

Samuel Gevirtz Oral History Interview
December 19, 2012

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- Clarke: Alright so, thank you first of all for having us. Really it's great. Could you tell me your name and spell it?
- Gevirtz: My name is Samuel Gevirtz. And it's spelled - G-E-V-I-R-T-Z.
- Clarke: Where were you born and where did you spend your time growing up?
- Gevirtz: I was born in Newark, New Jersey. When I was young, about 12 years old, we moved to the West Coast. I was raised mostly in San Francisco.
- Clarke: Tell me a little bit about your childhood and if you have any siblings or just things like that?
- Gevirtz: Well, I guess childhood...I would just call it average. I don't know what else to call it. I had...there was five children in the family. Of the five of us now, there is only one left besides myself. I have an older sister. But there were three brothers, two sisters, in the five of us.
- Clarke: What was going on in the country when you were growing up?
- Gevirtz: Mostly was the Depression era, and we moved to San Francisco, as I said, to be closer to some other members of the family. And I guess the war broke out and things were changing pretty rapidly at that time.
- Clarke: How aware were you of the whole developments in the Pacific and in Europe?

Gevirtz: I enlisted when I was 18 and went into the Marine Corps. First I went through Boot Camp and because I did have some office skills. At that time I was a typist, or knew how to type, so they thought that was a big deal. And they assigned me to the Headquarters Company, Headquarters Battalion of the Marine Corps Base in San Diego. I was there for 10 or 11 months, when I thought, gee, this isn't for me. It's not what I joined for. I asked to go to Sea School which is where they train for going aboard a ship, and all the things, weaponry and that sort of thing. So from there—I'm giving you a little synopsis of what goes on a lot earlier. But we went aboard, I guess it was a freighter of some type, from...it was Oxnard, California near Los Angeles. And traveled from there for several days it took us to get to Hawaii. When we were in Pearl Harbor for a couple weeks, doing some guard duty, and things of that type, before we were—the entire Company was split up into different groups and they went on different ships— were assigned to different ships in the fleet. And I ended up on the Bunker Hill. So that's how all of that occurred.

Clarke: Tell me a little bit about the Bunker Hill? Its capabilities?

Gevirtz: It was an Essex Class carrier. At that time, [it] was fairly new. When I got aboard she had just completed her earlier operations, which were around Rubal in New Guinea in that area, and were coming back to Pearl Harbor for refitting. There were several vacancies aboard; I think it was maybe a half dozen from our particular company from Sea School were assigned to the Bunker Hill. So I went aboard, I feel like I'm giving you my life's story here. I was assigned as a gunner to one of the 20mm guns. And because I knew how to type I was a part-time Company Clerk also. Then we went out for the first trip, first campaign, and at different times, I was assigned to Executive Officer's Orderly, Captain's Orderly, and sometimes Admiral's Orderly. I found all of those duties very interesting, wasn't too happy with them, but it was very interesting. But, it was your duty to sit in on some of these big conferences and what they call CIC, Combat Intelligence Center, where you can see these huge boards where we were, what they were doing, and how they were planning and so forth. So I found that part

interesting. Later on why I was changed to become a gunner on a 20mm and somebody else was a loader and what they call a trenchant operator. Maybe if you'd ask me some questions I can keep going.

Clarke: You kept extensive journals during your time on the Bunker Hill. And first of all tell me a little bit about journal keeping, because it's not necessarily something that was encouraged.

Gevirtz: Let's straighten it out. It was forbidden.

Clarke: Well, why did you, if it was forbidden, why did you do it at the time?

Gevirtz: It was just something like I felt I wanted to do. To keep a record of what was going on. Here I was 18, 19, 20, years old, and this was an experience that few people had. I wanted I guess just to put down, I don't know if I would even see it again. But I just felt that I wanted to write it, to keep a record of it. I usually had it either in my pocket or my locker. Just a couple people knew of it. On one occasion incidentally, I was writing in it, when a shadow came over the back of me, and I looked up and it was my Lieutenant. He said, "What are you doing Sam?" I said, "Writing in my diary, Sir." Which of course meant a Court Marshall offense. He said, "Put it away." I said, "Yes, Sir." And that was it. And then has happened, a year or two later, when our ship was hit and I went down below decks to see, they asked for a volunteer, "Who wants to go below decks and see what the conditions are." That was pretty tough. All of our...everything that we had was destroyed and melted. The aluminum lockers were melted down to the floor. And it was just fortunate that the diaries happened to be in my pocket. Otherwise they'd have been gone too. And it was, when I was down there the water was about six inches deep in the compartment. And the Marine detachment, we had this area which was a Marine quarters, but at the time we had a US Marine Corps Air Group aboard also, was a fighter squadron. And all the enlisted men in that group, which were mechanics and the people who worked with their weaponry and so forth, were part of this huge area where we were. When we went down to see what was left if anything, all of

these guys were dead, lying on their bunks. I remember there was one, it was the strangest thing. There was one guy was going to tie his shoe laces, and he just died in that position. And I just couldn't believe all of that, looking at that. And anyway, and I had to come up and to report to my Sergeant, whoever it was. What it was that I saw down there. So that was quite an experience, anyway this was on that date.

Clarke: You document a lot of these...a lot of the action that you saw. What was one thing for people who don't see it, they are curious about what is combat like? What is especially on an Essex Class carrier during World War Two?

Gevirtz: [D]uring the combat, it's a very, heightened thing. How can I explain that? You're well trained for what your about to do, but there is a feeling like you're in a real tough football game. And you want to do what you have to do. You know what you're going to do. Like if you saw one of the enemy planes were shot down, why does a big cheer went up, like you scored a touchdown or something? And so this was the feeling mostly at the time. It was very tense, but everybody knew exactly what they were going to do. When these huge magazines that were put on the 20m.m. gun. When they were empty, you knew it, or the loader knew it, he would snap it off, and these things weighed about sixty pounds, and he would just hoist another one and slip it in there, tap you, and you knew it was ready to go and you pulled the trigger again. And this was just practiced and practiced and orchestrated so you knew just was going to happen. So I might just say there's one thing that always stuck in my mind, which strangely enough, was shown on television. I forget the name of it, when the show where it was done weekly, "The Navy at War" or something, I forget, it just wasn't about the Navy it was also what was going on in Europe. I forget what the name of that program was. But anyway, the scene that stuck in my mind that they happened to have filmed, because we have photographers aboard, was a plane that was coming low in the water towards us. I was, my gun station was Battery One Gun Seven, [and] there were five guns: One, Three, Five, Seven and Nine right on the starboard bow. The plane was coming toward us and

it was low, and everything was just shooting at it. 20mms, 40 mms, 5-inch guns, we're all shooting at it. And it just coming and coming and coming, and flew right over us. And on the other side and went down into the water. And I've always pictured that. This guy had to be dead or something, because everything was just, I mean it was just, you can't imagine that the fuselage was going towards this one target and he just kept coming and then went over us. But if he had kept straight he'd gone into us. But he didn't. That was that one particular occasion anyway. But the entire period aboard the ship wasn't anything like that.

Clarke: There was probably a lot of in between time. What did you do when it wasn't; when you weren't you know, in combat?

Gevirtz: Well, gosh it was just like living any other, actually what your duties were you had so much time on when we were on duty, so much time off. I mean everything to the expression in the Navy was, "The Gedunk Line" where you, Gedunk is, don't ask me where it came from, that was ice cream. You get some ice cream, or I guess buy cigarettes, things of that type if you were so inclined. That was the "Gedunk Line." And there were these various duties that you had. You spend time with your friends, and other times you were engrossed in watching landings and take-offs of the planes. That was very interesting, because of where my location was on duty at that forward anti-aircraft station. The planes would go off, right off near us. And I found that just fascinating, just to watch them. Now at that time, this is interesting, I think the aircraft were not as efficient as they are today. It was not unusual, although maybe not as well known, that frequently the planes were taking off and they'd go right into the water. They didn't have enough power or something would go wrong. And one of our duties, because we were up there on the starboard bow, is they have these little smoke bombs. Which were I'd say this big, which would be about a foot. Over the side of a railing was a wire shaped like an "S" and you would stab that thing down into the nose of it which would activate the smoke bomb, then throws it into the water, and that would show smoke. So that way you were able to

notify a following destroyer where there was a man down there. We threw many of those smoke bombs over.

Clarke: The planes just went down? Get the guy out and the plane goes down.

Gevirtz: Sometimes they get out and sometimes not. But at least we were aware that we had to do that.

Latham: I think one of the things that struck me from reading your journals was how many times you described crashes. Which planes crash, but it seemed to be a more regular occurrence than I think a lot of people realize.

Gevirtz: True. Sometimes either just taking off or sometimes coming in landing. Yes, landing was not an unusual thing.

Clarke: You've had some time to think about what are in the journals. And I'm curious about a couple of things: one - when you got out and you re-entered civilian world, your thoughts about your service, early on after getting out and how you dealt with that; and then two - kind of down the road a few decades, and what your impressions are of your journal and kind of your service, and that time period? So it's kind of a two part question. So, if you don't mind starting out with, when you got out, what you did and if it impacted you? Or did you put them away for a while and said I'm not reading that stuff, I'm done with it?

Gevirtz: Yes, that's an interesting question. First, when I got out, was discharged at the Mare Island Naval Yard in Vallejo, California, which is not too far from where I lived. One of the first things, it's funny, it sticks in my mind, the quality of food aboard the carrier, was not always the greatest. People think, "Oh this is super." It was common practice, and I think common practice, you'd get a slice of bread and hold it up to the light and pick out the little insects that were in it. We used to joke about that being a source of protein. Anyway when I got out, and at Mare Island, we were treated just fabulously. I was all by myself. The other fellows went to their various parts of the country where they came from. But I was by myself, but boy they just

treated you great. And there were steak dinners and everything, it was just, this is fantastic. And I was requested to, "If you wanted to stay in the service, why, we'll promote you and you could, this would be great." I said, "No, I think I'll get out. Go back to my family." So I did and I was discharged there. And what's part of you next question, Ken?

Clarke: What did you reflect on this period of time, in the years following your service? Or is it something you put away?

Gevirtz: Not particularly. It was really, I put aside. Didn't think about them for probably for some years, I'd say quite a few years. And then I thought, I forget what triggered it, it may have been something I saw on television or read something, I don't know. But then I thought, gee maybe this would be of some interest to my children. I have son and two daughters. And I also showed the diaries to my Step-son, this is my second marriage. And he was a terrific guy. I don't want to get too emotional talking about him, because he passed away about five years ago. But if you can imagine looking at the discs, how he had to go from every page on there to put them on there, it had to take him a long, long time. But he did that for me. And I gave a copy of that to each of my kids. I have no idea if they read them or not. If I'm dead, I'm out; they'll have the service stuff. But anyway, I guess that aroused a little more interest in those. I still didn't think much of it. But now I had them on disc and that's what I felt that was preserving them in a way. And then one time, yes I'd like to go into this part of it, some months ago I heard about Honor Flight. And I had joined a veteran's organization here, all the veterans of Lake Barrington shores, and the subject came up. And I'm the only one from World War Two, in the group. And they made me; I'm on the board of this group. Anyway, and the subject came up about it. And I said gee, maybe I'd like to find out about this. Maybe I'd like to go. So they looked into it. And they were terrific and arranged for the trip. They even got a limousine, to pick me and to other veterans up, to take us to Midway, from there for the trip. Anyway, so after I found out about this, I wrote to my Son, in San Jose, California. And I told him about this, of

what I was planning on doing. Unbeknownst to me, totally surprised, he contacted Honor Flight, and he asked to be a volunteer for it. And when I got to Washington, he greeted me there, as one of the volunteers. So this was quite a deal there. So while I was with him, my Son's name is Ralph, while I was with him, he was what they call the Guardian, which is like the person who takes you around, pushes you in your wheelchair every place. He asked about the diaries, and said can I make a copy of them for him. So I said ok. So when I got home, I looked through the phone book, and gosh there're hundreds of guys with computers, because I don't know anything about that other than for e-mails and stuff, that's about as far as I go. And I picked some guy at random, who's in Barrington, and told him what I wanted. He said "Well bring it over here and I'll see what I can do." So I went over there, met him, very small outfit, one guy and a couple of girls work in there. Told him I'd like to have some copies to send to my kids and what they are, my experiences in World War Two. Well, he said, yeah he could do that. A couple days later he called and says, "I got them all ready for you." I went to pick them up, he says, "Instead of one I made five for you and there's no charge." That was pretty nice. Anyway, I told him, I said if you find them a little interesting, make one for yourself. I said, "I don't care, if you like it." He is the guy that turned them over to contacts, a retired priest or Army General, which is where, how come you're contacting me now. And that's how that happened.

Clarke: That's great.

Gevirtz: Just, but you can imagine happenstance.

Clarke: Yes.

Gevirtz: How did I pick this guy out?

Clarke: That's really cool, he did that for you. What is your, when you reflect on your experience, with time as kind of the great filter. Hindsight's twenty-twenty, they say. What is your impression about your service and the country, as it was then and now, if you.

Gevirtz: At that time, of course patriotism was at a very high pitch, there wasn't a big adversity that you find today. It just seems that things are a lot smoother and better at that time. You didn't think much about controversy, as you do today. Looking back on the service, it was an experience that a lot of guys went through, and well you know, there are a lot of guys that didn't come back. As I say my experiences were not any different from a lot of others.

Clarke: Is there anybody you want to remember for, in this recording, of people you served with, or any stories that you'd like to share?

Gevirtz: I had two very close friends. There was Bill Bonwell, who lived in Florida. I never tried contacting these two friends, but after I retired from my work, my wife and I moved to Florida. I didn't know it, and this guy lived maybe 45 minutes to an hour away. I never knew it. We moved here, and I'm going to contact him. And it was difficult trying to find him, but I found Bill Bonwell. His name is Miner Bonwell. And he had died two weeks before. The other one I was particularly close to was, John Hagman. John who was a high school Principal, in the Saint Paul, Minnesota area, and I just, never able to contact him. These are my two closest friends. I had a lot of friends there, but they were the two that were closest to; which brings me to a funny thing. On our first trip out, I don't know how long we were gone, eight months, ten months, a year, I don't remember. Now, we're coming back, and course everybody in the ship knew we were returning to the United States and we were heading towards San Francisco. I guess it was the Alameda Naval Air Station we were headed towards. Still got time on that? My Father gave, funny. Before I went aboard the ship that we were on, the freighter that we were on went from Oxnard to San Francisco first. And then across what was San Francisco there's my family. So, my Father told me to smuggle aboard, he gave me a bottle, now he knows nothing about liquor, or knew nothing about liquor, and it was Cherry Liqueur. He says, "You have this at some important time you want that." I said, "Ok!" So, boy I smuggled it aboard, had it in my locker this whole time. And I thought, you know I'm going to save this until we reach, we come back to the States.

That's a big occasion. There's Bill Bonwell, and Johnny Hagman, and myself. I say, "Okay guys we're going to open it up now." We're on our way, as soon as we hear that the United States is in sight. Now the planes had already taken off. They flew to some base or someplace. The pilot's ready room was empty. It was vacant. "So let's go down to the ready room." We went down there, it's a steel deck, and we're sitting in there waiting, and over the loud speaker someone says, "We can see The Golden Gate Bridge." We went, "HOO-ray!" The bottle slipped. I can remember that. Splash all over. I thought that was pretty funny and they did too.

Clarke: So much for your celebratory Cherry Liqueur drink.

Gevirtz: Yes, anyway, it was. I did many things at that time, in that age I guess, that you never consider doing later on.

Clarke: Of course.

Latham: With that in mind, for the recording, can you tell us a little bit about crossing the Equator?

Gevirtz: Yes, that was big there. I forget what the expressions they use, Shellback?

Latham: Yes, squallywag [sic]?

Gevirtz: Pollywog.

Latham: Yes.

Gevirtz: They made you do many stupid things, running though there. And they were whacking you with paddles on your backside, and shaved your head and all kinds of funny things like that. Funny to others, you know, not to you. And so it was quite a thing. It lasted for a couple of days. It was a lot of fun. But then the second time we went out, we were able to do that to others, you see. There are a lot of little things that.

Clarke: For the recording purpose, for people who will hear this. Just if you don't mind doing kind of a verbal, what did you capture in the two journals? And then they can read them for themselves. But, pretty much what is the scope of your journals?

Gevirtz: I was determined first, they will be truthful. No exaggerations, just what I saw. And just to be as general about it as I can. There are a lot of things in there that were not pleasant to see. There were a lot of things I guess that I didn't have time or slipped my mind and probably didn't go in the journals at all. But anyway, it was I feel now that it's an important part of history. Which is why I'm very willing to share it with you.

Clarke: It's great. Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add for the recording?

Gevirtz: I really can't think of anything.

Clarke: Ok! Thank you.