**Dr. Melvin Jett Collins**

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Cieply: Today is June 18th 2018, and my name is Adam Cieply. On behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library I have the pleasure of conducting this interview with Dr. Melvin "Mel" Collins. Dr. Collins was aboard the *USS Franks*.

Collins: My middle name is Jett, not Jeff.

Cieply: Dr. Collins served aboard the *USS Franks* of the United States Navy; He was a Radar Man, Third Class in the South Pacific during World War Two. It is a pleasure to have you.

Collins: Thank you; it's a pleasure to be here, both “cardiacly” and aesthetically. [Laughter]

Cieply: So first we'd like to talk about your background before the war. So my first question is, when and where were you born?

Collins: Unionville, Missouri, and I later moved to Iowa, and Iowa was my home through High School.

Cieply: What year were you born?

Collins: What?

Cieply: What year were you born?

Collins: 1924. September the 4th, 1924.

Cieply: In what year did you move to Iowa?

Collins: I moved to Iowa, oh, very early. Yeah so, goodness me, it was probably two years later.

Cieply: So what was growing up in Iowa like?

Collins: Oh beautiful! I just loved it. I was from a very poor family, and we didn’t have the best of everything, and then my father and mother got divorced and then it was just she and the kids. And so what of that can be. The nice thing about my growing up that I remember, that I really truly treasured because we didn't have any money, and so I went to the YMCA with a friend one time, and the director of the YMCA was kind enough to give me a free pass, and the YMCA did all of my growing up; where I became athletically appropriate. And, so, because of the YMCA, and so I loved that experience so much that when after I graduated from college, I then went back to the YMCA, and was the physical director at that YMCA. Thanking them for how they had helped me. Paul Heckman was his name; great guy.

Cieply: So you said you had eight siblings? How many siblings did you have?

Collins: It was, was uh, eight people. I'm sorry, nine; nine people in our family. Five boys, four girls.

Cieply: And you said that your parents got divorced; do you remember what year that was?

Collins: Oh God, I don’t remember that, but they were divorced when I was very young, and probably before I was three or four, and uh, then we were just left with her, beautiful lady, lovely lady, and just took good care of us. Thought she could make the best out of nothing; a great, great woman.

Cieply: I'm assuming that, for raising that many kids, she worked a lot of jobs, correct.

Collins: Yes.

Cieply: Do you remember many of those that she worked? Was she around often?

Collins: You mean the kids?

Cieply: Your mother.

Collins: Yeah she was around for a long time; she got us all through high school and college before she passed away.

Cieply: Now, did you have any military history in your family history?

Collins: No, just YMCA history.

Cieply: Now, during that time, you know, that was the great depression, right up to the lead up to the war, so what was the air in Iowa like at that time. What was it like living there, with all that stuff?

Collins: We were living, but I was poor. I don’t know, happy. We stayed happy and together, and that’s all you could say about it.

Cieply: Okay, now during that time, you know, you didn't really have TV to get your news from, so what was your common source for news: the radio?

Collins: Just each other.

Cieply: Just each other, word of mouth?

Collins: With the other, with the older people. I still was at the Y. The YMCA figures in all of this, both for my brother Jim, and me, and, my brother Ron was a little bit on... We had trouble keeping him in track. Jay was the oldest, the smartest, the eloquent, soft, gentle loving speaker. So, it was just a family filled with love. No money, just love; poor housing, poor everything.

Cieply: Now which high school did you attend?

Collins: Ottumwa High School.

Cieply: Ottumwa High School, and did you do any sports in high school? You said you swam.

Collins: Oh yes, yeah. That’s where I was, as I say, that’s where I learned all of my athletic skills, was at Iowa. And during High School, well and even in grade school and junior high school, athletics was the only thing I ever knew, and it was from the high school, err, from the YMCA. So I became a good Ping-Pong player. I became a good swimmer. I became a good wrestler. In fact, I was four years in high school, in the intramurals, four years in a row; I was the boxing champion, and the wrestling champion. My son Jim, was the same thing, and James, I would wrestle from 105-155, and he would wrestle there up to heavy weight, and we were both four year champions in boxing and wrestling. And we were both, he was the Volleyball champ, I was a swimming champ. Uh, swimming, I was state champion. I was a Red Cross life saver, and as I say, but everything relates back to college, I mean back to the High School and Growing up.

Cieply: And the YMCA, and now soon after, around that time, the United States entered the war, so when did you enlist in the military?

Collins: Oh I enlisted in the military in, God I think it was April of 1943 that would...

Cieply: Would you remember what year you graduated high school?

Collins: Uh, 1942, oh January 1943. I was a mid-year person.

Cieply: So you enlisted soon after?

Collins: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, can I tell you a cute story?

Cieply: Of course.

Collins: Do you like cute stories?

Cieply: Absolutely.

Collins: Okay. One never dated. Okay, in high school, when I was a football and basketball letterman, also, and uh, so in, never dated, and as I say, in my senior year of high school, happily, I met the lovely Martha. Martha, okay, we hit it off. I had never had a girlfriend, never been with a women, and so uh, I met Martha, and you know, it's [muffled], because the war is on with Japan, and I knew I was going to be going into the service and so uh, Martha and I had a talk and we both figured out that the best thing for me would be to swim because we both figure that I would have a better chance of survival swimming than I would running, and we both knew that I hate foxhole's. I hate being by myself in a jungle, and I avoided it because a good friend would come back to me. [He would] Come back and telling me about the war stories and I said I would never go in. I loved the Marines but I would never go in the Marines, the army, because I couldn't stand being in the jungle alone. If there's no enemy alone, I could not stand being in that Jungle alone. When my friend came back and said that in the service he was in Bougainville, in the war, a marine, and he was lying in his foxhole, he woke up one morning; he felt something move against his leg. There were these three or four snakes that had crawled up beside him to get his body warmth. So I said, no never. And so we decided to go to the uh, yeah... We decided that I would go in the navy, and I went in the navy in April. And uh, funny thing, can I tell you, finish the story?

Cieply: Mhm.

Collins: Okay. Then uh, when I went into the navy. We loved, uh just love full of bloom, and when I went into the navy, I went to Farragut, Idaho. Farragut, Idaho. Okay, with 330 other people that were going to be going on ships. Okay, and uh at Farragut, nothing very happened, but because of swimming, I had the good fortune to meet the chief who was in charge of all the swimming, and so he knew of my swimming skills, and so he took me up there at the end of boot camp, he took, and "You know, What we would like to do with you," he said, "we'd like to keep you here to be a part of our swimming program because so many of the sailors coming uh, didn't know how to swim. Can you believe it? So he said, "We would love to have you," and he said, “The nice thing about that," he says, "You'll spend your war here in Farragut, Idaho, just teaching people how to swim." So then I had a real choice, because then at the end of boot camp they always give you a chance. Select something that you'd like, and they said "What you can do is you can take a leave. Okay, a thirty day leave, and come back and do what you want to do, or if you decide not to, we could, we'll send you directly out to sea." And I said, "No," love a bloom, and do you know what I decided to do. I decided to go back and see my lovely Martha, you know. And so back home and we had the best time of my whole life and then I returned to the service. But you know me, I said, "We're gonna get..." We even talked about marriage. Okay, so uh, went back to the ship, and within that time, I was aboard a destroyer, heading out to get shot at, and do you know anything about the history of the Tin Can Sailors? You know, the history is, the Tin Can Sailors, we are plane guard for every big ship, and we protect all the big ships because we can't lose them, so if a torpedo goes and is heading their way, we run and get in front of it and take it. I'm serious and take it so the big ships don't get hurt. And so, and then, we also, we were the ship to take care of the carriers and the pilots. We used to oh "Two thousand yards astern everybody" Everybody did the same thing. They got in a whale boat when a plane went down, everybody got in a whale boat and went out and got the guy and got him back and bring him right up. That’s all they ever do. Okay, now, got to back up a little bit, because we're on our way down, go through [muffled] town and start fighting the enemy. Okay, then, uh, uh, about oh, three or four months later. No, no, it was one month. One month later, when we went down fighting the enemy, I got this "Dear, Mel" letter. "Mel I have found another." And then I needed getting shot at. "I have found another." And so just, broke my heart, but as they say, the interesting, she is a part of all this, because it just broke my heart. And, so, we went down into the 3rd Fleet, this 3rd fleet and the uh, 6th Fleet down there, and uh, were, were fighting the war. And so being a destroyer, we were asked routinely to come down serve as plane guard, because... Plane guard, we had ship, I mean planes taking off the ships, uh, every four hours and so, you know if one of them, so we get two thousand yards astern of the carrier, and then if a ship [a plane] goes in we're close we run right up with our whale boat and pick up the pilot. Okay, so our turn came, and so, and how the captain knew this I had no idea, uh, but we were summoned to serve as plane guard, and to go pick up a pilot and so he asked me, me, if you can imagine that, he asked me because of my swimming, if I would accompany him, on this and in case they need a swimmer which they never had before, in case. How the skipper thinks about these, I don't know, but so he said "You just come along." And so, as I say, and we went out and got out and got to the pilot and the water was rather choppy, and we had a terrible time getting the whale boat close to the pilot, and you know, and so I, you know being an old lifeguard, I know, because the guy is hurt, and he can’t keep his head up, and I did, clothes and all, I went in the water and saved that, I brought him back. I said [to the captain] "let me go get him and keep his head up, because he couldn't keep his head up.” I’ll keep his head up, and then we came back and they pulled him aboard, and that was the start of the complete swimming program in the history of the navy, and then, little old, “squally-squirt” Mel, was the first swimmer in the history of the navy to serve going out and rescuing a pilot. Isn’t that interesting? And it's all because of Martha. And, I kept going, I'll show her. I'm gonna get a medal, and get hurt, not too bad, but just get medal, but just don’t be hurt, so I can get back to show that Martha.

Cieply: Just to back up a little bit...

Collins: As I saw, can you imagine, also, the beautiful, thoughtful. Here they, the captain selected me, of 330, three sailors, to be the swimmers for the *USS Franks DD554*. Isn't that a beautiful story? And it's all because that dumb Martha. Okay. Now, I’m sorry.

Cieply: Let’s just back up, just real quick to talk about boot camp, just briefly. What was that experience...

Collins: Boot camp was just a sort of a nothing time. Uh, six year, I mean, it was, jiminy, boot camp, you went up and they make you out into sailors. You know, so you went through all the sailor things and all those sorts of things, and you, when you spend about six months, about uh, uh, a month, no three months in boot camp, and then you go out and you're assigned to a Ship or a, somewhere else. Boot camp was nothing. In fact, I bet, all the what-you-call, I was a sharp guy with a gun too, because my, I knew all the slips sorts of things, that I was picked to stand in front and be at attention and honor all those sorts of people.

Cieply: Was your first assignment with the Franks after boot camp?

Collins: What was that?

Cieply: Was your first assignment, position with the *USS Franks* after boot camp?

Collins: Uh, yes, Oh yeah, because remember I'd have been earlier, but I went back to see. And then, the minute I got back, aboard that ship, the *USS Franks DD554* and off to fight the Enemy.

Cieply: Now, destroyers are relatively small ships. They're screen ships, so what was it like to be on...

Collins: Their whole job is they just protect all of the big ships and as I say, if a torpedo, if they fire a torpedo, you run and get in front of it to save the big ship. Can you imagine that? Yeah, but I don’t know what. And we started out in the Marshall Islands, uh down there, an uh, in fact that’s where I got my first touch of things. And when the captain asked me to go along, but uh, uh, as I saw, but you know, I still think of the great honor it was, and he was killed later with the Franks, the interesting thing, to be selected as the chief swimmer, god that just inspired me.

Cieply: Now, how did the ship fare during the high seas, like bad weather, was it rough? Did you ever get sea sick?

Collins: Uh, yeah, um the weather, in my swimming experience?

Cieply: Just on the boat?

Collins: Well the ship generally was just nice, but we got stuck uh, uh, in Halsey's Typhoon out there, and uh, uh, gee, it was over probably 170 miles per hour something like that. And three destroyers capsized and sank in that typhoon. Terrible, terrible mistake, that uh, because he was allured to get out of there and uh, he decided not to do it, and our skipper, and so uh, but three destroyers capsized and sank in that typhoon, in Halsey's typhoon. Terrible typhoon. But as I say though, our job was just to protect the big ships, and uh provide, when they're landing to provide uh shore artillery, within the beach so we would, Iron on land, and then try to keep them back as far as the beach so they can at least get to the beach without any trouble. So they came probably two-hundred yards off the beach to make sure that uh the uh army that the Marines and the uh the army could get in.

Cieply: Now, before you went off to uh fight, the enemy, you wrote in your diary that you made a couple stops along the West Coast and then to Pearl Harbor do you remember that much from those experiences.

Collins: No, no, no, just the big thing was just crossing the equator where you became the uh, uh, uh, whatever it’s called, the frog or something.

Cieply: The Shellback, that's what they're called.

Collins: Yeah, yeah, but as I say, that’s the big thing for. Uh but uh, before that, uh, uh, nothing, just nothing. We got started a little bit later, uh, in my swimming. And I was also, uh, upon the swimming when we were in the formation, then I was also in charge of a 40mm gun, and that was right in the top of the ship and that was right next to the 5 inch gun that was going off and that didn’t help my hearing. But also that funny thing, uh, uh, talking about that, it’s a funny thing how scared you can get out there, and I was in, Japanese planes would come from everywhere and I’m on the 40mm back there and that’s a big, machine gun, and, you know what tracers are?

Cieply: Yeah.

Collins: Tracers yeah, they were firing the ship, these planes were firing these tracers, I mean, from the airplanes, and I’m up there and I see these tracers coming right at my head, and I tried to get out of, I tried, that space down there is probably about this big [gestures pretty small] tip for the cannon. I tried to get in that space and hide. You don’t know what it's like to see tracers coming right at your head. [They’re] These big fiery, light bullets. You know, I couldn't have gotten to get in there in a thousand years, but I tried so hard to hide. So it’s amazing what you get scared and what you do.

Cieply: Yeah, it really is. Now, do you remember much from your first engagement, in the South Pacific?

Collins: Not really, just really, just the being with the 3rd Fleet or the 5th Fleet, which is a big thing. We were in almost every operation from the Marshall Islands, Tarawa, Bougainville, everything. We were in everything. I don’t remember. The only thing I remember about that is my son once asked me if I had ever been to Savo Island, and that’s where all the ships were sunk, uh, Savo Island, down [by] Bougainville, and I said, “We were just there and I could spit on it.” But that is to say you don’t remember. You forget, after all the same, because each one is new and exciting.

Cieply: Yeah, definitely

Collins: And so that’s about the time where I started this regular lifesaving pilgrimage.

Cieply: Yeah, now I remember in your journal and then in a couple of the articles, you said, during those rescues, you were armed with a knife, to ward off sharks.

Collins: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well you know, after our first operation, uh, uh, you know, they all got together and this is the first time in the history of the navy that our skipper decided to try something different, because a whale boat was just too slow to go out and get the whale boat down into the water, then out to the pilot and these guys are hurt and it's just too slow. And so after my first jump, in wet clothes and all, jump in the water and got the pilot, he came back and he said "We got a good," the skipper "We got a good swimmer, why don't we set up where he would dive off the ship. Dive off. He'd have a line on him." And so because with the pilot with all that foul weather gear, you’re not gonna get him back, so they tied a line so I'll get to the pilot. I only dive off the ship, it's only about fifteen or twenty feet. I swim out, I get the pilot, and I bring the Pilot back. And then the problem is to get him into the stretcher because we have to get him in the stretcher, see. And the first couple of times were just terrible because I went out and got the pilot no problem whatsoever, but I brought him back, you know, the stretcher has these things coming up, both sides, and getting him in the, in the stretcher, and it, an interesting thing that nobody had thought about, on our second rescue... As they didn't and so when the ship, we had not counted on this, when the ship rolled to the right, the stretcher’s under water, when it rolled to the left, it's out of the water, and I have this pilot being beat up on side of the ship, and I'm trying to get him in the stretcher. We just can't do it, and I say "we gotta find some way to keep this thing level." So, smart people on the ship, they took a 5 inch powder keg, 5 inch gun, powder and but it on both sides and kept it nice and even. So, as I said, we're learning as we go along.

Cieply: Now, how long would those pilots stay on the destroyer after you rescued them?

Collins: Oh goodness me, uh, normally they went back there the next day, because we would take care them, and they would stay overnight if they're hurt, and we'd take care of them, but generally we would just get the pilot and get him on board and then the nicest part about uh, about, uh, this part of the program, for every pilot we brought back, they gave us twenty gallons of Ice Cream. We were a destroyer, we never had ice cream, and ice cream was the biggest thing to get. And so, after every pilot, we would take care of him, and then send him back in a day or two and then they would send us twenty gallons of ice cream. And you know, it got to the point where the sailors, they couldn't care less about me in the water being beat up as a barnacle, all they cared about was getting the ice cream. Ice cream was big, and I said the only thing that made it important, the minute they get the pilot, they were so excited to get the ice cream that they left me in the water twice. [Laughter] I’m just kidding it was only once. Can you believe that? Ice cream. But as to say, every carrier used to ask for us, every carrier. And that's, and nerves are probably the biggest thing, and you know, the nerve for every thou...every four hours they would take planes off and they would land planes, and you know, you had to be up, two-thousand yards astern, we would watch those planes go right over us, then they would shut, in the mid dark of night, and they would shut off to land and then you don't know your sweat. Because you know if they went in the water, you're gonna have to go in and get them. And so you just are really concerned and that’s every four hours waiting for that to happen.

Cieply: Now, you, how many rescues do your remember making? Rescues, of the pilots?

Collins: Oh, twenty-two. Yeah, twenty-two.

Cieply: Now were you the only one on your boat who...

Collins: What now?

Cieply: Were you the only swimmer?

Collins: No, no, no, no, no. No, you know, the interesting thing about this, probably the third, uh, probably the third rescue, we hadn't thought about this, and so, I hadn't thought about that, and so as, about the third rescue, I dove off the ship, not knowing what was out there, but just knowing approximately where it is. I swam out there and the plane was still up, and had not submerged, and so I swam out there and there were two pilots sitting on the wings of the plane. The plane didn't go down so they were safe, they were on the bus, and I got, beautiful, beautiful day for swimming. So I swam out and I got them and I said "Are you guys okay?" he said "Yeah, we're fine." And I said "Well okay." And they knew I had a line and "Now, do you want to hold on to me, or do you want me to hold onto you?" He said "We'll hold on to you." "That's fine." So they held on and we were talking pleasantly like this all the way back. Then I decided, we decided, we need more swimmers because if the planes have two pilots, or sometimes three, but isn’t that fun?

Cohen: It is fun. It is so wild imagining two pilots sitting on the wing and all of a sudden that somebody from the army swims by. [Laughter]

Collins: As I was saying, that was one of the really nice times I've had. Nicest guys, neither hurt, but you know and they about, about, at that time, then the ship smarten up, and uh, they said "You know, we have to help Mel." Okay, so they took me aside and they said "Now we're gonna take care of you because we love you." So they decided that they were going to give me... but a little thing around my with my rope, put a little thing around your, and have a nice knife on me so I could fight off, cause a majority of the pilots are hurt and bleeding, he says "So we'll give you a knife to fight off the sharks." I said "Oh boy isn't that nice." I’m serious. Can you believe that, a knife to fight off a shark? And you know, the skipper took me aside, about the second time I had made it, and he took me in and it was just all love and grace and he said "You know Mel, I want you to know, I don't like doing this, but I can’t sacrifice three hundred people for you, and so, if you’re in the water when you’re rescuing a pilot and they start shooting at us, what we're gonna have to do, we'll throw you your line, and then we'll come back and pick you up later." I'm serious. Now, can you believe that? And I thought "Boy how nice. He is so kind." And these things are just delicious. They are such fun things. That you just can't uh have that, I’m sorry but I don’t mean to interrupt.

Cieply: No, it’s alright. Now, did you're destroyer become known as the rescue ship?

Collins: Oh yes. Oh God. After the first time use of swimmers, everybody said, "Get the Franks. Get the Franks, because they use swimmers." Because nobody and we sent after the second thing, we got it official, we sent it to the navy bureau of personnel and they said that we were the first to use a swimmer, uh in the program, and all of the destroyers should be using this because it is a quality program. But as I say, all these fun things going through. But I thought that was so nice of the captain to take me aside and say well, because I understood that they can't sacrifice one scrawny kid in the water to save the ship.

Cieply: Now uh, on top of the rescuing, you served on the boat as a gunner, correct?

Collins: What now?

Cieply: You served on the destroyer as a gunner, correct?

Collins: Yes. Just destroyer Franks and Destroyer Blue, but the war was over, when the uh, uh, when I was transferred to the Blue, and there was no action at all on that.

Cieply: But you said you were also a radar man, correct?

Collins: Yeah, that when I won an award, remember that’s when I was a radar man. And I was in combat, CIC, Combat Information Center, as a radar man?

Cieply: Was there radar on the boat?

Collins: Yeah, oh yeah, radar was on the boat because you have to keep track of everything, yeah. And you have to have radar.

Cieply: Now...

Collins: Now, this is about having a propeller, we knew nothing about jets.

Cieply: Yeah, wow. Now, during your experiences there, you saw a lot of islands...

Collins: Pilots?

Cieply: Islands.

Collins: Oh God, yeah. Oh God, Marshall, Tarawa, Bougainville. You saw everything. We were in every operation right up to and including the Battle of Tokyo.

Cieply: Now uh...

Collins: And I was still rescuing Pilots.

Cieply: Still? Wow.

Collins: In fact, I rescued a pilot in the Battle of the Philippines, in uh, oh, God, the Straits of the Philippines, deepest water in the world. Five miles right straight down.

Cieply: That's crazy. I'm assuming the water could be very rough when you rescued Pilots?

Collins: Oh pilots loved us. Yeah, and in fact, uh, uh, uh, I rescued a pilot uh and you know, you don’t know about this until later, and I rescued a lady [a pilot] and if you read my material, he's in the Ernie Pyle story. And uh, this was the pilot that was saved, and so, uh, little did I know, sixty-five, when I was at National, about sixty-five years later, I received a letter, because they read the article in the Legion Magazine, "A Sailors Dairy," and she said "I want to contact you to see if you saved my husband," and I was and we became very good friends, but from the paper they contacted me and another one through the same thing. And said, “I wanted to thank you for that.” But as I say, uh, then, you know, we move from the South Pacific up to the North Pacific in the Battle of Tokyo. Okay, and, we're getting to the end of the war, in this operation, they sent about, we had about two thousand planes, okay, and I because I, I just knew, that if a pilot go up there, that I wouldn't have a chance. And so, I swept two thousand planes and then we stayed up, and they all come back except two. Two were in the air. Okay, and so we got the other on and the next to last one went into the water and I had to jump out and get him, not the thing that you have to remember about this, we up around Japan, from the first carrier based raid on Japan, and the water is very, very cold, ice cold, you know, and so, when that last pilot didn't get in and hit the water, next last went into the water. I knew, that I'm gonna have to get down to my swimsuit and dive out in Ice Water and rescue that pilot, and I'm getting concerned about Hypothermia and I said, "boy, I'm really frightened about this," and, but I dove in and got the pilot and brought the pilot back and it was okay, but I was awarded a Navy and Marine Corps Medal for that.

Cieply: Now, in April of 1945, the *USS Franks* was hit by the *New Jersey*.

Collins: Yeah, the New Jersey. We were in our... we were in our formation, a part of the formation, then we were serving as plane guard in that, and after we rescued the pilot, we were going back to our position in the screen, protect them, and the New Jersey, the battleship, hit us, and uh, killed the skipper; my dear friend. And uh, jeez as I say, it took off the whole super structure, and that was it for us.

Cieply: Yeah. Now, you speak highly of your captain, what was that like, losing your captain?

Collins: He was always very cordial and very nice, and tried to keep me posted, uh, um, and the only two times that I didn’t think too highly of him. Was the first time, where he said "If anything happened, we're gonna throw you your line and come back and get you,” and the next time, this happened about three of four pilots later. So uh, oh God, I forget where I was. It'll come back. Oh I know where I was now. But anyway, uh we were rigged for a mid-ship rescue. And the pilot, like Barney Bovil [??], he was a way out there to go to the pilot. To pick up the pilot, you know cause he could get up and get us very close, and it's only fifty, fifty yards for me to swim. Well we're always rigged for a mid-ship rescue. Okay, now, he went up and was just stopping, but we were going past the pilot. You know, and so, uh this he hadn't counted on, and now he didn't think about this at all. So he gave, I’m in the water, he gave Emergency Full Astern. That puts me right by the screws. The next thing I know is all this terrible, I'm rolling like that. I'm underwater. Stroke after stroke, I can't get up, I can’t move and it's drawing me. The only thing that helped me from going into the screws was my line felled up aboard the thing and so I'm in the water, taking stroke and I can't move, but at least I'm not going into the screws, so I finally broke to the surface and [drowning noises] and they came in and got me. I’m serious. Oh the skipper felt terrible about that, but got God that was a terrifying experience.

Cieply: Did you end up getting the pilot after that?

Collins: No. Goodness me no. God I was lucky to get me back aboard ship.

Cieply: Now after the New Jersey hit the franks, you were sent...

Collins: Yeah killed the captain [unintelligible] we had to, we had to limp into off shore, and then we left him there and got back for the... This is later in the war.

Cieply: So before that, you were at the Battle Iwo Jima, it said in your dairy you were helping with that with the Franks.

Collins: I was what?

Cieply: The Franks was there supporting the fleet at Iwo Jima. Do you remember that experience?

Collins: The what at Iwo Jima?

Cieply: The fleet.

Collins: Oh yeah, we were at Okinawa, we were at Iwo Jima. We were at all of them yeah.

Cieply: Did you remember what you guys did there?

Collins: Oh yeah, well, we were serving as the, as we always did. We were in the close in support, because for the landing, then what we would do is, we got a pilot there too, but the destroyers command a smaller ship would go in, and they, they were expendable see, and so we would fire everything to make sure that there is nobody to keep the troops about 500 yards away from the beach so our people could land and not lose too many men. So that was always fun too. But as I said we saved a thing from... but a cruiser was a ship, from a cruiser, he sent a signal back. He said, "We wish everybody used swimmers, we'd have more pilots alive today." Now isn’t this interesting.

Cohen: It's fascinating really.

Collins: I'm sorry go ahead.

Cieply: I've lost my train of thought one second. That late in the war though, there were less, you spoke kamikaze planes in you dairy.

Collins: Oh they were terrible.

Cieply: They, I don't know if they targeted you guys.

Collins: It was the latter part of the war it's all they were using. We were scared to death of those things.

Cieply: Do you remember where you first saw that? Or...

Collins: Oh God I don't remember. I don't remember. Oh, you know you're getting shot at so much.

Cieply: I'd just imagine that that is something very jarring. That would take you out of your day to day.

Collins: As I say, you're getting shot at all the time. And so, but... During the latter part of the war, you know they'd go in and they would go in and serenade these pilots and make sure that they had every pleasure and then they would go up and dive into all the ships. We hated them. God, they were just terrible and we ran into a lot of them. The Kamikaze, as I say, we really hated them.

Cieply: Yeah. I don't have much else from the war itself, but anything notable do you remember, any notable story you want to tell about your time out there.

Collins: What now?

Cieply: Is there any notable story that we haven’t covered yet?

Collins: About the Kamikaze?

Cieply: No just about being in the South Pacific at the time before.

Collins: Oh no. The only thing that I remember clearly, again, was the lovely Martha. The only thing that you think about is, the uh, after I was aboard ship, a month later, I received a “Dear Mel” letter, but that’s about the only thing I remember. "Dear Mel, I’ve met another." But that just through genius, you’re either swimming or getting shot at.

Cieply: So, now after the Franks had been hit, where did you go during that time?

Collins: Oh you know, I was aboard the radar, up on the bridge, and we were going back to our place in the screen and uh, uh, all of a sudden, I hear, just an out of ordinary sound, and it knocked me out of the Radar, to watch the radar, and it knocked me clear out of the thing. I said, “What the hell that was?” God and so, I left my station and I ran out onto the bridge and the whole bridge is gone, and I thought “Whoa.” And I hear a message come on the thing from the New Jersey, "I have just hit a Dog-Dog." D-D: Destroyer. "I've just hit a dog-dog."

Cieply: Now after that...

Collins: So I run down there. I didn't know what to do. So I run downstairs to look and there's just nothing to look at. And I say "Are you kidding me. What happened to our ship?" I didn’t even bother. I don’t even. The New Jersey, I don’t think there was even a scar on it. It almost destroyed us.

Cieply: Now you, the Franks into port for repairs, where did you go afterwards? After the Franks got hit?

Collins: Oh, oh, God, the only place we... Yeah we were hauled. We were shipped into the ship in the port.

Cieply: Now where did you go? Did you get assigned again afterwards?

Collins: No, no, no, no. No they, they went back, this is the latter part of the war, now you understand and so no, I mean, and then they say, so they send the Franks back to states I mean because they can't fix it over there. They sent it back. That was the time I left the Franks too.

Cieply: Now what ship did you go to the second time?

Collins: The Blue. *USS Blue* [DD-774]

Cieply: Was that another destroyer?

Collins: I don't remember anything about that. Yeah, the war was over.

Cieply: Did you write a lot to your family at home while you were in the war?

Collins: Do what now?

Cieply: Did you write a lot home during the war.

Collins: Yeah. Yeah. We kept it. You know it’s a funny thing about that. Uh, during the war my brother Jim, I was aboard a destroyer, he was aboard an Air Craft Carrier. Okay, now, now, think about this. My mother, unbeknown to her, I had not written to her, I had not heard a letter, but about oh two or three weeks, a month after that, she says, "Son, I had the worst dream in my entire life. I dreamed that you were surrounded by water and couldn't get out." Now, about the same time, my brother Jim rescued a pilot on the Lexington from a burning plane. Receive a not from mom "I just read... I mean I just woke up from this dream and here was Jim surrounded by fire." Can you believe it? A mother’s intuition and this is fact. I wrote her back, "You don’t know how true this is,” but in water and in fire and both received a Navy and Marine Corps Medal of Honor [i.e. precise name is Navy and Marine Corps Medal] for that.

Cieply: Now, the end of the war, where were you...

Collins: Martha was no longer in my heart.

Cieply: Now...

Collins: Then I, then after that I, you know, I was back about two months, then I went to college.

Cieply: But...

Collins: Four year letterman in three sports.

Cieply: Wow. Right, but right before that, when you were still enlisted, how did you hear about both V-E and V - J Day.

Collins: The what now?

Cieply: Victory in Europe and then Victory in Japan day. What were those experiences like? Do you remember?

Collins: Okay, you have to talk up a little bit.

Cieply: Okay, Victory in Europe, were you stationed somewhere when you heard about that.

Collins: Yeah, yeah, the war was winding down. We heard it on the radio just like everybody else that the war had ended.

Cieply: Did everybody celebrate?

Collins: Yeah, and then we knew that we were all going home, and the thing I felt good about was the people with, that had outstanding things happen in the Navy would be the first, the medal winners, would be the first to go. And I said, "Boy, I'm happy" because I was medal winner.

Cieply: Did you, how did you get home after that?

Collins: Oh you took a train home.

Cieply: You got a train home.

Collins: So you’re numbered out of the service.

Cieply: Now where did you go to college after you were discharged?

Collins: Oh 1946.

Cieply: Where did you go to school?

Collins: Coe. Uh, yeah. Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Cieply: Now, did you have much trouble adjusting back to civilian life after the war?

Collins: No not really.

Cieply: It was pretty simple?

Collins: Yeah. Yeah. Because even, it's even nice, you're not getting shot at, even the more pleasant. But yeah, but I went to Coe on you know, war, tuition free because of being a service man. Yeah, and as I say in football, I lettered in three sports, football, basketball, and golf, and they didn’t have a swimming team so I went to the Y and they had a swimming team and I won the state championship. Yeah, but then I left there, and I was a teacher and a coach, and I was the YMCA physical director, and goodness, I was just trying to find something that I liked, but I went back to Coe as 11 years as a college admissions officer, and then I went to Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa as uh, in their admissions office and then I retired and then I retired and then I decided to go with something I like and I went with the National University of Health Sciences in Lombard Illinois, and there I was a, in fact I had a sailors dairy, I had another book, the first Navy Seal all published. I had a story published the Tin Can Sailors, and uh, published, they published the Joy of Remembrance, you know I tried to keep up with the world, but uh, after I received the Navy and Marine Corps medal of honor, the president, President...

Cieply: Kennedy right?

Collins: Yeah, but, but, uh, yeah, Kennedy, yeah. President Kennedy, I found out had received the navy... the same medal that I had received, or I received the same medal that he had won. And uh, so I really wanted Caroline, or somebody to know how much I loved the Kennedy's and how much, uh, it meant to me to receive the same medal so I wrote a letter to Caroline Kennedy and uh, yeah and told her about how proud I was to be a part of their family and having the same medal. Yeah. And I was also in the Honor Flight Chicago.

Cieply: Yeah, I was going to ask about that.

Collins: Oh, greatest time I've ever had, and I wrote a letter. Did you get my thing? The…

Cohen: The Binder?

Collins: Yes.

Cieply: Yes, it's in there.

Collins: In fact an interesting thing, when I was there, I was selected to be the honorary spokesman, on TV.

Cieply: Really? Wow? Sort of, in that vein, are you active in or were you active in any Veterans organizations after the war?

Collins: No, no. I was... you know, after, all these accolades and honors, came after I went to the National University of Health Sciences and that, that's a small school, only about three-thousand students in Lombard, Illinois, but that’s where I. About found my family and my loved ones and that's where I was awarded an Honorary Degree LLD, Doctor of Laws, uh, oh goodness me, Alumnus of the Year, and, and all those sorts of things. Yeah, and my picture hangs on the wall of that Augustine Building. In the hall of fame, I was in the hall of fame there.

Cieply: And uh, with that, do you want to talk briefly about your honor flight experience...

Collins: I'm retired. I'm retired, uh, from there, a couple of years ago.

Cieply: Now uh, how did you get, if you're not a part of a veterans organization, but how did you find out about the Honor Flights that were going out to D.C?

Collins: How did I find out about Pritzker?

Cieply: Okay?

Collins: Okay. One, uh, I've had a doctor friend and a group of his friends that always wanted to make sure that they get a book written about me, and they love... And I gave them all the copies of everything that had gone on, and they were so proud of me that they said "We're gonna see if we can get a book, or get you published in a book or both." And you'll be my leading lady okay. But as I say, uh, uh, we decided, or they decided, and so I was contacted by a publishing house, and the publishing house that we're interesting in writing a book or a movie about you, so I sent them all the material and then it got to the point where they were couldn't decide and then with all the material, they said that I just did not have enough material for a book. Okay, so then they gave it to another, and he says no we don’t think, his name was Keith Chapman, and he said no, I don’t think you have enough, and you have nothing to do with the, the uh, oh, he named the people who jump in the water, not Seabees, uh. Well, anyway, buy I don’t have enough material, but he says you know, I think somebody, I’m gonna give you the name of somebody and I’m gonna send your name to this place— Pritzker— because they are the ones that will probably do a story about it or be interested in knowing about you because they are the prestige outfit in Chicago, Illinois, And I’ll write them a letter and let them know about you. And so I said "Fine" and then I didn’t think anything about it and then I received a letter from you. A beautiful, beautiful, letter from you, and uh, so, then I was contacted by you and then this follows. And I have arrived at the pearly gates.

Cieply: Now, before we conclude, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Collins: You are a living angel right?

Cohen: I don't know, are you an angel?

Collins: Help, I'm alone here. Okay.

Cieply: Now, is there anything else you'd like to add about your history.

Collins: God, I can't think. I've bored you for probably an hour. But it’s to say it’s a fun like.

Cieply: Well, thank you so much for sharing you story with us.

Collins: It was my pleasure. Now, if you would like to come up, now the place is a mess, would you like to come up and see the pictures or you might want some of this stuff.

Cieply: Now, first we'd just like to present you a challenge coin that we had that we give to all our Veterans for these interviews.

Collins: Now, how do I clip that on me?

Cieply: It's just a coin, it's not a pin.

Collins: It’s a coin. Oh. Oh that’s a beautiful thing. I hope my neck is strong enough to hold it up.

Cieply: So thank you. The Library thanks you for your service to our country and thank you for sharing you story.

Collins: My pleasure indeed. It’s been a fun time for me.