



Fort Smith Historical Society Oral History Center World War II Project Interview with Thurman Jordan

CB: Mr. Jordan, would you give us your full name and your birthdate, please.

JT: I'm Thurman Odell Jordan. I was born (DELETED CONTENT).

CB: Where were you born, what city?

JT: I was born in Chigger Valley, at Driggs, Logan County, Arkansas.

CB: Who were your parents?

JT: My parents were Bethel and Mae Jordan. And in the country at that time, it was pronounced Jerdan.

CB: Oh, really. But it was spelled J-o-r?

JT: J-o-r-d-a-n.

CB: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JT: I had one brother and four sisters.

CB: What were their names?

JT: My brother was Donald. My oldest sister was Mable. Second oldest was Arwelia Rachael. The next one was Dorothy, and my youngest sister was Aneita. Donald and Aneita are dead. Isn't that strange because they are the youngest, the youngest of the siblings. We lived about three miles from Subiaco, and we lived below the top of Rich Mountain. There are two Rich Mountains, one is down near Mena and one's near Subiaco. Well, on Sundays, a group of neighbors and friends and students from Subiaco Abbey would go up to a fire tower built by the Civilian Conservation Corps. On December 7th, 1941, our time, we came down off of Rich Mountain and the fire tower; and at our home, we had a battery operated radio. The announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack had been going on. And so a lot of people in our community hadn't known a thing about Pearl Harbor. But we had a neighbor boy, Riley Hibbs, who was in the Navy and he'd been home on leave from Pearl Harbor and had told us about Hawaii. So we at least knew where Pearl Harbor was located. I was seventeen and I wanted to join the Navy right then. My mother convinced me that I shouldn't go, but to stay home and continue in school. That was good advice because if I'd gone in the Navy then, a lot of ships were being sunk in the Pacific, and I might have fed the fishes.

CB: Were you raised in Logan County?

JT: Yes, until the age of nineteen. I was nineteen in April and went into the Navy in April.

CB: Oh, really. Now, what year was that?

JT: 1943.

CB: What were you doing before you went into the Navy?

JT: I had spent two previous summers in the Civilian Conservation Corps.

CB: Oh, really. Where were you located?

JT: The first tour was on Mt. Magazine, and the second tour was in the Rogue River National Forest of Oregon.

CB: Rogue River?

JT: R-o-g-u-e.

CB: And how long were you in each one of those? 2

JT: Just a couple of months each. I considered it a summer job. The first tour was spent on Mt. Magazine. In the Fall, I requested to go back to school, which I did, and that was in 1941. And then in 1942, I enrolled again and went to the Rogue River National Forest in Oregon.

CB: I bet that was interesting. What did you do there?

JT: On Mt. Magazine, I was in a carpentry crew. In Oregon, I just did general labor, like laying water pipe to a resort that the United States Government had purchased, then helped build a building down at the headquarters in Medford. We also cleaned up what used to be a youth camp which had been bought by the United States Government. I had boney shoulders and was tall and lanky. We carried steel water pipes on our shoulders without any padding or anything. The tall men were on the ends, and the ones in the middle could slack, if they wanted to -- some did.

CB: You carried the weight?

JT: And there was a tremendous weight on my boney shoulders. LO: Did your shoulders stay bruised all the time?

JT: Yeah, I felt bruised. Well, my maturity commenced with the Civilian Conservation Corps. I began to acquire some muscle.

CB: That was a really great experience?

JT: It made an easy transition for the CCC boys to go directly into the military service, and many of them did. LO: More so than the ones that left home for the first time?

JT: Who had not been away from home.

CB: Well, that was almost a military discipline.

JT: We learned discipline, we learned work ethic, that's all discipline.

CB: What were you paid in CCC?

JT: Thirty dollars a month, our board and clothing. We only got to keep five dollars.

CB: Twenty-five went home?

JT: Yeah, twenty-five went home.

CB: That was a lot of money, though, wasn't it?

JT: Yeah.

CB: What'd you spend it on?

JT: We had a canteen where you could get candy and Cokes and tobacco, but I didn't smoke. And movies were a nickel or dime, I don't remember.

CB: Well, then you got to go in town on weekends and go to the movie?

JT: Yeah, we were off every weekend.

CB: Well then, you went back to school after that and graduated from high school?

JT: No, I went back to school. And in December of 1942, I was a senior at Paris High School, and I got a draft notice. Well, I was called in April and I went to the recruiting station at Little Rock and I stayed in the Marion Hotel. And I stayed there for three days, and I had meals and lodging in the

Marion Hotel. 3 On the third day, I went up front in this large hall at the recruiting station and asked why had I not been called. They made telephone calls and came back and said, "You're not supposed to be here," and "you can go home or we'd be glad to take you and you can have a choice of Army, Navy or Marines." And I said "Navy," right away. And they said, "Well, you can go home for a week and come back and we'll send you to the Naval Receiving Station at San Diego or you can leave right away and you can go to Great Lakes, Illinois." Well, there was still snow in Great Lakes, Illinois, and I was thinking about sunny California, so I chose San Diego. And I graduated from boot camp and had a pretty wide choice of schools. So I chose Hospital Corps School, because I had, the previous year, been talking to two pharmacist mates who were on a train in Salt Lake City and they said to choose the medical department. You'll have air conditioning and clean sheets. And so I remembered what they said and followed their suggestion. In addition to that, I had enjoyed a First Aid course in December, 1942, at Paris High School and that was still fresh in my memory. So I was ordered to Hospital Corps School in Balboa Park, San Diego, Camp Kidd, right across the fence from the zoo. And in our chemical warfare class, we were looking down into the zoo, where the big cats were. Lions roared and we could hear the other animals making noises. On graduation from Hospital Corps School, the top fifty percent of the class had their choice of duty station, and I scored just about in the middle. And the instructor nurse told me that she knew a wonderful place known as the Corona Naval Hospital. So I chose Corona, and found out it was the Narconian Country Club that had been leased by the Navy and converted to a hospital. It still had a golf course, riding stables, a lake with canoes and it had exotic chickens and other fowl in a pen. The Officers Club was down on the edge of the lake, and I got a job in the Officers Club setting up the bar for the night bartender. I chipped ice and squeezed lemons, and fed the ducks and geese from the balcony. I had a girlfriend in San Bernardino, California. And on the first Christmas that I spent in the Navy, her family took us up to Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear Lake. There was snow up there, and we made snow balls and put them on the front bumper. That was a time when the automobiles had an extended front bumper, and we placed up the snow balls down in the front yard. I remember the address was 890 Vine Street, San Bernardino. Well, I'd been in the Navy about ten months when I saw my name on a draft list to go to sea. I had completed all requirements of a hospital corpsman for general duty, I had completed the academic and practical factors. I had been assigned to sick officers quarters to get practical experience. So I shipped out on the heavy cruiser, Birmingham. The Birmingham had just come from the European Theater where they had seen quite a bit of action. And I was fascinated by the sounds and the activity and the stories of 4 the old salts. We zig-zagged, as soon as we cleared the Golden Gate, out of San Francisco Bay. If you haven't been on a vessel going outside the Golden Gate in February, you can't imagine what you're missing. We were locked in a compartment down below decks and we were given a bucket, or buckets, just in case. And many of the sailors, their first time to go to sea, used those buckets. The petty officer in charge went down to the galley and got something for us to eat. He brought back greasy pork chops and loaves of bread. I ate the bread. All I got was dry heaves and I never felt seasickness again, after being on many ships and even cruising around the world, I never got seasickness. I began to think maybe I would become a career man, even a lifer. I was assigned to Base Hospital Number 8 at Pearl Harbor. They were receiving casualties from Tarawa. I had passed through a receiving station, which was a tent camp that was set up in what is now Nimitz Bowl. There were not enough barracks for all of the recruits going through the receiving station. One day, a Hawaiian farmer came over to the tent camp and said, "I have a warehouse, it's

full of pineapples and some of 'em are getting too ripe to market. You can come over and take all you want." So those pineapples became footballs for us sailors, we played football with them. And of course, we got them splattered all over our dungarees and the whole camp smelled like pineapple. And one day at Base 8, I saw a notice on the bulletin board stating that a battleship was coming in to port and they needed replacement hospital corpsmen. I immediately signed on the list and found out that this battleship, the beautiful U.S.S. Indiana, had been rammed by another battleship, the U.S.S. Washington, in night exercises in the Marshall Islands. Both ships had to come in for repair, and it was decided that the Indiana could be repaired at Pearl Harbor without coming back to the United States. So I went aboard the Indiana. The Chief Pharmacist Mate, Mason Adolph Nelson, was at the gangway and he stuck out his hand and said, "Happy Birthday, Jordan." He had reviewed my record and knew that, indeed, it was my birthday, April 5th, 1944. I stayed on the Indiana for twenty-two months and participated in six major campaigns.

CB: Which campaigns were those?

JT: These were campaigns for which we were awarded a battle star: Truk, Ponape, is called Pohnpei now, the Marianas Operations, Southern Palau Islands.

CB: What was that?

JT: Southern Palau, P-a-l-a-u, Islands, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Kamaishi and Hamamatsu, home islands, Japan.

CB: You were on-board ship during all of these, is that --

JT: I was on-board ship. And now, I'm gonna tell you about the Occupation of Japan. On 20, August, 1945, I left the U.S.S. Indiana and joined, after being transported on three 5 other ships, the 4th Reinforced Combat Regiment of the 6th Marine Division. LO: 1st Combat Reinforced?

JT: The 4th Reinforced Combat Regiment of the 6th Marine Division, to occupy and take over the Yokosuka Navy Yard, and that was on 30, August, 1945. We landed on Green Beach near the gunnery department building. We received blanket orders. And we noted that all the streets in the Yokosuka Naval Yard had been renamed and numbered. And we had streets like Halsey Boulevard, Nimitz Boulevard, Spruance Avenue; these were the leading Admirals of the Pacific Fleet. Halsey was commander of the famous 3rd Fleet and Task Force 58. At the Yokosuka Naval Base, we lowered the meatball flag and raised Old Glory.

CB: What's a meatball flag? The Japanese flag?

JT: That's the red fireball on a white background. And this was when the signing ceremony was going on out on the U.S.S. Missouri in Tokyo Bay. We saw wave after wave of aircraft going over. It was a spine-tingling sight.

CB: How did you all feel about the surrender of Japan, the dropping of the atom bomb?

JT: Well, having been at sea, we got very little information about the bombing at that time, so I had no feelings except we won. We wanted to win, whatever it took.

CB: Right.

JT: It was much later that I heard all the pros and cons about whether we should have dropped the atomic bombs. To this day, I would have us do it again.

CB: I think most people feel that way.

JT: I would do it again based on the information I have of the atrocities that were committed. The reason we got no resistance on landing is because of the kind treatment of the Emperor and he did not lose face with the Japanese people. And if I had time for a long story I'd tell you that two of my favorite books on anthropology are Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, and *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, which I have in my bookcase, there. And she explains Japanese culture and why they acted as they did. And the Japanese people completely separate themselves from the military high command in their feelings about the war. And they were, for the most part, unaware of the atrocities that had been committed in China Korea, Manchuria and some of the islands throughout the Pacific. Now, for example, I doubt if they knew that Naval aviators who were shot down and recovered, became stir fry for Japanese officers. The liver stir fry was a delicacy.

CB: Oh, the American aviators?

JT: Yeah.

CB: Oh, I hadn't heard that.

JT: Nine aviators were shot down over the Bonin Islands. One of 'em was George Bush, who later became President of the United States. Well, he was recovered by a United States submarine that happened to be in the area. The others were captured and they were tied up to trees or stakes. One of 'em was taken down into a bomb crater and butchered. The Japanese officer in command ordered the medical officer to butcher the aviator and save the liver, and the liver became stir fry for the officers. And there were other cases of that nature that happened on Iwo Jima. The Japanese public probably was unaware that the Chinese and other nationalities of captives became guinea pigs for biological and chemical experiments to see what their reaction would be and how long they could endure or survive. The experimental procedures were labeled Project 731 and a report on it has been declassified. Prior to the Project being declassified, you couldn't get our World War II scientists to talk about it. LO: Why is that?

JT: Well, I've talked to a chemist who was at Pine Bluff Arsenal, where poison gases were made for the United States. And I asked him about this and he said he never heard of it. So I suppose they have ultra-secret clearances; and if they know, they will never talk. It's the same way with U-2 pilots. You will not get a U-2 pilot to explain in detail what they did. I know two of 'em, I know two of 'em real well, they're friends of mine. You get no details from 'em. Or course, now the U-2 Program has been declassified. Back on the topic of occupation: This was the first occupation of Japan by a foreign power, first occupation in all history. Then after a few days of occupation, I returned to my ship.

CB: What did you see while you were on land?

JT: What I saw was I was assigned to a sanitation crew and there were mosquitoes, there were mosquitoes and there were rats as big as cats running through the open sewers. And they had monkeys in a cage. It seemed as if all the Japanese people were attracted to monkeys. We fed them vegetables and fruit from our field kitchen. And so the sanitation crew was allowed access to all the buildings and all of the tunnels, while being on the lookout for booby traps. We saw locomotives intact in tunnels undercover, where they had been protected from bombs and shelling. Before the occupation, we sailors in the fleet were asked if we could operate a locomotive. We wanted to keep what was left of the railways intact, which they did. I had a shipmate friend, Floyd Thomas Brisco, who was from Booneville, Arkansas. He was a pharmacist and his family operated the Rexall Drug Store at Booneville, Arkansas. His dad was a locomotive engineer on the Rock Island Line, from Arkansas to end of the line at Tucumcari, New Mexico. He used to ride in the cab with his dad, so when he got a questionnaire asking if he could operate a locomotive, he said, "Sure,

sure, I can operate one." But the occupation force didn't have to use any operators from the Fleet. The Japanese engineers kept their jobs and the railroads were put back in operation.

CB: Well, I'm surprised they had railroad track. I would have thought it had been bombed out of existence. 7

JT: Well, some locomotives survived in the tunnels. They had heavy cranes and the locomotives and other heavy equipment. I've compared notes with others who occupied Japan, and they found aircraft in tunnels under mountains by the thousands. I'm just trying to answer questions about what I personally saw and experienced at that time.

CB: How did you manage to clean up and sanitize with vermin like that running around, the rats? How did you get rid of those?

JT: Well, really, I don't know. I think we just pointed it out to sailors and they brought in an assassination crew.

CB: Just shot 'em? LO: Target practice?

JT: We sprayed, we sprayed for mosquitoes and other vectors. And somebody else, the non-medical work crew, I guess, disposed of the rats.

CB: I can imagine. LO: Were the people hungry when you got there?

JT: Well, there was food in the kitchen. I didn't have contact with civilians. There were large vats of food. They had left vegetables and rice in those cook vats and there were utensils on the tables, as if the cooks had just walked out in mid-preparation.

CB: Were you involved in the Medical Corps there while you were on land, or you went back to the ship then?

JT: I was with the 4th Reinforced Combat Regiment, 6th Marine Division, as a pharmacist mate corpsman. You say "medic".

CB: I'm sorry.

JT: Marines don't go anywhere without their corpsmen, and they're either called by their name or corpsman or Doc. And when U.S. Navy Corpsmen are serving with the Marines, they become Fleet Marines. They become Fleet Marine Corpsmen.

CB: Now, you were aboard ship at that time?

JT: No, I was ashore. As I said, I was ashore serving as a medical corpsman for the Marines. LO: So is that normal? I noticed in the Afghanistan, not Afghanistan, but the Iraq War, that I see naval corpsmen with the Marines and Army. So the Navy --

JT: Same thing. LO: -- provides it. They don't have their own corpsmen?

JT: The Navy provides corpsmen for the Marines. I have a whole seventeen page article explaining what a Fleet Marine Corpsman is. You may look at it when you have time. LO: So you know, you grow up or I grew up as a child thinking, Navy, you're on ships, you know. I didn't think about -- This has been a real learning experience for me to realize that the Navy furnishes that service for the other Armed Forces.

JT: See, I don't fit into the mold of your standard questionnaire. There's not enough room anyway. LO: Yeah, 'cause you could go anywhere then. You could have been sent with any regiment, anyplace. 8

JT: Right. That was special duty for me.

CB: How long were you with this Fleet Marine Division, this 6th Marine Division?

JT: After six days, I went back to my regular ship, which had come in and anchored in Tokyo Bay. At the Yokosuka Naval Base, we were allowed access to a warehouse that was full of rifles and Browning automatic shotguns. We had our choice. We could have a rifle or a Browning automatic shotgun, and I chose a rifle. It's a Japanese .25 caliber Arisaka. And I brought it back to the United States and it's in my gun cabinet in the living room.

CB: We have to get a picture of that.

JT: This is the nomenclature on it (indicating). LO: What was the other gun besides the Browning rifle that you had a choice of?

JT: Japanese .25 caliber rifle. It's an Arisaka. LO: So they were just stacked in that warehouse?

JT: Well, it was like an armory, it was like an armory and the Japanese just turned it over to us. Now, they did say and later told us, I never did get the word, to obliterate this chrysanthemum which is the Emperor's symbol. You can see on my rifle, it's still got that chrysanthemum, and I'm not gonna obliterate it. I made no commitment to remove it.

CB: How interesting. LO: My grandfather came back with a rifle, but from the South Pacific, and I'm wondering if that was the same deal. You were offered a souvenir?

JT: Yes, officers got the swords and the daggers. And enlisted men were searched, shook down and searched several times in case we had one up our pant leg or something. When we got back to the ship, the ship's armory took our souvenir weapon and put 'em in a lock box. When we got to the United States, they gave them back, or when we were detached from the ship. I only found out about obliterating the chrysanthemum from friends at the American Legion Post 31 not very long ago. I took my rifle down there and let them play with it. An ex-Marine, Joe Bob King, pointed out to me that that chrysanthemum is supposed to have been wiped out. LO: That makes your rifle more valuable, though, because it's got it, I would think, as an antique.

JT: Yeah. In my mind, as a souvenir, it's more valuable. JW: Original condition is always better. What happened after that, going in chronological order, if that's the way you would like to tell.

JT: Well, that was the end of the war, and I reenlisted in the regular Navy and stayed in to serve in Korea and Vietnam.

CB: So the occupation of those islands was the last act that you were involved in in World War II?

JT: Yes. When the surrender was declared, technically, the war was over. And we won that one; unlike Korea, where we ended in a stalemate, armistice. LO: Or Vietnam? 9

JT: I was also in those wars. Korea, two years. You may not want to record this. I was in Korea two years, and actually, that was more interesting to me than World War II. The occupation of Japan, that was a highlight, that was a highlight of that war for me and the fact that we won.