

**Raymond H. Combs
Veteran**

**Mike Russert
Wayne Clarke
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

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Q: Interviewer Question

RC: Raymond H. Combs' response

Interviewer: Not a question, but a comment or statement by an interviewer

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

RC: Raymond H. Combs, 3/23/26, and I was born in Argyle, New York.

Q: Could you tell me what your educational background was?

RC: I'd rather not because it isn't very much (laughter) I went through... I went to Warrensburg High school, up to first-year high. I quit; I was off for a year. Then a school teacher took me under his arm and took me to Hyde Park and I went to Hyde Park's high school. But I didn't graduate from there, I lacked like six months of graduating...

Q: That was Roosevelt High school?

RC: Roosevelt High school. Yep, and from there I went into the service. I was only eighteen years old at the time.

Q: Do you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

RC: I believe I was in the streets of Warrensburg when the extra newspaper came out and kids and newspaper boys were running up and down the street hollering 'extra, extra' you know? I believe I was on the streets of Warrensburg at the time.

Q: Do you remember at all what you thought about this?

RC: I didn't think too much about it; I was too young. I was what? I was only sixteen then.

Q: Okay, did you enlist or were you drafted?

RC: I enlisted.

Q: Why did you select the Navy?

RC: I didn't want to go to the Army (laughs)

Interviewer: That's a good enough reason.

Q: So, you were only 18 when you went in?

RC: When I went in, I was 18. Yeah.

Q: Where around did you go for your boot camp?

RC: Samson, New York.

Q: What was it like at Samson?

RC: I was only there I think something like eight weeks. That was our... that was our doctrine, or whatever you want to call it, into the service and I think it was only eight weeks long as I recall and-

Q: Did you go anywhere else for specialized training?

RC: No. I went from there, I went from Norfolk, Virginia and went right on to the USS Randolph.

Q: Now what was your assignment on the carrier?

RC: Well, I had several assignments. For a while I was an extra .50 Caliber machine gunner on a TBM because when the flight crew came aboard our ship, they flew on and the only way they could...The only people they could bring aboard with them was the initial crew. So, they took some of us little guys and trained us on .50 caliber machine guns right aboard ship and I flew two or three times as a machine gunner. That was one of my duties, part time.

Q: Did you fly combat as a gunner?

RC: Oh yes, I flew over Tokyo. I've seen the top of mount Fujiyama (laughs). The other, I was an operator on number three elevator and my duty there was that I was on a hanger deck, which the elevator was like in two sections. It had, you know? One section the full elevator went up to the flight deck and then as it came down it had what we call an auxiliary elevator underneath the big elevator. When the big elevator came down the little one went down with it, so that there was room for the big one to get in there. But my only duty was, I had a little booth like a telephone booth with a switch in there and I had to make sure that there was nobody or nothing on that auxiliary elevator when the big elevator was coming down. That was my only duty, so during flight quarters that elevator could not be used anyway because it was the aft elevator almost in the center of the ship. Which naturally couldn't be used during flight operations.

Q: Now, okay. So, they didn't use it because they needed an entire deck?

RC: Right, they had to land, the planes landed

Q: So, when it was used why was it used?

RC: It was used to transport airplanes. Uh, we had three elevators. One forward, one that hung out over the side of the ship and number three elevator was almost in the middle, right in the landing area. So, during flight operations the only one they used was the one that was off the side of the ship and one plane would go straight on the hangar deck or on the flight deck to get out of the way because planes were landing, and the next one would go on this elevator they would drop it down and put it on the hanger deck. So, every other plane went downstairs, more or less.

Q: Now when did you leave Virginia?

RC: When did we leave? ... See, that's what I can't remember is exactly what the dates were. I've got it in there. (Pointing to his documents)

Interviewer: Oh, that's okay

RC: It was within, I went from Sampson to Norfolk, Virginia. Went right aboard the ship and within five or six days we left. We also had the crew of the USS Shangri-La, which was another aircraft carrier. It was commissioned I say about a month or so after we were. But we took their crew on the shakedown.

Q: Where you the first crew on the Randolph?

RC: We were the initial crew, yeah. I'm what they call a plank owner. We went into someplace in the Caribbean for shakedown cruise and then we came back and had a few repairs and then we left for the pacific.

Q: Did you go through the Panama Canal?

RC: We went through the Panama Canal both ways

Q: Now were you in a convoy? Did you have a large number of ships with you, or?

RC: Ahh, no we were all alone as I recall anyway. We had no other ships with us while we were going from... We first had to go, now let me think, after shakedown cruise we went back to Newport News, Virginia and had our gun sponsons. You know? Our gun... We called them "Sponsons," something like that. They hangout over the side of the ship, they won't go through the canal so they had to be taken off. They would set them up on the flight deck, we went through the canal. We went to San Francisco, then they put them back on again.

Q: Where did you go after San Francisco?

RC: Right to Pearl Harbor. Right to Ford Island, Pearl Harbor.

Q: How long were you there?

RC: A week... Ten days.

Q: And from there?

RC: From there we went to the Pacific. We went to Philippines; we went from San Francisco right to... Actually, we went to Ulithi. Then we went all around...

Interviewer: Or, if you hold that in front of you, we can get that.

RC: There is where the ship went during its existence.

Q: So first you went to Pearl Harbor, then you went to the Philippines?

RC: And then we went to, I think we went to Ulithi first which is a ring of Islands. Have you ever heard of it?

Interviewer: Yes

RC: Okay, it's a ring of islands there's nothing but harbor, and there was I don't know I don't even dare say. But there were several, at least what I would say five to eight aircraft carriers and probably a thousand other ships I know it was full of. But they figured it, that that particular place was far enough away from Japan so those suicide bombers couldn't get to us, but they figured wrong.

Q: So, you came under attack from Kamikazes? So where were you when this happened?

RC: Where was I?

Q: Where was your ship?

RC: It was right in the Harbor. Right in Ulithi, and they... and it was because we were lit up like New York City. Because the people that do the thinking didn't think that the Japanese could get out there and one reason for that was because the Japanese were using "Zeros" which were fighter plane, as Kamikazes and our people never stopped to think that well, when they run out of zeroes what are they going to use? They started using twin-engine bombers and that's what hit us. A twin-engine bomber hit us right in the fore-castle.

Q: where were you when this happened?

RC: (Laughs) Well I was in the water soon *after* it happened. I was... well we were having a, well to make the story longer, we were big enough where we had an amphitheater on the hangar deck and when we were in harbor we would invite all crew members from all these little ships that could not have a movie on their board ship because there's no place to put it we would invite all those people onto our ship and we would have movies and one movie had just gotten over, and they were having like an intermission and the crews that were belonged on other ships were going down the gangways and gathering at the gangway to get on their particular motor whaleboats, and they would take them back to their ships and that's when the kamikaze hit.

Q: Was there any warning at all?

RC: Oh nothing! We were standing... I was standing in the middle of the hangar deck. Well, long sight, I was probably as far as from here to the edge of the wall from the hangar deck and all of our roller curtains were up and all there is, is chains across to keep you from walking right out over the side of the ship. And I happen to be standing in a lucky place because I was standing, talking to two of my friends and they had their backs to the blast and I had my face to it. Which I understand that a man can take more to his face than he can in his back. Killed both of those guys, and blew me right out through that roller curtain. I never remember going through the air, the only thing I can remember is I was gasping and I was reaching for anything. I was in the water and I was reaching for anything I could get my hands on. And all these motor whaleboats were alongside picking up other... Their members of their ship. And somebody just grabbed me right by the tower and just yanked me right into one of those motor whaleboats. Lucky, I didn't hit one, and within five minutes I would say I had come-to enough so that, you know? I was alright I wasn't hurt. They put me back on my gangway and I went up and went to my fire station, started fighting fire.

Q: Where did this plane hit on the ship?

RC: Right in the fantail. Right where our crew and a lot of members of... of these other ships always went out to the fantail to smoke, because of course we could smoke on... and that's where I was headed but these two fellas stopped and we were taking when it hit and you know? We didn't have no idea that anybody was anywhere near us.

Q: Do you know? Whether the plane was carrying bombs? Or was there just...

RC: Uh, no it was... it had bombs in it. It must've, it blew a big hole in our flight deck. I've got pictures of it here. But a lot of... What I started to say was, a lot of the fellas that were from other ships went out to the fantail to have their cigarette before they left. A lot of our crew was out there so there was, I think there was a hundred and some odd men killed from our ship and probably another 200 killed, that were from other ships.

Q: How long did it take to get the fires under control?

RC: Oh, we had them under control within hours I would say. Well, I know it happened like 10 O' clock at night because the movie was on and by the next day we were, you know? We had no fire come out to anything. In fact, there was a lot of fire and smoke. I know because I had to go into it. That was part of my fire job was to go into it.

Q: Did you have any kind of equipment or?

RC: Yeah, I got a picture of it and I didn't even know it was in there until just... I don't know one day I was looking at it and I remember this officer adjusting a gas mask, it wasn't a gas mask it was a smoke thing but, I never knew there was a picture and I had to be looking at it one day. You know? Several years ago, and I

said “good lord, that’s me” and that was probably the worst thing because I mean there was bodies blown all over I... Our sprinkler systems came on and so it was like a, you know? A shower. And I remember there was a piece of canvas laying on the deck and as I was going back in to see if I could find any guys to drag out. There was this guy laying out on the deck with both legs gone, both arms gone and he was still alive. But this rain and salt water was hitting him right square in the face and I could see he was still...He wouldn’t have probably lived another five minutes but he was alive at that time, and as I went by I just grabbed that canvas and pulled it right over but of course he was dead by the time they found him at least I imagine. But oh yeah bodies, we had bodies stuck to the ceiling. It was an experience I never want to go through again I know that.

Q: How... What happened to your carriers after you got the fires under control?

RC: We had a repair ship come alongside and they repaired the flight deck enough so that we could operate and we went on and operated for, well I don’t know how much longer I’d have to look in there to find out the date.

Q: So, you never had to go back to pearl or nothing else?

RC: Nope, we stayed right there and they repaired the flight deck enough so that they could land planes. Of course, back there where it hit, there was nothing but deck. There were no barriers, there was no resting gear, back there because it was too far back. And what the theory is, that this plane may not have been a suicide dive bomber although it was coming in pretty close. They think it might have been a bomber. Because it was a twin-engine bomber that had gasoline fueled enough to get from japan out to where we were, and uh when we were at sea, we had two big antennas that were probably 50 feet long. At least 50 feet long, but they were gear-driven and wires run between them, it was two of them and when we were at sea, they were down here. Well, this is when the Japanese would take pictures of our ship. When we were at sea, not while we were at anchor, but for better reception when... when we came into port they would stand them up like this and they think, the theory was at the time that this bomber may have come in and go to drop bombs but he didn’t anticipate those uh barrier antennas and he hit this and it brought him right into the deck. You got any water or anything? When I talk so much I...

**A brief water break was taken from the interview upon combs’
request
Resume:**

Q: After the attack and your carrier was repaired, where did you go?

RC: We went to Okinawa from... now I’m not just sure where we might have gone in between them but we ended up in Okinawa. Our planes supported Iwo Jima, or planes supported a lot of the fighting that was in Leyte and Leyte Gulf.

Q: Did you ever come under attack from the kamikazes again or?

RC: No, that was the only time. Oh... I say yes, we would hear the – the people that talked over the loudspeaker you know? Telling us on certain days “we have bogies on the screen” but nine times out of ten we’d never even see them. There was only a few times that, you know? They got in close enough so that our gunners had to protect the ship but, we never got hit again or – or got hit before that. We might have gotten hit with bullets or something but uh...

Q: Now were you in near Okinawa when the tornado or the typhoon hit?

RC: We were in it, yep. We – but we... well we were at sea. I mean I don’t know; the sea looks all the same no matter where you are (laughs). But yes, I went through that typhoon. It ripped the catwalks right out from under our flight decks. We couldn’t set and eat a meal because the ship was you know? Like this. Trays wouldn’t stay on the table, you had to hold the tray with one hand and eat with the other.

Q: How long was – did you encounter this?

RC: Oh, that typhoon I think went on for like forty-eight hours or so. It was quite a time

Q: Can you tell us about you’re to – you said you flew over Japan?

RC: Yeah

Q: As a ball turret gunner, could you tell us about those?

RC: Well it was just two or three times, two I think I’m not sure, that I went up and they were bombing stuff but I’m looking up in the air while they’re looking down. You know? So, I couldn’t see very much. The only time I could see if they went in for a bombing run and when they would come up out of it. Then I could look down and see land. Other than that, it was – I don’t even remember hearing any bullets coming towards our plane or anything and we never got hit, so.

Q: Now in the form that you filled out it mentioned that you heard the dropping of the atomic bomb.

RC: Well, we think we did. But I’m not too sure, whether we did or not. We were approximately up between twenty-five and fifty miles off the coast of Japan when it was dropped and of course the next morning or soon after it was dropped it was announced. “Oh yeah, we heard that! We didn’t know what it was.” You know? I’m not sure if I heard it or not. I wouldn’t lay my life on it (laughs).

Q: Well when the war ended what did your ship do?

RC: We immediately I think, it was the second day after it ended because we needed more repair. They headed us towards – just headed us towards the United States and we came home.

Q: Now how was it announced on the ship that Japan had surrendered?

RC: It was just announced over the loudspeaker.

Q: What was the reaction?

RC: Oh gosh, I can't tell. "Great! Great! Now I can go home!" you know? And we did, we did. It was like forty-eight hours and we were on our way home.

Q: What kind of feelings did you have when you heard about the atomic bomb being dropped?

RC: We didn't – I was so young that I don't even know what my feelings were in those days. We didn't know what it was, we knew it was an atomic bomb, "well what's that?" We had no statistics on what it was, neither did anybody else, I guess. So, we knew it was a big bomb that's all and it stopped the war and that was all.

Q: Do you remember, did they announce it on the ship about the death of President Roosevelt?

RC: Oh yes.

Q: Do you have a reaction to that?

RC: No... no I mean it was a normal reaction as far as I can remember.

Q: How long did you stay in the service after the war ended?

RC: I came home and got right out of the services. I don't think we came back. Well, I did to stay in for a while because uh...I'm not too sure whether I was in the second group or the first group. But they came back to New York and they sent half of the ship home on leave for thirty, I think either thirty or sixty days. And the ship went to Italy and picked up – we took over Italian prisoners that were here and that we'd captured and we took them back to Italy, and we picked up US forces and brought them back to the United States.

Q: Now were you on the ship when it did that?

RC: I think I was in a second wave, I'm not sure. First or second. It went over twice with just have a crew, just enough to run the ship. And they put bunks, about seven high as I recall, on the hangar deck. It was just like pyramids, just room enough to walk between them and we brought back I don't know how many but, seven-thousand sticks in my head for some reason or other, troops from Italy – went to Naples, Italy. And I remember we pulled back into New York Harbor on Christmas day, that much I do remember.

Q: When were you discharged?

RC: Right as soon as we got back. They started within a week, I was discharged and sent home.

Q: Did you make use of the G.I Bill?

RC: I did because jobs were hard to come by and I went to work for a place in Glens Falls called “Double-A Provisions” you’ve probably heard of it, and I learned to be a butcher. So, they had a slaughterhouse, I worked in the slaughterhouse they had a retail store, I worked in the retail store. They had a wholesale business where we sold boneless meat, you know? For hamburgers, for the big chains and I was there for five years.

Q: Did you ever use – what did you use the G.I Bill for? For the training?

RC: That – that was, half of it was being paid for by Double-A Provisions and half was paid for by the government.

Q: Did you ever use the 52-20 club? Fifty-two dollars per week for twenty weeks, it was kind of unemployment...

RC: I don’t think so, no.

Q: Alright, did you join any veteran’s organizations?

RC: I belonged to Veterans of Foreign Wars for maybe a year.

Q: Don’t belong to anything know?

RC: Don’t belong to anything, now.

Q: I know we asked a little bit about this; did you ever stay in contact with anyone that served with you?

RC: No I didn’t, there was only one – one man that I was wanted to keep in contact with and he lived in Allentown, Pennsylvania and by the time I got his address, because I never had it, I got it off a computer one day and I wrote to his wife and she answered me and he had died three years prior to that so that was the only one that –

Q: And you said you’d never have gone back for a reunion or?

RC: I went once, Jekyll Island about four years ago, went to the reunion. And there was about five other guys that were from the same division that I was, I was there and it was nice to meet them.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

RC: I don’t think it did. I mean, it took two and a half years out of it. That’s all but oh, it gave me some – maybe I grew up a bit because I was a young kid. I was too young and stupid to be afraid (laughs) in those days. You know? When you’re

that age you think you're invincible and so I don't think it affected me, mentally anyway.

Q: So, maybe you could show us some pictures of the carrier when it was hit?

After it was hit or? You can show them up to the camera when you –

RC: Alright, when I find them... This is the whole history of it.

Q: Did you ever get to see any USO shows at all?

RC: Never went to one, no. We did have a – leave and a bunch of us went to Hollywood, California and I did go – stepped inside the door of the Holly – what did they call it? The Hollywood Canteen? It was run by the USO uh... There's a picture of me right there.

Q: Oh, why don't you hold that up to the Camera?

RC: Ah! I better not– Can't see my face anyway.

Q: Down there in the bottom corner?

RC: Down there in the bottom corner.

Q: So that's the equipment you wore to fight fires?

RC: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, we got it.

RC: Okay, I have to go through this whole book to find out – well there is the... these two pictures here – this picture is a picture of the flight deck, this is the hole that that bomber made. And this is while it's under repair.

Interviewer: Okay, got it.

RC: Got it?

Interviewer: Alright well...

RC: Here's another shot of some of the wreckage up here, where the hole was.

Interviewer: Okay, got it.

RC: I was hoping – there should be a decent picture, there's – maybe you could take just part of it. There's a picture of the USS Randolph, Underway.

Q: That's it? In the background?

RC: Up here, on the top.

Interviewer: Alright, I got it. Alright well thank you very much for your info.

RC: Okay.