patrol off the coast, particularly in New Orleans, Houston, Corpus and the main ports.

Question: Did they have... that has not changed in recent years, they still got all sorts of stuff in storage scattered all over the country. I doubt the defense department even knows where they are.

JD: That is probably true, very true.

Question: I know as early, as late as 1980, in 1980 they still had 3 World War II (unintelligible).

JD: Lufkin area produced a lot of, well, particularly I know about pilots because I was interested in pilots. But they produced a lot of other people that were real heroes in the particular wars they have been in. One was named Hawkins, Ray Hawkins, he was from down at Zavalla. You probably know who he is. And uh...

Question: Talk about buzzing... he buzzed and he ended up in a cotton patch in Huntington. And the Navy came right away and they courted him off because apparently it was an experimental type plane.

END OF INTERVIEW