

From blimp duty to A-bomb testing

Osborne Duncan (June 16, 1940-Sept. 1946) Navy Third Class, A Division, Ordinanceman

By OSBORNE DUNCAN

Arie Cross, Denny Chitwood, G. B. West and Little Red (Bill) Smith ran around with me hunting and fishing and so on. We were keeping up with what was going on with the war and we were in Evelyn Cross's store, sitting on the counter and heard on the radio that Germany had invaded Poland. We talked about it and decided we might as well go on in, we were going to have to go anyway. We all enlisted in the Navy on June 16, 1940, for a six-year tour of duty. I was 20 years old.

We went to Nashville to be sworn in, then back through Tennessee picking up men at about every train station, on to Norfolk, VA, for our three months of training. We got to choose the ship we wanted to go on and we chose the aircraft carrier *USS Ranger*. Some chose the destroyers, "Tin Cans" as we called them.

The *USS Ranger* was undergoing repairs so we were transferred to the *Yorktown*, which carried 80 planes. We left port from Portland, Maine, picking up civilian supply ships as we came along and first thing we knew, we had about 38 ships. The convoy included three Army troop ships and three Canadian troop ships which were escorted by one destroyer in front, one on the left side and a cruiser on the right side. This was to protect them from the "Wolf Pack" submarines, traveling in groups of six to eight, that were sinking ships in the Atlantic. Those enlistees who chose to be on the destroyers *Ruben James* and *J.P. Jones* didn't fare so well. On a trip up near Iceland, which was in very dangerous waters, both destroyers were sunk during a submarine attack.

After I had completed two years of sea duty, I was eligible for one year shore duty. So I was assigned to the LTA (Lighter Than Air) Unit at Lakehurst, New Jersey. These were blimps (dirigibles) that were equipped with machine guns and depth charges . . . just regular flying fortresses. After I completed the required school before I could join the LTA squadron, I was sent by troop train to an area in the Everglades about 18 miles outside of Miami, FL. We were clearing land, making way for an LTA base. The mosquitoes nearly ate me alive. Reports were that they had killed cattle. They literally would stand up on their nose to draw blood from you. I eventually was relieved of having to go into the swamps.



Figure 1 Osborne Duncan in World War II

When the blimps were coming in to land, they would have to drop off the bombs to get rid of weight in order to not crash upon landing. These bombs were dropped in the shallow waters of the Everglades because the water wasn't deep enough to allow the bombs to detonate. I was among those who had to go hunt the bombs. We were given the general location of where it might be. After it was found, we would take it back to base and I was specially trained on disarming the bomb. This was a very dangerous job. It hadn't been too long since a bomb had exploded while being disarmed at Norfolk and killed about 15 soldiers. Even knowing this, we would playfully pitch the bombs to one another and drop them onto sand bags because we knew they were only tripped by depth charges. This really upset the officers who weren't familiar with the bombs and we took some chewing out from time to time.

We flew with convoys protecting civilian supply ships. The role the LTA played was to scan with radar to pick up submarines. By nature, they can move slowly and are better able to scan with radar than fast moving airplanes. There were L Ships, K Ships, and M Ships and I flew in all of them. The crew was made up of a pilot and copilot, navigator, boatswain, and ordinance man. I was an ordinance man and took care of the bombs and guns and I manned the machine gun. We would depart from Portland, Maine, and go to just off the coast of England. This was where there was the most danger of airplane attacks. One blimp was shot down near Miami, all aboard but one was rescued.

From working on the LTAs, I was sent to the Marshall Islands to work with an eight-member crash crew. We had to be on hand 24 hours a day with fire engines, jeeps, etc., in case there was a crash or mishap on the air strip. The American Military Base is located on Kwajalein atoll which is about eight feet above sea level and a mile wide by three miles long. This was a stop off for air and sea traffic in the Pacific. I saw a lot of crippled and maimed soldiers as they were being taken back to the States. One time, they had a plane ready to go and one soldier was sitting with his feet in the water and they couldn't get him to come on. They didn't want to use force on him because he was pretty "banged up", so I said, "Where is he?" I just went down there and sat down beside of him like I was going to talk with him and after awhile I said "Come on, let's go home." He just got up and came back to the plane with me. He was what we call shell shocked.

These islands were chosen for nuclear testing because of the surrounding coral reefs that would break possible tidal waves. On June 12, 1946, I was eligible to come home but volunteers were sought to help test the atomic and hydrogen bombs. I volunteered. These were big publicity events. Newspaper men, Congressmen, and all kinds of officials would come there to witness the testing of the bombs.

Four months after I had volunteered for this extra duty, I decided I was ready to come home. I went down to the office and told them I was going home. The officer said, "Going home?" and another office spoke up and said he could have gone home three months ago, if he had wanted to. They went to processing my paper work right then. I noticed one of the ATC (Air Transport Command) planes had come in and I asked the pilot if he could give me a ride to the States. He

said, "If you can be down here in 30 minutes and have a sea bag that doesn't weigh over 50 pounds, then you can go." He already had a load but he was taking me on anyway. I had to sit on a bucket back in the fan tail. We went through a bad storm and the right engine went out causing us to do an emergency landing in the Johnson Islands.

After about a four-hour stop over at the Johnson Islands, we flew on to Pearl Harbor and I was directed to "transient processing" and was told there was a baby aircraft carrier leaving out for the States. We had time before it pulled out to see a baseball game there on the island and I got to see Ted Williams who had enlisted in the Navy and lot of other big players play. I "hitchhiked" back to San Francisco and on home.

I was sent to the VA Hospital in Johnson City because of a heart problem which they said could be treated with medication. I was discharged in September, 1946. I decided I would run track for exercise, instead of having to take medication. Sixty years later, I still run as often as I can.