

INTERVIEW

Johnny Flowers

YEAR

2006

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Johnny Flowers

DATE: March 6, 2006

PLACE: Dodge City, Kansas

INTERVIEWER: Joyce Suellentrop

PROJECT SERIES: **Veterans Oral History Project for Gray County**

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Johnny Flowers was drafted at 18 years old while he was still a student at Cimarron High School. He received a physical and was allowed to finish high school and then report to the Navy. He was trained in Farragut, Idaho, and sent to San Francisco. There he was assigned to a new ship called the USS Coleman, a transport, which moved troops and supplies in the Pacific Theater. The most dramatic happening in his Navy career was when he was called on to steer the ship as a coxswain during a typhoon off Okinawa. After his release from service he returned to the Cimarron area and worked at several jobs until his retirement. He lives in Dodge City, Kansas, and is still in touch with some of the men he met while in the Navy.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Entering the service and training and life as a part of a Navy crew aboard ship in the Pacific during war time. His service as a coxswain during a typhoon, and his relationships with his crew mates during and after the war.

COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:

SOUND RECORDINGS: 60 minute tape

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 3/4 hours

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: none

TRANSCRIPT: 18 pages

ORAL HISTORY
Flowers, Johnny
Interview Date: March 6, 2006

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)
Interviewee: Johnny Flowers (JF)
Tape 1 of 1
Side A

JS - When the war started in 1939 or 1941 when we got in it, do you remember where you were and how you heard about it?

JF - I was in high school so it was probably on the radio.

JS - This would have been at Cimarron?

JF - Yes.

JS - Do you remember what the reaction of you, your parents or the community was?

JF - Back in those days, there wasn't that much reaction to it. Communications weren't very good in those days. To everybody it was a big surprise.

JS - Was there anyone that was opposed to the war that you knew of?

JF - Not that I knew of, no.

JS - When Pearl Harbor happened, most people remember where they were when they heard it. Do you remember?

JF - Not for sure, we had a radio so I imagine we heard it over the radio, that and by word of mouth.

JS - Did you enlist or were you drafted?

JF - I was drafted before I graduated.

JS - Before you graduated?

JF - Yes, I took my physical about March. I got to come back and go ahead and finish high school.

JS - You took your physical, where?

JF - At Kansas City.

JS - Did you go alone or were there others from the community that went?

JF - There were other people, but this one from Ingalls was the only one I knew.

JS - Do you remember who that was?

JF - Last name was Bergen. I can't remember what his first name was.

JS - What did you think of the physical and what did they do? Evidently you passed the physical.

JF - You just lined up with a whole bunch of people who took the physical at the same time.

JS - They just asked you questions?

JF - They took your heartbeat and several things like that.

JS - Did you know immediately that you passed the physical?

JF - No, they never did say anything.

JS - You rode the train back home and you graduated from high school. Why the Navy rather than the Army?

JF - I had a brother in the Navy so I chose the Navy, too.

JS - Was he already serving?

JF - Yes.

JS - Was he in the war effort overseas?

JF - Yeah, he was stationed in Okinawa.

JS - How long had he been in the service?

JF - I really don't know.

JS - You don't know why he chose the Navy. Evidently he enlisted?

JF - Yes. Well, he might have been drafted. He was married at the time, but they didn't have any children so he might have been.

JS - When you were leaving home, what did your parents say, or did they say anything?

JF - No, they didn't say much. They were old timers as far as that went.

JS - What happened those first few days? Did you go back to Kansas City to be inducted?

JF - Yeah, we rode the train back to Kansas City. I don't think we stayed in Kansas City, but we were put on another train and went to Farragut, Idaho.

JS - Could you describe what boot camp was like or what your first days were like?

JF - Different, to start with they gave us our uniforms and stuff like that. We were taken down to a barracks and we all took physicals. You can imagine about 100 to 200 all with no clothes on and taking shots.

JS - That was different. Did you know anyone there?

JF - Not a soul.

JS - So nobody from your community or even from Kansas was there?

JF - I don't know what state anyone was from in particular.

JS - How long did this camp last and what did you do in boot camp?

JF - Different types of training, mostly physical training.

JS - Because you were in the Navy, did you learn any skills you would use on the ship?

JF - No.

JS - Did you learn anything about guns and things like that?

JF - We took a little training on some heavy rifles, but that is all.

JS - About how long did that last, do you remember?

JF - I think about three months.

JS - What did you do for fun during that time?

JF - There was no such thing.

JS - Were you just on the base or did you get to go off base?

JF - One time I got to go into Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. That was in daytime. We had to be back in the evening.

JS - What was it like, that experience of being where you didn't know anyone and you were meeting young men from all over the United States?

JF - You find out there is a lot of difference in the way people were raised.

JS - What were some of your impressions?

JF - The Easterners, we never did associate much with the Easterners. They were a different type of people. Most of us were from the Midwest and we kind of hung out together.

JS - Did any of those men go with you as you, then, traveled on or did you make friends with any of them?

JF - No, never seen them since.

JS - Were you able to come home during boot camp?

JF - After I got out of boot camp, I got to come home one time. Then I had to go back up there and then we took a train to San Diego.

JS - Your parents were able to write to you? Were you able to write them or call, maybe?

JF - We didn't call, but we did write back and forth.

JS - So, what was it like? Was this the first time you had been away from home?

JF - Yeah, very far anyway. You didn't travel anyplace by yourself in those days.

JS - You went back to Idaho, got on a train and went to San Diego and what happened in San Diego?

JF - We took another train. They were breaking in a new ship that had never been used before and that was the ship I was assigned to. There were a whole bunch of us officers and all that were rookies.

JS - What was the name of the ship, do you remember?

JF - USS Coleman.

JS - When you went on this ship, because it was a new ship, what were you assigned or did you volunteer for something?

JF - No, you don't volunteer for anything.

JS - You learned that right away?

JF - That's a mistake.

JS - What were you assigned?

JF - I was just aboard ship. I just was in a bunch in the back of the ship. We just took care of all the deck work and we also transported stuff, food and different types of things like that.

JS - What do you mean by deck work?

JF - That means you set there with a little hammer and chipped the paint off the deck. We are not doing anything, but that keeps us out of trouble. We'd chip the paint off and put new paint on there. When we would get out at sea if there was nothing else to do we'd chip that off and put some more paint on.

JS - That was just to keep you occupied, do you think?

JF - Oh yeah, there was nothing else to do.

JS - What were some other people doing?

JF - That's what most of us did on there.

JS - So you were assigned to the rear part of the ship and you were chipping paint most of the time. Could you maybe describe where you slept and where you ate?

JF - We had our own compartment for that area of the ship. All of us slept there and there were probably thirty or forty of us.

JS - Where did you eat, did you have your own dining area?

JF - No, it was all in the mess hall.

JS - What do you remember about the food?

JF - Terrible, but it would keep you alive.

JS - Was it about the same as the food you got in boot camp?

JF - Pretty much so, I guess. You have cooks and they cook up a whole bunch of stuff and you just go through a chow line.

JS - Were there activities on board ship?

JF - No, just chipping paint.

JS - You're the first person I have talked to about chipping paint. Maybe it was because it was a new ship or something.

JF - You have to have something to do or you'd go crazy.

JS - Was this in harbor?

JF - No, we did that all the time we were aboard ship.

JS - What did you think the first time that you saw the ocean or got out on the ocean?

JF - I thought it was awful big.

JS - Were you seasick?

JF - Yeah, I have been seasick a few times too.

JS - Was the food like meat and vegetables and so forth?

JF - Yes, it was just typical ordinary Navy type food, beans and so on. It wasn't bad food.

JS - You were with other young men. Did you make friends with some?

JF - Yes, we still communicate. There was one from Chicago, Illinois, two from Houston, Texas, and one from Fresno, California. We have been meeting every year, there are just three of us left now. We talk to each other often.

JS - You are one of the few that has kept up with those friends that I have talked to. Were you on the same ship the entire time?

JF - We were all on the same ship together. We all came from different places and we didn't know each other then. We were on the same ship, in fact, we sat straight up and down from each other. You just live together all the time.

JS - Were you on that same ship the entire time you were in the Navy?

JF - Yes.

JS - And did you chip paint all that time?

JF - Most of it. We loaded up stuff, but when we'd go back out to sea we'd go back to chipping. There's nothing else you can do.

JS - You said it was a transport ship?

JF - An ATA, it hauls supplies and also hauls troops.

JS - Where did you haul them to?

JF - We hauled them into the Philippines, etc.

JS - When you went to these places, did you just unload? Could you get off?

JF - We got off on some islands. I spent a lot of time off in Hong Kong. We went off in Manila. That's the only times I remember going off.

JS - When you were taking the troops or the supplies did you have any contact with the troops that you were taking?

JF - A little bit, they were mostly Army personnel. I think we took some Marines once.

JS - When you were able to get off the ship what did you do?

JF - Partying, after all I was nineteen years old.

JS - What did you do when you partied?

JF - Just went to all the beer places and checked out all the girls.

JS - Were there any instructions that the Navy gave you left the ship?

JF - Stay out of the brig. If you got in serious trouble, they would pick you up.

JS - You knew how much you could do or where you could go?

JF - We could go about anyplace. There were a few places in Manila where we couldn't.

JS - What were some of your impressions of these places?

JF - Manila is a dirty town. Hong Kong was a pretty nice place.

JS - When you were there, did you eat the food?

JF - No, we didn't eat any of their food.

JS - Just drank their beer?

JF - We tried that. Some of it was pretty bad.

JS - Were you able to see any of the sights?

JF - We did in Hong Kong. In Manila we didn't have time. I think we just went once.

JS - Were you in the rear division the whole time?

JF - Yes.

JS - Were you able to know other people in other parts of the ship?

JF - One or two, but not many. We were on totally different work in different areas.

JS - How many people were on that ship, not the troops that you were transporting, but the others?

JF - I have no idea.

JS - Do you remember a particular superior officer or anything like that?

JF - No, they don't stay with us people.

JS - Did they order you around, though?

JF - On different things, but we didn't see them very often.

JS - You stayed out of trouble evidently.

JF - There wasn't much you could do aboard ship except chip paint.

JS - You weren't chipping paint when it was dark so could you listen to the radio?

JF - We didn't have radios.

JS - What about books to read?

JF - You could have books if you wanted, but we sat around and played poker most of the time.

JS - Played cards, and poker was the one you played?

JF - Black Jack or whatever.

JS - Would you have conversations and talk about a lot of things?

JF - All of us did. We lived together all the time.

JS - Did you know how the war was going?

JF - We didn't know anything about it, just where we were.

JS - So, you didn't get updates about it?

JF - No.

JS - When you wrote home or when your parents wrote you, did they mention anything about how the war was going?

JF - You couldn't mention it. If you did they would scratch that out.

JS - Your mail was censored, going out?

JF - Yes.

JS - Were you able to receive mail on a regular basis?

JF - No, I think I, maybe, got two letters from the folks in all the time I was in the Navy. They never could catch up with us.

JS - When you were able to leave the ship, did you buy any souvenirs to send home or take home?

JF - No.

JS - You just wanted to put in your time?

JF - There was no place to keep it there. We just had a little locker.

JS - Were you responsible for taking care of your own clothes or did the ship do that?

JF - We had to.

JS - That meant laundering them?

JF - Yes.

JS - Ironing them?

JF - We didn't iron anything.

JS - What were the clothes that you wore?

JF - Pair of jeans.

JS - Pair of jeans and a shirt?

JF - We wore jeans most of the time, but didn't wear a shirt in the South Pacific.

JS - Did you ever run into rough weather?

JF - Oh yes, we were off Okinawa when a typhoon hit Okinawa.

JS - What was that like?

JF - It was weird to see water going over the top of the ship.

JS - Were you scared?

JF - I was shook up, I had to go steer the ship. I was a coxswain then. I had to steer the ship most of the time. I had just gone off duty. I had been doing it for months. They got the other guy to steer so I could get a break, but they came down and got me up again. There were two of us and they had been on a long time and thought I should come up there.

JS - How did you learn how to do that? You went through training?

JF - No, it's just like steering a car.

JS - A big car. You used instruments to steer?

JF - Yeah, there was an officer that was always on duty. They would tell you where to keep it on the compass.

JS - I don't know anything about ships, but you were up?

JF - Clear up at the top.

JS - Did you have a wheel?

JF - Yeah, just like they do in the movies.

JS - That is what I was wondering, but you were protected from the elements?

JF - Yes, we were inside.

JS - When that hit the waves would go over?

JF - Clear over the top. That's how big the waves were. We'd go up like this and all you could see was white.

JS - Oh my, were you seasick then?

JF - Yeah, a little bit. I was too busy to worry about it.

JS - How long did that last?

JF - six or eight hours, I was up there about four hours and they brought the other one up and we had to switch off and on for awhile.

JS - Did they ask if you wanted to learn that or were you just told?

JF - They don't ask anything. You are told what to do.

JS - So, they chose you?

JF - Yes, I don't know why.

JS - Most of the time when you were out the weather would have been calmer than that.

JF - Oh yeah, that was the worst one they had heard of.

JS - Was there any warning or fear of enemy ships?

JF - No, not particularly. You can't see them so there's no use being afraid of something you can't see anyway.

JS - Did you have a routine or drill in case of enemy attack?

JF - No, just to man our guns. We were assigned to different gun locations. We were already assigned and knew where to go when we got down there.

JS - You were on that from '44 through '46. That's what this says. Where were you when you heard of victory in Europe in May of '45, do you remember?

JF - We were right outside of Japan someplace, just setting there. I don't know if we were going in. Everybody assumed that was what we were there for, but who knows?

JS - Then in August came the dropping of the bomb. Do you remember what some of your thoughts were?

JF - We didn't really know anything about it until quite some later. They let us go on to one of the islands.

JS - How many times do you think you crossed the ocean?

JF - At least five, I suppose. After the war was over we were sent to San Francisco. You had to have so many points to get out. We were all one point short.

JS - How did you earn points?

JF - Time, all of us in that same area were one point short. We were all about the same age. We had to go back. They loaded all new officers and we went to Hong Kong and China and hauled Chinese troops up to Russia. We'd dump them out up there and come back and get another load. We did that for about three months. Then we had our time in and they brought us back.

JS - You were eager to get back?

JF - Yeah, especially out of there.

JS - As you left the Navy, did you have any thoughts about the war effort that you had participated in and how you felt about that?

JF - No, it was different with all the things we got to see.

JS - But you were ready to get out?

JF - You are always ready to get out. It gets old after while.

JS - You came back then, to San Francisco and you were discharged or let out then?

JF - No, I had to go on a troop train to Oklahoma City. I was discharged at Oklahoma City. There, they gave me \$300 and said goodbye.

JS - You said goodbye too?

JF - I had to hitchhike home. I didn't know how to get from Oklahoma City to Dodge City or Cimarron. I didn't even know where I was.

JS - You had received wages while you were in the Navy? Were you able to save any? What would you have spent it on?

JF - Playing poker or what have you; it was just \$70 a month. It didn't take long to party that up.

JS - Did you think \$300 was a goodly sum?

JF - Oh yeah, in '46, 300 bucks lasted quite a little while, really.

JS - Looking back now, is there someone you worked with or an officer that you remember in particular and why?

JF - We five were probably together all the time, same ones that we got together with afterward.

JS - And had good talks. When you get together now what do you talk about?

JF - Depends on where in our lives we are.

JS - Looking back on that experience, you were eighteen when you went in, what do you think that experience did for you? Was it a good experience? What did you learn?

JF - I think you learned discipline to yourself. You don't have mama and daddy there to help you. You are strictly on your own. You learn how to get along with people, all different types of people. Easterners, we had never seen before. They were totally different.

JS - How would they have been different?

JF - I suppose the way they were brought up or something, same as we are. We are kind of laid back out here in this part of United States. They are totally different, in fact, some of them you can hardly understand what they are talking about.

JS - What about the people from the South?

JF - They don't bother me, in fact, that is two of the people I ran around with all the time. One was from Houston and another from Texas, too.

JS - Was it hard to take orders?

JF - I had been in sports and you had to take orders there. You took orders in school.

JS - Because your brother was in before you, did he give you any advice?

JF - No.

JS - Did you ever meet up with him?

JF - No, he was stationed in Okinawa, but we couldn't get off and those big waves started coming in and we had to leave anyway.

JS - So, the only news you would have of your brother during that time was what you would get from your parents occasionally?

JF - I doubt if I got over two letters.

JS - You really didn't know what was happening with him and he didn't know what was happening with you.

JF - No.

JS - Anything else about your experience that you think would be important?

JF - You make good friends and don't forget them.

JS - Do you think that is because you sort of grew up together?

JF - We went through a lot together. We spent over eighteen months together, but it is totally different eighteen months than you ever had in your lifetime.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Johnny Flowers (JF)

Tape 1 of 1

Side B

JS - So you hitchhiked home, did you know what you were going to do when you got home?

JF - I had no idea.

JS - What were your options? Were your family farmers?

JF - Yes.

JS - Did you think you would go into farming?

JF - No, I wasn't much of a farmer. I've done different things in my life.

JS - And you came back to Cimarron? What was it like coming home, were there other servicemen returning at the same time?

JF - Not too many, actually, there were two of them the same age I was, but both of them got killed. I don't know of any of them that were my age that came back to Cimarron.

JS - When you came home, what was it like? Did people want to know about your war experience?

JF - No, I think there were enough of them there. You might talk to somebody who had been in the service. There was a couple that were a year older than I was and I met both of them out in San Francisco. They came back here. I went to university for a year right after I got discharged.

JS - You did, on the GI Bill?

JF - I came back. I was too wound up to go to college. I came back and got a job on a farm out there and met my wife. Then I finally got a job with the state highway and worked for them for ten or fifteen years. Then I did other stuff.

JS - Did anything that you learned in the Navy help you after you got out?

JF - I think the discipline when you get older. It takes about a year to settle down more or less.

JS - Did you ever think of going elsewhere, other than Cimarron or home?

JF - No, not really, I had been other places.

JS - All the places you wanted to go. Do you think the experience changed you?

JF - I think so, yes, that was the first time I was ever out on my own. I think you learn how to take care of yourself real quick that way and how to make friends and keep track of your day. I learned that we are more alike with people from Texas and California. I made real good friends with two or three from California. I think you find that different types of people are just not alike. It seemed like we were all brought up kind of the same way. You find there are lots of things different just here in the United States.

JS - When you came home, did you have a desire to travel back to any places?

JF - No.

JS - I know it has been a lot of years, but do you think that serving in the armed forces should be a part of young people's lives?

JF - I think it would help a lot of young people, but I would hate to see the draft for that purpose.

JS - So you think it should be volunteer?

JF - Volunteer, yes.

JS - When you say that you have kept up with the four or five friends, evidently you wrote for a certain period of time and then you got together on a regular basis?

JF - We didn't write to each other. I didn't really know where they were. One of them came to see us one time at Ulysses and another was going to contact the others.

JS - It just sort of evolved?

JF - Merle lived in Chicago and he got the idea to see how many we could find and try to have a reunion. That was it, we just got started. We never did find everyone else. We wrote all over the place trying to get a list of people aboard the ship, but we couldn't.

JS - It's just like when you get together you just pick up right where you left off when you were nineteen years old?

JF - Yes, we have lots of fun.

JS - Except they don't talk about some things. These tapes will be archived and you will receive a copy of the tape. Is there anything you can think of, a specific feeling, a specific event or person that you think is interesting historically that people will want to know about? People that are historians probably will use this. Is there anything that you can think of that you would like to have preserved?

JF - Not right off hand, no.

JS - When I say Navy World War Two, does anything pop into your mind that you see a picture of?

JF - Just the ship and water.

JS - Did you learn a lot about that ship while you were on it or did you just stay in that area?

JF - You are more or less assigned to one area.

JS - Is there anything that you need to explain like about steering the ship, anything you had to really know to be careful about when you were steering that ship?

JF - No, it is really pretty simple when you find out what it is. You've got the compass up there and you just keep the needle on a certain place.

JS - When the typhoon hit, did you know it was coming?

JF - Well yes, there were six of us ships together and they had us all go in different directions. I think it was somewhere around midnight when they came down and wanted me to come up. There was a captain and experienced people, on the helm. That's when we hit the main part of it.

JS - When you traveled, did you travel in a convoy with other ships?

JF - Like I say, there were six of us that went together and I think there were two destroyers with us. I am not sure how many.

JS - The destroyers were there to protect you?

JF - That is what they were there for, yes.

JS - When the typhoon was coming and they had the six ships split up, why was that?

JF - So we wouldn't run into each other. You can't steer very well. All you could do is try to hit the waves head on. I just forgot about the compass and the captain said to just try to hit every one head on if you possibly can at all or else you will tip it over.

JS - When you hit it head on it and the water would come over it.

JF - The water would fall out from under it and down you would go.

JS - How far would that be?

JF - Probably ten or fifteen feet and it would make a heck of a racket when you hit. You hoped the ship was glued together good.

JS - Then there would be another one coming?

JF - Oh yeah, right after, one after another.

JS - You said it went for six or eight hours?

JF - Yeah, I think the worst part was about four or five hours because I was there, I think about five hours. Somewhere in there, I don't remember exactly.

JS - No people were above board, right?

JF - They were inside. Everybody was trying to hang onto their bunks.

JS - When it was over you had to reconfigure yourself with the other ships?

JF - Yes, go back. I don't know how far. They can talk to each other and get back on course.

JS - I'd say that was your most dramatic incident wouldn't you?

JF - That was definitely dramatic, all right.

JS - No wonder you didn't want to go back.

JF - There was a bunch of sick people.

JS - When you went to Wichita State did you plan to study something in particular or did you just think you needed to do something?

JF - I thought I wanted to be a math major.

JS - Then you got there and what?

JF - It was the wrong time of life for that, too much partying. I didn't learn very much.

JS - What did you think of Wichita at that time?

JF - I liked Wichita.

JS - Was your brother coming home at the same time as you were?

JF - I think he came home before I did.

JS - Did he fight?

JF - I don't really know what he did. He was stationed in Okinawa and they had a Navy port there.

JS - So you and he didn't talk about the war much?

JF - Not much, no.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Johnny Flowers (JF)

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END