

INTERVIEW

Ralph Monical

YEAR

2006

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Ralph Monical

DATE: June 22, 2006

PLACE: Larned, Kansas

INTERVIEWER: Joyce Suellentrop

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

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Ralph went to Wichita to learn a trade and then to the Navy. He trained at Great Lakes and was assigned to the carrier, New Yorktown to help repair planes that had been damaged in battle in the South Pacific. He married a Cimarron girl while on leave at home. He spent some time in Pearl Harbor where he met up with his brother Russ and an acquaintance from Cimarron both of whom were in the Navy also. Ralph received seven battle ribbons and later returned to Cimarron and made much of his life there. He now lives in Larned, Kansas, in retirement. Eight of the nine children in his family were in the service.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Entering the service and training and life as a part of a crew that repaired planes on a carrier. His marriage in wartime and his experience in the South Pacific and discussion of his three brothers and four sisters who were in the service.

COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:

SOUND RECORDINGS: 60 minute tape

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 1 hour

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: none

TRANSCRIPT: 15 pages

ORAL HISTORY
Monical, Ralph
Interview Date: June 22, 2006

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Ralph Monical (RM)

Tape 1 of 1

Side A

JS - The first question that we normally ask is: Do you remember where you were the day that Pearl Harbor was bombed?

RM - Yes, I was in Wichita going to a metal specialist school and working at a gas station. I was at the gas station when I heard it on the radio.

JS - Were you there at that school so you could be employed at Boeing?

RM - It was so I could, at least have something to do.

JS - Had you graduated from high school?

RM - Yes.

JS - Were there other young men from the Cimarron area that were down there with you?

RM - Some were down there, but they weren't in the same thing I was. They were trying to get employed in the aviation factories. One took off and started going to Emporia to school. That didn't last long. He got drafted. I was trying to get a skill of some kind as I was raised on a farm. As soon as I got through that school, I was hired to go into a factory-type thing that manufactured airplane wing-tips and ailerons. That is what we did. I did that for awhile and it wasn't getting me anywhere so I just quit and joined the Navy.

JS - At the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, did it enter your mind that you would probably either join or be drafted?

RM - We knew that before then. Too much stuff was going on. I already had two brothers in the Navy then. Russ was on a submarine and Bill was a boson on a fleet tanker.

JS - You knew you wanted to go into the Navy?

RM - I knew I wanted to go into the Navy and my older brother was the only one that was drafted. That was a year and a half before Pearl Harbor. When they first started drafting he was on the second call. He was a single man and there

was no reason why he shouldn't have service. He was the only one of the boys that was in the Army. The rest of us were in the Navy.

JS - You had four of you that were in the service?

RM - There were eight of us?

JS - Eight brothers?

RM - No, I had three sisters that were all RNs and they went into nursing service. The older girl couldn't go into a wartime thing because she had one ear that was hurt when she was a kid. They joined her up and she stayed in a job in San Francisco for the length of the war. The sister just older than her was Alice. She was shipped to England to a receiving hospital. The sister just older than I was, Marge, was sent up to Iowa to work in a maternity ward.

JS - Was your whole family in the war effort then?

RM - I had a brother and sister, who were still in high school, but my brother did get in the Navy and the war was over about seven months after he went in. My younger sister was sixteen years old at that time.

JS - I had no idea that your entire family was in service. What did your parents think?

RM - They probably thought the grocery bill went down. There wasn't much that they could do. It was something we had to do. We were always taught that it was better to make a choice than to have something forced on you. That worked with all of us.

JS - Do you know why your older brothers chose the Navy?

RM - At that time when Russ went into the Navy, he had always thought a lot about submarines and he was on the Finback. He was off the Finback in the hospital in Honolulu at Pearl Harbor when George Bush got shot down and the Finback picked him up out of the water. We always gave Russ a lot of trouble about that. If they had just let George swim for awhile we wouldn't have that idiot in the White House.

JS - You then, enlisted and where did you go for basic training?

RM - I went just north of Chicago at Great Lakes.

JS - Could you talk about basic training a little bit?

pointed that window at; he could take a picture of it. It worked and he sold it. He got a lot of good pictures and he got a reputation for them.

JS - You mentioned the F6 plane. Was there only one type of plane that you had?

RM - We had a fighter plane. We had the F4 before the F6 came in. There was another one that the Marines used. It was a good plane but the Navy itself was mainly Grumman. We had Grumman planes all the time. There were torpedo planes, fighters and dive bombers.

JS - How many planes would be on the ship?

RM - Usable planes would total about ninety something. That would be the three groups; torpedo planes, fighters and dive bombers that were FP2Cs. It was a little two-place plane, the fighter was a single plane and the torpedo plane had three guys on it. Mainly we had fighter planes.

JS - Did you know the pilots? Were they the same pilots most of the time?

RM - They were assigned planes and we sometimes had to shift them to another plane and sometimes hung up and we had one unused plane on the hanger deck. Sometimes we had more and if you needed the space you could just push them over the side. We just had no place to put them. We didn't have to do that too often. One pilot was landing an FP2C and he didn't think he was hooked on the line so he tried to fly off of it and he went over the barrier and came right back down near the finish. It caused a fire and burned up five planes and killed three guys. Anytime you were taking planes on you had to have business up there to be up there. They had some smaller ships made into temporary aircraft carriers and one was sunk and we had to take those planes on. It was the first time they had been on a big carrier and that one didn't think he was hooked on.

JS - That didn't happen very often?

RM - No.

JS - When you were on that ship and you knew you were going to the Pacific Theater, what were your thoughts as you left the United States for the first time?

RM - I don't know if there was anything in particular. There is always the thought of not coming back, but what are you going to do about that? You could come back and live in Cimarron and somebody might run over you with a wheat truck.

JS - Because your brothers had gone in before you, did they say to do this or don't do that?

RM - No, nobody tried to lay anything on you. My one brother, Russ was in the submarines and got along good. Bob was the only one of the boys that was in the Army and my three sisters were in the Army. I had two younger brothers in the Navy and an older brother.

JS - Your ship was in a convoy with other ships going to the Pacific?

RM - Hardly a convoy, it would be a group. Carriers were so big they had to have extra support to take on extra fuel and things like that. Our airplane fuel was a little bit touchy. You had to be awful careful when you were shipping fuel off of a tanker. There would always be a tanker out in the ocean somewhere for us to get loaded up again. You'd have to get up on your ship and fuel off the tanker and most of the time they would have mail on it and it would be kind of stale.

JS - It had several different addresses?

RM - When I was at Yorktown, Mom mailed that to me and I came home and was on leave. I went up to Atlantic City, New Jersey, and then came back to Cimarron and back to Atlantic City. I got it the second time I went up to Atlantic City.

JS - Looks like the final address might be in Oklahoma on here.

RM - I was there when I was home on leave. I got engaged to a girl and I got time off from Atlantic City, New Jersey, to come home to get married. The Navy was real good about that. I already had my time.

JS - You were married when you went overseas?

RM - No. I was married during the war.

JS - You got a leave to come home from the Pacific?

RM - No. They changed my air group completely. I got off at some islands in Kwajalein. I went back up to Pearl Harbor on a merchant vessel and came back to San Francisco. When I got into San Francisco, I had two sisters in the Army and we went out and had dinner. It was nice to go out and eat with a couple of captains. From there, I came on home on the train. I was supposed to report back to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where my squadron was going to. I got to messing around and got married, and took that leave. When I went back up they were gone and I had to take something else. I ended up in Norman, Oklahoma, for repair of bulletproof gas tanks which you would never do. We had to learn to patch Plexiglas and we didn't do that either. If it went out we put something new on it and get the plane back were it was usable.

JS - Was Plexiglas the windshield?

RM - Yes, and all the way around like side windows. Anything you could see through was Plexiglas. There was no natural glass at all, not even lens in glasses or anything, nothing to shatter. After I got out of there, the other group had moved down to Pensacola. I was kind of glad I didn't go down there anyway. I spent the winter in Minneapolis at a Naval Station up there. My wife could go with me up there. Then we moved back to San Diego and I was on active duty again. I worked on Fleet Squadron Fourteen. It was PV02s sea planes, just on maintenance and different things. It was completely different from aboard ship. There you could, in the middle of the afternoon, say you would finish it tomorrow and go on home.

JS - How long were you in the Pacific?

RM - It was about fourteen months, I believe.

JS - It was over a year. Could you just describe the routine or the duties or your impressions?

RM - The air group is not in the same command as the people who manage the ships. If we had a combat air attack or something like that I had a set of four forty-millimeters and to run that, I had seven guys. I had five up on deck to run the guns. We were all out of the officers' mess down there. Most of them were from Chicago and they would just do anything to get to stay up there. They didn't like to stay down below in case we were hit with a torpedo because they were below water about twenty feet. It would be pretty tough swimming up. We got along real good with that.

JS - The planes that were on your ship, where were they flying to?

RM - Different little islands all over the Pacific after the Japanese or anything at all were there. Every island had Japanese on it. We got in at Truk twice. That was a big base for Japanese. Sometimes according to MacArthur we helped with the attack of it. One time we spent three days of it and MacArthur announced over the radio that it was the Air Force with help from the Navy.

JS - Was the ship ever fired upon or in danger?

RM -Yeah, I had a piece that fell off a plane that went over and we knocked some stuff off it onto the flight deck. We grabbed that and took souvenirs off of it. You couldn't do it right then. My squad was pretty busy. I had the squad on twenty-millimeters.

JS - Even though you were trained in repair, you had other duties?

RM - Yes, aboard ship you were assigned to something else. I was in the fire department and in combat I had my gunnery there. I had my foot hurt and couldn't get around very fast so I was in charge of oxygen tanks. The fighter planes had one on there and each portion of the TVS had an oxygen tank and the same thing on the SBDs. It keeps you kind of busy but we had a lot of watch stuff.

JS - The oxygen tanks would be when they were flying up high?

RM - Yes, they get high. You can get up pretty high but the ability to think and defend yourself is pretty well gone. You just don't notice things.

JS - Were you at that time, receiving mail from home?

RM - We had a fleet order come along to refuel us and we would get mail bags. It would take about three days after they got aboard to get everything sorted out for everybody.

JS - Did you know how the rest of the war was going, for instance the war in Europe?

RM - We were sort of up on things. We had different radios and we got to listen to the Japanese girl. We got a lot of garbage on that. I was pretty well up on it, not to little things, but on major things. You could tune in on that Japanese girl who was telling us their Army and aircraft carriers were better.

JS - Was that Tokyo Rose?

RM - Yeah, that was the one. It has been a year or two.

JS - Were you there or were you back here when the war ended in Europe?

RM - I got back to the States the day of the invasion. When I got back to the States I couldn't get my folks on the phone. They were away because my uncle had died. I was coming back on the train and VE was announced. That was on the tail end of it.

JS - That would have been May fifth?

RM - I was coming home and eventually going to Atlantic City, New Jersey. I had a five-day pass so I came home.

JS - In August would have been the last of the war in Japan.

RM - We got out pretty fast after that. I got shipped to Saint Louis and was there five days and was coming home.

JS - Some of the men said they had so many points. Was it that way with you?

RM - As long as you were not in combat anytime, then it didn't make any difference how many marks you had. We had the same thing. They used to have ribbons and guys that were on the Yorktown the same time as me, we had seven stars on it. One star is enough to get shot.

JS - You got a star each time?

RM - They said which battle and each battle had a star.

JS - That would earn you points?

RM - It earned points and when they finally got to putting battle ribbons on and everything they had a star. After so many silver stars you had gold. I had that stuff but somehow they disappeared.

JS - After basic training when you were stationed in the other spots and you went overseas, is there a particular memory you had? Maybe of a particular person, a fellow soldier, an officer or an event that when you think of your experience, you think of that?

RM - Not really, if you had any problems you could always go to your personnel officer and they would try to work out something. You had to scream awful loud to get sent back.

JS - Were there other people that you met from Kansas? Did you ever hook up with your brothers anywhere?

RM - Russ and I got together in Pearl Harbor an awful lot. Every time we would go in there, I could find out real easily if his sub was in there. They had a whole regular place for the subs and they would raise them out of the water to see if they were all right. It was pretty close to where the carriers were. We would tie up at Ford Island in the middle of Pearl Harbor. Submarines were a little over a quarter of a mile from there. I could find out if I went over to their office if his submarine was in. He was on the Finback.

JS - Are you saying "a finback" or "the Finback"?

RM - That was the name of the sub. Submarines have a fish name.

JS - I didn't know that.

RM - There was a Tuna and all those names. There might have been a Minnow but it would be small.

JS - It would be very small or a Whale of a very large one. Were there others from Cimarron that you encountered while you were in?

RM - A neighbor that we had out north of Cimarron was Myron Benton and he was in the Navy and he was on patrol boats. Their harbor was across the island at Pearl Harbor. I managed to see him a couple of times. We had a place at Ki Wy Chong that was a bar where you could leave messages for somebody. The whole wall was covered with notes and you couldn't find them, there were so many.

JS - As you were progressing along. Was it hard to take orders for you?

RM - No. If you had a reason or something was wrong, you could always stop and say, "No." If they would listen and you could convince them that there was a real problem, they would change it real quick.

JS - Were you ever homesick?

RM - Yeah, but it didn't do any good. My first birthday in the Navy, I was in Pearl Harbor but I thought, "What the heck?" That afternoon I had seen Myron Benton from across the island.

JS - What about holidays like Christmas or Thanksgiving? Were there any celebrations?

RM - There wasn't such a thing. On all the bases they always had church, but like when you were going into combat there were a lot of people in church.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Ralph Monical (RM)

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Side B

JS - What about the food?

RM - You couldn't complain about it. It wouldn't do you any good. You didn't have to eat it all. On the whole, it was fine, but if you haven't seen a chicken, don't eat a fried egg. If you haven't seen a cow, don't drink fresh milk. They had powdered milk they mixed up. It didn't even make a good mess.

JS -When you were docked, you lived on the ship?

RM - Yes, unless when we came back from the South Atlantic and were at Trinidad, they had to do some work on the ship. Our group was sent to a Naval

Air Station. They had a big barracks there that we stayed in. It was real nice. A barracks that had a bunch of girls in it was just across from us.

JS - That was nice.

RM - That was probably really nice. It was different. We could hardly recognize them.

JS - On ship you just had a bunk?

RM - You had a sea bag. There was a small bag you called a ditty bag that you had for shaving equipment and stuff like that. The other bag had your clothes in it and you had to roll your clothes to get them all in there. That was it. There were some places that had cabinets, but the sea bags were on racks. You could put a lock on them if you wanted, but it didn't do any good. Anyone could cut the canvas and they were open anyway. Anything private, forget it.

JS - Was that hard? Of course, you came from a large family, but in the service you were in barracks in training with men from all over the United States. Was that difficult?

RM - Oh no, you just were kind of careful who you were close with. For no good reason, someone you thought was a rat was a real good person. Pretty hard to judge them, they were all scared. Not always scared but kind of tense about what you might get into. It didn't do you much good to be scared. You couldn't even think well if you were scared. All you could do was try to stay on top of it and do a good job. Sometimes do it a darned sight faster than if you were scared.

JS - Do you remember how much money you earned a month?

RM - It was sixteen dollars when I first started out. They took all that, but seventeen cents for different things that were given to you. After that they had payday and paid cash money all the time. That depended on what your rating was. Clerk is seaman three and it goes on up depending on your trade like a metal smith, etc. You got more for that.

JS - What did you have to spend money on?

RM - Things like ice cream cones that are nothing like we have now. A lot of times in our meals we would get something like that, but they couldn't do it very often. There were a lot of people to feed there. It was probably like schools are now, there wasn't anything frilly or expensive, but they take care of you.

JS - All your clothing and everything like that?

RM - You would take care of them yourself. That is why when I had that group up there, they all worked. It was an officers' quarters and I was in the laundry and some were cooks. I always got my clothes washed, they took care of them. You had to be good to them too. Some would be down below loading ammunition on the elevator and others up on top with the magazines we had up there. They just did anything to stay up on top.

JS - The danger of being torpedoed was always there?

RM - Oh yes, from a submarine or a plane, we had a plane that tried to drop a torpedo on us. It hung up on the bottom of the plane and they flew right across the top of us and we had every gun on the ship shooting at it. We destroyed the plane and the torpedo blew up in the water after that. I got a little piece of that plane but I don't know where it is. My sister, I believe, has it. It is just a little piece of metal, triangular.

JS - When there was a danger like that, was there some kind of alarm that you would know to get your men to the guns?

RM - Your rack around where the guns were would let you get behind that and it would stop fifty calibers but it wouldn't stop anything bigger than that. Japanese didn't use fifty calibers. That was pretty good size. We used it all the time.

JS - The seven stars that your unit had are because seven times you were engaged in combat?

RM - Yes.

JS - I asked if there was a particular story or memory from that time and you told a few things. When you look back at that experience now, do you think that that changed you? When you reflect on it what do you think about it?

RM - I don't know how to answer that. Every experience that you got into, you got a little bit of education. If you didn't you were going to get whacked sometime. So many people were in the military that weren't in combat actually. They are still performing something that is very needed, like my three sisters who are nurses. They weren't taking risks, but every job is not the same.

JS - One thing I have learned that no matter what you were doing it was an important contribution to the whole effort. Everything was working together and if something was not there, it wouldn't have worked.

RM - One of the best friends I had was back at Pearl Harbor. Eleanor Roosevelt was coming to town. We went into town and we had to have our dress blues on. Dress blues are not good in the tropics, but the admiral thought that would be good to do that. She thanked us all for putting those on and said "As soon as

you get through here, go get your others on." She gave a real fine speech up there about the way things were and the way we hoped things were going to be.

JS - Of course Pearl Harbor is now a National Monument but what was it like when you were there?

RM - You could see all the ships that were sunk. A kid from Cimarron was on one of the ships and he is still there. The ship was never raised.

JS - Is that the Arizona?

RM - Yes.

JS - I guess if you needed any reminders about the Japanese, it was right there.

RM - Oh yes, everything was beat up pretty well. We read and heard a lot of stuff and there was no proof for it except it had to be what they were talking about.

JS - In service like that, do you find out a lot of things by rumor or scuttlebutt, the talk among men?

RM - Normally you can, like if they try to keep secret where we are going. Whenever we started out on a cruise they tried to keep it secret for so long a time, why I don't know. Well, if we knew before we were leaving somebody tells somebody ashore and they tell Charlie and he tells someone. Then they all know about it. They can talk about anything they want to after they get out there because there is no one to hear them.

JS - Some men said they would get the Stars and Stripes. Was that mainly in Europe or did you get to read that newspaper, too?

RM - That was Army, but we had a little paper we printed aboard ship. I had three or four of them. My youngest sister had them and she died here awhile back. She was the only one in the family that didn't go into the service.

JS - That is remarkable. Did you know at the time how remarkable it was to have all those people in the service?

RM - It was, but nobody paid much attention because we were all individuals. We were a group but we were individuals and nobody thought to question anybody about what they were doing.

JS - Was there a time after the war when you were all home and you would sit around and exchange stories?

RM - Yeah, but mostly that was water under the bridge. Everybody wanted to forget it.

JS - I can't remember hearing of a family where that many members were in the service.

RM - Alice was a captain in the nurses. Bob was a master-sergeant in the Army. Russ was a (?) first class on the Finback. Marge was a lieutenant in Ames, Iowa. I was on the Yorktown. Bill was on a freight-tanker in the Atlantic and he got in on the top side of Africa over there and they got shook up. Then, Don got in after the war was practically over. He got to San Diego and was messing around there. The only thing he got in on was he had an officer that he had to take over to an island (Catalina) over there. That was the most danger he ever did see.

JS - I will bet you all told him about that.

RM - He couldn't help it. They quit school a month and a half early.

JS - Did your sisters receive the nurses training before they went in?

RM - They were always nurses. The Catholic Church was teaching nursing in Dodge City and they all three got their nursing license. The younger one, Marge was a lieutenant. Catherine was, I forget what, but Alice who went to England had the best thing. It was the highest rank, but she didn't try to lord it over the others because the other sisters were older than she was. I had one sister that wasn't in the service.

JS - Are any of your sisters that were in the service still living?

RM - Yes, Marge is still alive. She is in Des Moines. We were up there five months ago. My younger sister from California was there, but about two weeks later she died.

JS - There are not many of you left?

RM - Just Marge and I and my youngest brother, Don.

JS - When the war ended you were here in the United States and you were very quickly out?

RM - In fact, I already had orders to go to someplace south of Saint Louis to be discharged down there.

JS - Did you know what you were going to do when you got out?

RM - I knew I was going to have to do something because I had a pregnant wife.

JS - Where was she, around Cimarron while you were gone?

RM - She went with me some of the time when I was in Atlantic City. She was up there two weeks and they sent her home and I went to Minneapolis. The reason I went there was that over at Hutchinson they had some Navy Aircraft going and I thought I might be able to get into there. I had to go through training on a PDY4. I was up there for six weeks. That was the Christmas after we got married and I was shipped to California. I had her come out there about three weeks after I got there. We lived in San Diego then.

JS - You said earlier that when you went into the Navy you had experience with flying?

RM - No, I wanted to. I got to put in a little flight time in the Navy but not as a pilot. I was kind of headed into it and as soon as I got out I learned to fly and I got an airplane.

JS - When you got out, I know there was the GI bill available and I know the government also gave training. Did you take advantage of that once you got out?

RM - Yeah, in pilot training, but it got to where I could do better myself than with them telling me what to do so I quit that. It did take care of some of the expense of hiring an instructor. It didn't take very long till I got my license. I had to give all that up because I had a heart attack and couldn't fly. I had a good aerobatic airplane and did a few air shows with it. I used to terrify the people of Cimarron.

JS - That is probably what they remember you for. You came back to Cimarron and you lived in Cimarron?

RM - Yes.

JS - When you came home, there were still some wartime conditions. Things were rationed during the war and it wasn't easy to get cars and tires. When you came home, was that easy or not?

RM - It was eased up quite a bit. When I came home on leave earlier, Russ was there and everything was so tight. I wanted to go down and see my grandmother in Severy, Kansas. Dad said I would have to get some gas stamps and he didn't know about the one tire on the car. I went in and talked to old Mr. Leatherwood about what I wanted to do. He kind of hemmed and hawed around and didn't know about that. I said, "I brought home some twelve-gauge shotgun shells. I have a couple of boxes of them." He said he could fix me up. He was a hunter. I got enough for fuel and a tire on the car. My grandmother wanted to see some

of the kids and nobody had been able to get down there. She wanted somebody to get down there and dad wanted me to give it a try.

JS - Did your parents ever talk about their wartime experience when you all were gone?

RM - Not much, I had a pretty good Ford car and when I got back, Dad had sold it. Someone had to have a car.

JS - Is there anything else that you can think of. This will be transcribed along with all the others, and people wanting to know more about World War Two will be reading them. Is there anything that I haven't touched on that you think might be important for people to know about that period?

RM - It would be hard to say. If a person gets out and gets on his feet and does not have a big hatred for everything, it is hard to do when they take that much out of your life.

JS - It is a good point. It was three or four years out of your life.

RM - You get to reflecting back about what you would have done. You think if you could just have done something differently. "If" is an awful big word.

JS - They say half of life is "if".

RM - We did have a family get together and all of us wore or uniforms. When my folks had their fiftieth anniversary we did that again. We had a picture; it was in the basement of the house in Cimarron. Finally my younger sister took it. I don't know where it is now.

JS - It would be a nice photograph for the community of Cimarron to have.

RM - We can get a copy, I am sure. We moved down here and this house is so much smaller that I still have a lot of stuff in the garage that I need to take care of.

JS - I will make a note about that picture. That would be a nice thing for them to have with the things they are putting in the courthouse.

RM - It would. My brother, Don has it, I think. He is now the youngest one in my family since my sister died. I could get a copy of it.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Ralph Monical (RM)

Tape 1 of 1

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