

Interviewee: Adams, Joseph
Interviewer: Jack Sigler
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Sigler: Good afternoon, Mr. Adams. You understand that this interview is being recorded?

Adams: Yes.

Sigler: Let's start with where you were before you joined the service and how you got in, and we'll go from there.

Adams: Okay. I graduated from high school in 1939 and worked for a year for a grocery chain, and joined the Navy in November of 1940.

Sigler: You were in the Northwest then? Were you in Washington then?

Adams: No, I was in Washington when the war started, but I joined then Navy in November 1940. Went through boot camp and technical training in Jacksonville, Florida, and became a aviation machinist. That was my duties until I went to flight school in 1942.

Sigler: Had you had any previous experience as a machinist?

Adams: No, this was taught to me in a school. It was a Navy school in Jacksonville, Florida.

Sigler: And how long were you there?

Adams: Well, I was there for sixteen weeks. Then I was transferred to Miami Naval Air Station, which at that time was Opa-Locka. I stayed there for a few months and then was transferred to Washington at the Naval Air Station in Anacostia. At that time, Anacostia was the flight test station for the Navy. That was before Patuxent River ever was commissioned. So, the development of the aircraft was tested and they were desperate to get something that could compete with the Japanese. So it was just a rat race trying to improve our equipment. It was really pathetic to see what condition we were in. There was a fear that there would be sabotage and even possibly attacks, so one of the duties that I had was to stand watch on the runways during that period.

Sigler: Where was the Naval Air Station in Anacostia? I lived much of my life in Washington.

Adams: It's just across the river from . . . remember the old airport there, the civilian airport?

Sigler: National Airport, right.

Adams: Yeah. It's just east of there and across the Anacostia River. And there was also an army field over there.

Sigler: Right, Bolling Air Force Base.

Adams: Right. And they were right next to each other.

Sigler: Oh okay, then I know where it is, because I served in Bolling briefly.

Adams: One of the things that had to be guarded against there was flooding. And there were dikes along the river to protect Bolling and Anacostia. They opened up flight training as soon as the war started to high school graduates. Before that time, you more or less had to have some college to go to flight school, but they began taking high school grads. So I applied for flight school and started in flight school in the latter part of 1942.

Sigler: Where did they send you for flight school?

Adams: I went through pre-flight at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. From there, of course, we went to basic training, which in my case was in Dallas – actually a place called Grand Prairie – but it's in the Dallas area. And from there I went to Pensacola to an outlying field and flew from several fields in Pensacola before I actually finished flight school. After getting my wings, I was sent to Vero Beach, Florida, for advanced training in dive bombers.

Sigler: What aircraft did you specialize in?

Adams: The SBD Dauntless, which was really one of the planes that enabled us to, I think, win the war, actually. A lot of other planes go a lot more publicity, but the SBDs were the ones that sunk the Japanese fleet, really, over a period of time. It was replaced by an aircraft called an SB2C, which was built by Curtis and it never was quite suitable for the job that it was supposed to do. But anyway, it replaced the SBD, and all the new squadrons were being equipped with that particular aircraft. Then from advanced training, I went to a squadron in Wildwood, New Jersey, which was a dive bombing squadron and a part of Air Group 81. We trained there and also trained in the Hawaiian Islands on Maui, at an air station at Paunnee which nobody knows where that is today. But it was an important port at that time.

Sigler: Now, in your training, had you qualified yet as a carrier pilot?

Adams: Yeah, we did that when we're at Wildwood. Well, no. Actually, after we finished advanced training in Vero Beach, we went to the Great Lakes and they had a carrier up there which everybody had to qualify on. We qualified in the SBD there. We made six landings and that was supposed to qualify us for carrier landings. That went very well, except that it was in the dead of winter [laughs] – it was so cursed cold.

Sigler: Chicago is a very cold place.

Adams: Oh man, is it ever! Let's see now ... we're back at Wildwood, New Jersey. And what happened is that each squadron was training in several separate places. And then eventually we got together and formed an Air Group, which consisted of a fighter squadron, a dive bomber squadron, and a torpedo squadron.

Sigler: And your squadron number was what?

Adams: 81. It was called VB-81, which would be Bombing Squadron 81. Fighters would be VF-81. We got together at Otis Field in Massachusetts, the three squadrons, to form the group. Then we practiced a bit there together, and then we shipped to Paunnee for the final training in the Hawaiian Islands. The war had progressed quite a way at that time and they were getting a backlog of planes and air groups, so they were beginning to rotate them on the carriers, and we replaced an air group which was Air Group 14 on the *Wasp*.

Sigler: Is this the original *Wasp* or the second?

Adams: Second one. And I think the first one was sunk. We were transferred from the Hawaiian Islands to Guam on a jeep carrier. And of course the aircraft was already out there. And then we were transferred from there to Ulithi lagoon, which was anchorage for the fleet at that time. And started operations from . . .

Sigler: That was on Guam?

Adams: Mog Mog Island. Mog Mog was a little island that they use for recreation. There was really no natives there, to my knowledge. But the ships would send liberty boats over to Mog Mog to drink beer and cook hotdogs and what have you. It was kind of a recreation spot. I could be wrong, but I vaguely remember standing out on the deck and counting about a hundred ships in that place. It was a tremendous force. They pulled anchor and they went out and participated in the battle for the Philippines. But by the time we got there, practically everything had been bombed out. We were bombing ships that were already sitting on the bottom and we didn't know it. [laughs] But anyway, that was the time when the kamikazes started to get active and they were afraid, and rightly so, that they were going to get worse all the time. So I was only on that ship about two months and they decided they wanted to replace part of our outfit with a fighter group. So I was one of the ones that was transferred from the ship. We went back to Guam and we were going to check out in fighters at Eniwetok ... they had a

strip there ... to be replacements in case they needed us. Well, it just so happened they didn't recall us to the fleet. We went to Barber's Point in Hawaiian Islands and continued to fly there. And at that time they were forming an air/sea rescue unit and it was to be spotted all around the Hawaiian Islands and to work in conjunction with the crash boats which the Army actually was running. So I was put in one of those units and sent to the Naval Air Station, Honolulu. I actually stayed there until the end of the war, and then I was sent back to Charleston to be separated. In the meantime, I had applied for a regular commission, because all of us were commissioned in the Reserves when we finished flight school. So we fooled around Charleston doing just menial things and really not doing anything but ferrying vehicles to Atlanta. [laughs] So anyway, it came time for me to be discharged and he said, "We're going to put you on a jeep carrier if you're going to go for the regular Navy." And I said, "I just withdraw my application."

Sigler: You didn't like flying those small carriers.

Adams: I didn't want to fly off one of those things. I'd had some experience with that in practicing, and that particular airplane, it just was not a good carrier airplane and I just didn't want any part of that. So I withdrew my application. I'm not sure why they transferred me, but they did transfer me to Alameda to go to navigator school because the Navy let all the navigators go and they trained pilots to be navigators in the interim period. Actually all that it amounted to was to study celestial navigation because we'd already had the basics, you know. We spent a good time at Alameda just fooling around and learning to do celestial.

Sigler: The SBD, the Dauntless, was a two place aircraft, if I remember. Was the second man in it a navigator or simply a radioman/gunner?

Adams: He was a radioman/gunner. And one of the things that always . . . it was in my mind that they never really did get the credit that they deserved because for some reason the pilots seemed to get all the glory, you know. But when you think about them riding in the rear seat with you and that the faith that they had in you and what have you, I always felt that they should have had more recognition. But anyway, that's another story. The SB2C also had that same type of arrangement, a radioman/gunner. And also, we had radar on those planes and he was a radar operator; he had three jobs. Like I say, I've read a lot about the SBDs myself in the history in the Pacific, and that was some real boo-boos. But fortunately there were a lot of good flights too, where they did a lot of damage. The SB2C never did get much recognition historically. You won't see any of them any more, and you very seldom ever see a picture of them.

Sigler: They were a single engine?

Adams: Single-engine, built by Curtis. And Curtis was notorious, in my opinion, for turning out crappy stuff. Their engines were okay, but my division officer in Anacostia was killed in one of their planes, which was an experimental job with an inline engine. He took off and the engine quit on him and he hit the levies on the river.

Sigler: Those dikes you were talking about.

Adams: Yeah, he never did get any altitude. He just rammed right into it. And the planes that we got were being built in Canada, and they were rigged so bad they were hard to dive and control, so the skipper wanted to get some spare parts. So he flew up to Canada to the factory that was making these things, and when he came back he said, "I can understand why these planes are in such poor condition, because they're building them with grandmas and grandpas with sledge hammers. I had a couple of really scary experiences in that airplane, and I think maybe one of them, if I had been in any other plane, I probably wouldn't have survived it. But I didn't have a lot of combat due to the fact that ... just the way it evolved.

Sigler: Yeah, just the timing of each assignment.

Adams: Yeah. So then I was in that air/sea rescue unit in Honolulu when I had enough points to get out. Well, I'm going backwards now ... after I finished the navigation training, I was transferred to a transport squadron at Naval Air Station, Honolulu.

Sigler: What were they flying there?

Adams: Well, Navy people would ... Alderman R5D. What they were, they were Douglas four-engine aircraft, and I'm trying to remember the civilian designation for them, but the airlines were using them then.

Sigler: Uh, I think they were DC8s.

Adams: No, these were DC4s. The Air Force had a lot of them, too. And we were running an airline operation, really. The Army had MATS, which was Military Air Transport Service, and the Navy called theirs the Naval Air Transport Service. We were flying these things all over the world because the airlines had not really gotten back into business. So it was a real pleasant tour. The airplane was just terrific, best plane I ever flew. It was very reliable and I was in those different squadrons for about two and half years and we never did have an accident. We blew tires and things like that.

Sigler: Yeah, the usual maintenance thing.

Adams: Yeah, but it just was a tremendously reliable aircraft. From there I was transferred to what they called a five-term program, which was an educational situation that ... they promised us when we went through flight training, that we would eventually be given five semesters of college. That was supposed to allow us to compete with academy graduates as far as education went, coupled with the pre-flight and the training and what have you.

Sigler: They promised you this when you signed up for ...?

Adams: Signed up for flight training. They call it the V-5 program. There was another program where they put people through college called the V-12 program. These were all meant to be officer training programs, and I don't recall exactly when I was told ... I just got orders. We went to various universities all over, different ones. But I was sent to University of Pennsylvania. Because I needed another unit of math in order to get into University of Pennsylvania, I had to go to Temple to pick up that math course.

Sigler: Well, they certainly picked good universities!

Adams: Well, they did. They picked the ones where they had ROTC ... Navy ROTC. And we were actually under the command of the . . . what did they call them . . . ?

Sigler: Professor of Naval Science.

Adams: Yeah, right. Yeah. I went to that program and . . .

Sigler: Now, was the fall semester sufficient to get you a degree then?

Adams: No, you didn't get a degree. It was just designed to have you compete. . .

Sigler: To give you the scientific and math knowledge.

Adams: Right, with the academy boys, because there weren't very many of the people that I went through at the time that ever made captain. Most of them ended up as commanders, but a few did make captain. But almost all of the academy boys that I served with made captain. So that was the idea.

Sigler: Yeah, to enable you to compete a little bit better.

Adams: Yeah, supposedly would give you the equivalent of a degree, but we didn't get any paper.

Sigler: You did your math and you went to University of Pennsylvania. And this was when then? About '48-'49?

Adams: Yes, '49 and the first part of '50. Then from there we were going to go to what they call a line school, which was to give us some education in the . . . what we call the "Black Shoe" Navy or what have you.

Sigler: Sea duty.

Adams: Yeah, teach us how to operate on ships and what have you. Went to Newport News to go to what they call the General Line school.

Sigler: And at this point what was your grade? Lieutenant?

Adams: I was a JG.

Sigler: Lieutenant JG.

Adams: Yeah. Well, I think I made lieutenant about that time, but I don't remember exactly when. But anyway, the Korean war broke while we were there. We really hadn't started the school when it broke, and they closed the school and shipped everybody to the West Coast to be assigned and I ended up at Whidbey Island in Washington, waiting for the formation of a squadron. They didn't have the aircraft, really, to form, so we got orders to go to the Naval Air Station at Miramar, just north of San Diego. We went to a squadron, a composite squadron which was the photographic unit. They had a mixture of F9F fighters, and the old Army B-24 is what the multi-engine part of it was. I think primarily because the B-24 had a Norden bombsight and the bombardier/navigator could fly that plane from down below. So it was ideal for mapping. I was in the multi-engine part of it. None of our planes were sent to Korea.

Sigler: Were you flying as a navigator at that point?

Adams: No, I was flying as a copilot because I wasn't checked out in that particular airplane. We had a regularly assigned navigator and he did all the mapping. The F9F, the jets in that squadron, they went to Korea and they were flying off of carriers. But as the thing progressed, they separated the two squadrons and I went with the multi-engine part of it.

Sigler: Were they using the F9F as a reconnaissance aircraft as well?

Adams: Yeah, but they were flying off of carriers. And we did not go to Korea, anybody in our squadron, because they didn't think the plane would last very long. [laughs] And I was kind of glad of that.

Sigler: It probably wouldn't have against the anti-aircraft artillery they had developed by that time.

Adams: Yeah, and it was slow, you know, although it was a very reliable machine and it could go to pretty high altitude. But the fighters they had could probably bring them down pretty easy, too. I spent the Korean War, a time in that outfit. We made maps of the Mississippi delta south of New Orleans. There's one job I was on, and the other job I was on was in Saudi Arabia. We had a continuing detachment that went there every year to map the Saudi landscape. Actually, it was a continuing thing and I think it was part of Roosevelt's promise to old King Ibn Saud that he would protect him, you know, for the oil.

Sigler: Yes. And at that point, too, were you flying overland? I mean, over the Saudi mainland?

Adams: Yes, mostly.

Sigler: Because the United States Geographic Service had a major mapping project in Saudi Arabia at that time.

Adams: Yeah. And ARAMCO, which was the Arabian American Oil Company, also had a few planes that they operated, sort of a little air force. They patrolled the pipelines for one thing, and then they also did some mapping. So I don't know, the Navy I think, was exchanging information with ARAMCO, but that was a very interesting experience over there.

Sigler: Where did you fly out of? Dahrán?

Adams: Dahrán, uh-huh. That was fascinating place. And to see the development in that area today as compared to 1952 is just unbelievable. Oh my God, it was just mud huts and no roads. Well, I mean, it's just beyond my imagination what has happened over there, you know.

Sigler: In the fifties, did we have an air base at Dahrán?

Adams: The Army did. Air Force. When were the Air Force come in? '50?

Sigler: '47. National Defense Act of 1947.

Adams: '47. Okay. Yeah, that would be the Air Force. They had some B-29s there, but they couldn't keep them flying – the sand and dirt and everything. So they were doing very little flying, but they supported us. One of the jobs that we had was to take oblique photos of the coastline in the southern part of Saudi. And that again, I think, was kind of an intelligence thing in case we ever had to land troops to protect that area. And we operated out of a little island which now I guess is quite a base called Masirah.

Sigler: Yeah, that's down in Oman.

Adams: Yeah. That was a British protectorate at that time and they allowed us to fly form there, but they didn't have any facilities. It was just a caretaker type thing. So we had to . . .

Sigler: Must have been a fairly large air strip even then?

Adams: Yeah, well, today I guess it's a major thing. But then, it was just barren rocks and sand. But an interesting thing about that assignment was, they didn't have any gasoline and they hired these native dhows, sailboats, to haul fifty gallon drums of gasoline down to Masirah.

Sigler: That's how you got your aviation fuel?

Adams: Yeah, its unbelievable. They kicked them off ... there was no docking facilities or

anything ... they kicked them off and floated them over or rolled them over and the British brought them up to the air strip. And our crews pumped that fuel by hand, if you can imagine that. That's the way we completed that assignment. Some interesting things happening at that time. King Ibn Saud was still alive and the Navy furnished him a DC-3 for transportation and a Navy crew. I was down one time when he was going to his, I guess, summer palace, and they were loading the plane and he had a bunch of concubines and they were loading goats and sheep, too. It was just amazing.

Sigler: And this was on the base at Dahran?

Adams: Yeah. Of course, the Saudis, they had no aircraft, they had very few troops and we were just really their only protection, you know. Anyway, the political situation was even tense then, and Air France had a flight that came through there. And they would not allow any of the passengers to leave the terminal because there was a big deal going on between the Jews and the Arabs even at that time.

Sigler: Oh, the Palestine problem was going on.

Adams: Yeah, it was going on then. And well, you remember that time. Also, we had a theater there and everybody could go to it, Americans and Saudis. But if they showed anything that was complimentary toward the Jews, they would stop the movie and that was it. I mean, that was it. You'd just leave, you know. I thought that was kind of ...

Sigler: There's a lot of anti-Israeli feeling in Saudi Arabia.

Adams: Oh yeah. People don't realize how long this thing . . . well, you know, going back to when the British were over there, it's a long history. And actually they don't ever talk about that, you know.

Sigler: No, they don't, and it's unfortunate that people don't understand how long and difficult the problem has been.

Adams: The Palestinians were getting it in the nose even back in those days, and they've been doing it for a long time.

Sigler: How long were you assigned to Arabia, Saudi Arabia?

Adams: Actually we were only there three months because of the weather. We always scheduled it when the weather was suitable for taking photos and mapping. And we sent a detachment every year – I mean that outfit did. But I just happened to go that one detachment. And other people in the outfit went the other two times it went over there. I don't know how long it continued.

Sigler: Did you ever fly into the other cities in Saudi Arabia, Jiddah?

Adams: They went one trip over to India, but I didn't go on it. It was just a kind of a recreation deal. There was a communication ship in the Persian Gulf that had a admiral on it and that was about the extent of any fleet operation in that area at that time.

Sigler: In fact, it was the only white ship in the American Navy. "The Great White Ghost" of the Arabian Coast, we used to call it.

Adams: Oh boy. And in those days there weren't any air conditioning on those ships. It was just tough to get a good night's sleep. Fortunately we had water coolers in our Quonset hut, so we made out pretty good. Oh, yeah, when I had served my two years in that squadron at Miramar, I was then assigned to the general line school which had been closed at Newport before the Korean War but it had reopened at Monterey. So in '53, all of the gang that originally went to Newport were sent to Monterey.

Sigler: Still trying to get you some sea duty training.

Adams: As I remember it was about nine months we spent there.

Sigler: Did they actually put you aboard a ship at some point in all this?

Adams: Well, yeah, they give us a few submarine dives and took us out on a destroyer for familiarization is all it was, really. After that, I went to Pensacola to the photographic technical training school as part of the staff there. At the end of that tour, I got out of the Navy. 1955.

I had some experiences which probably pilots would appreciate. While we were at Otis Field in Massachusetts, we were out flying one day and the division leader put us in a column. I was the last plane, six-plane column ...

Sigler: This was when you were forming up the Air Group 81?

Adams: Air Group, yeah. I was the last plane in the column and he put us into a roll and everybody rolled ahead of me. It came my time and I rolled and I got on my back and I could not . . . I wasn't going anywhere. I knew something was wrong. So I did what they call a split S, and I guess you know what that is. If you're on your back, you just pull through; I did and I blacked out and so did my . . .

Sigler: That just essentially puts you in to a dive, doesn't it?

Adams: Yeah, and without any flaps or anything. It was just a desperate thing. I just didn't know . . . you know, it's just some of those things you react to automatically. I knew I wasn't rolling. Fortunately I got out of the dive, and I was pretty low when I got out. I knew that there was some damage somewhere and I asked the gunner, I says, "We got to get out of

here. Do you see anything wrong with the tail?" He said, "No, but your ailerons are flattening." And they had broken two bolts in the wings that controlled the ailerons. So I thought we'd better get out and he . . .

Sigler: And that's why you couldn't complete the roll to begin with.

Adams: Yeah, that's right. It snapped while I was on my back, I guess.

Sigler: Or going over.

Adams: Yeah, and he just kept . . . he got hung up on a gun ring. There's a circular ring that the gun rolls around on. He got his parachute hung up behind that thing and he didn't get out, and I kept waiting. In the meantime, I was beginning to get the thing under control. I did get it under control and was leveled off and was doing pretty good, so I said, "Just hold it, let's not go now, we still got time." So I tried landings up at about 4,000 feet, and I could control it with the rudder and the horizontal stabilizer. So I said, "Well, you're in this as much as I am. What would you like to do?" He said, "I think we ought to land in the water." I said, "Well, if we're going to do that, we might as well try for land. We don't have to swim there." I didn't say that, but that's what I thought.

Sigler: And at about a 100 miles per hour, the water is as hard as the land.

Adams: Yeah. And they just completely abandoned us. All the planes went home and landed. I could hear them, but they couldn't hear me.

Sigler: You couldn't get radio contact with them?

Adams: No. I couldn't get anybody to answer. So I made a pass over the field and I was doing really good until I let my flaps down. The plane kind of gets kind of unstable with the flaps down. I decided I couldn't make it, so I just eased it on around, came around the next time . . . I just flew way out in a big circle. The next time I came around, I didn't put my flaps down and I made it. Taxied up to tarmac . . .

Sigler: You must have been going awfully fast when you hit the ground.

Adams: Yeah, but it worked out. That's why I say I don't know if I'd have made it in any other plane. But that old thing was pretty stable. Nobody inside; I guess they had decided that since I didn't seem to have any control, that they better get in safe place. But it sure was kind of a downhearting thing to see nobody meet me or anything out there. So that ended up okay.

End Side A, Tape One

Sigler: You were going to start a second story, after the one where your ailerons failed.

Adams: When I was stationed at Barber's Point, I had a engine failure on take off and . . .

Sigler: What were you flying there?

Adams: The SB2C. I was making it around okay on the primer, just shooting a squirt in you know, and I thought I could make it back to the field

Sigler: But you couldn't get steady throttle?

Adams: No, couldn't get . . .really, power, and I knew I was going to go in somewhere. But a flight landed ahead of me and kind of cut me off. I thought I could make it. So I decided I couldn't – I had to go to the ground. I went into some trees that were about four inch diameter. The trees in the islands aren't very big. I landed in there and came out without a scratch. After I had stopped . . .I did everything just right, you know. I got out of the cockpit and I had splinters and dust and stuff all down. I remember feeling around to see if I was broken anywhere. All at once I got mad and started kicking it! Kicking the side of the plane. And by that time there was some ground crew coming out to help me out. They were running out there. Anyway, there's a lot of . . . you know, operationally you get more trouble than you do in combat for some reason, in the Navy. You lose a lot of people in training, in accidents that have nothing to do with combat.

Sigler: I think that's something that most civilians don't understand.

[conversation about the present day Iraq situation not transcribed]

Adams: Yeah, I know of two in our outfit that were lost over Manila due to anti-aircraft, but the rest of the people I served with were killed in accidents, you know, training accidents. I call him my kid brother, two years younger than I am – he went into this program, too, toward the end. They were washing out people; just every ride was a check ride. So he didn't make it; he became a gunner in a TBM, which was a torpedo bomber. They were practicing at Opa-Locka in Miami, toward the end of the war. It was the spring of '45. And they were breaking up around the field, and usually they'd cross over. They'd come in in a V and then they'd cross over. Anyway, two of them collided and both crews went down. Of course, they were flying at 500 feet, there was no way for them to get out. But that continued all the time I was in the Navy. I mean, toward the end when we were flying multi-engine, we didn't have those sort of things happen as much. But early on, especially at Anacostia when they were testing and trying to develop some good machines, they lost a lot of guys. Not a lot, but I mean . . . percentage-wise, they lost them. I just remember that as being desperate times and they were working around the clock. We were borrowing aircraft from the British to see if they had something good that we could copy, you know. So we were just really extremely lucky, I think, in a lot of ways because we were so unprepared for the whole thing.

Sigler: You had quite a career.

Adams: Well, I enjoyed it. There were scary times, but as a whole I liked the life. It's hard to describe, but I'm sure that other people have the same feeling. It's kind of like a brotherhood type of thing. I still am in contact with some of the people. We have a reunion once a year and I go when I can.

Sigler: What, of your original air group?

Adams: No, this would be that photo outfit. And the Korean thing. The last one we had, there was about thirty people there.

[general conversation about reunions not transcribed]

End Transcription