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J. Willard Dyer (September 13, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. J. WILLARD DYER

September 13, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with J. Willard Dyer. J, the first name initial, stands for Jonathan. We are in Whittier, California, now. The residence of Mr. Dyer is in Upland, California. Today's date, September 13, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Dyer, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

DYER: I was born in De Kalb County, Missouri, near the towns of Stewartsville and Amity, on September 25, 1914.

ARENA: And would you mind giving a brief resume of your educational background?

DYER: I was born on a farm in this location, which is about twenty-five miles east of St. Joseph, Missouri. I went to a one-room, rural grade school, and graduated after four years of high school from Amity. I went one year to junior college and graduated from Warrensburg State University at Warrensburg [Missouri] with a B.A. [Bachelor of Arts] and a B.S. [Bachelor of Science].

ARENA: Was that one-room schoolhouse the elementary school from first grade through the eighth, by the way?

DYER: That is correct.

ARENA: What do you recall of the education you got under those circumstances, looking back?

DYER: Well, I think it was basic. We didn't have a lot of things that they have today. We had a lot of the basic that they perhaps miss today. We had a lot of fun, and there were times when it was difficult and hard, but we enjoyed it.

ARENA: You say you were born on a farm. Did you have farm chores to perform, say before and after school, and that routine?

DYER: We certainly did.

ARENA: Would you give a brief resume of your career to date, including, of course, the period of your military service?

DYER: After graduating from Warrensburg, I taught high school for one year at the town of New Hampton, Missouri, which was very close to the Iowa line.

ARENA: And do you mind if I ask you what subjects you did teach in high school?

DYER: I taught math and physics and coached the basketball team. It was a rather small high school and you had to be quite versatile. I don't think we had any teachers in that school who were specialists in any one field. After a year of teaching school, I started on my flying career, and this was something that I had wanted to do from the time that I saw the first World War I plane, flying in an old Chautauqua when I was a few years old, I think preschool; but I remember seeing it, and I know I made my decision to be a pilot at that time, and it fortunately worked out that way.

So I went down to Pensacola [Florida] in 1937 and graduated from there as a naval aviator in October of 1938, and I reported to San Diego [California] for duty. And I chose the Marine Corps. I didn't know any difference between the Marine Corps and the Navy at the time I went in, but the Marine Corps required a person to be a college graduate and the Navy would allow you to enter with two years of college. So because of that reason I decided to go in the Marine Corps, and I'll say that I've never regretted the decision. I spent two years in San Diego in various squadrons. At one time I was in the squadron that was later on to become the famous Wake Island squadron.

ARENA: Is this the one that possibly included [Joseph] Joe Foss?

DYER: No, Joe Foss was a little bit later than that. These were people who were captured on Wake Island after three or four weeks of bitter battle after Pearl Harbor, or maybe six weeks. I don't know how long they lasted, but they gave a good account of themselves. I know that Frank Tharin and somebody else went out and sank a Jap cruiser with 100-pound bombs, and the airplanes they were flying at that time were rather antiquated compared to what we had later on. I believe that Frank Tharin is still on active duty. He would be a major general in the Marine Corps.

ARENA: By the way, while you were in San Diego--it would be a coincidence--but do you recall getting into this part of Southern California as well, Whittier? Were you conscious, for example, that there even was a Whittier?

DYER: Yes, I knew a great deal about this area of California because my grandfather had moved out here, Grandfather Fred Paddock had moved to Covina [California] in 1919 or 1920. Although he had passed away in 1937, my grandmother still lived in Covina and she lived on an orange ranch that they had, and for two years I was up here to visit her at least one weekend every month. My route used to be on Harbor Boulevard, which passes right by Disneyland today.

ARENA: Did you ever hear that the President's football coach, Chief [Wallace J.] Newman, had been a coach in that area; in one of the high schools, as a matter of fact? Chief is his nickname. His full name is Wallace Newman, and he brought several of the high school players who graduated with him when he came to Whittier College. Did that ever come up in any way? Or possibly even with President Nixon when you did meet him later on?

DYER: No, I don't think that we ever really got into that. I knew that he was from Whittier, but we never had time to sit down and talk about things like that, although it would have been very interesting. Covina was a very big football power as a high school team in those days. They had a lot of players who went on and became All Americans at Southern Cal [University of Southern California] and other places.

ARENA: Would you mind continuing then with your summary of your career?

DYER: Well, after two years at San Diego, the Navy decided to enlarge the training at the various primary bases. We called them elimination bases in those days. They asked for one additional volunteer to go to each base. This was a very choice job, and also we thought we were going to get out in another year and pursue our other careers, so I asked for Kansas City [Kansas] and was given that duty. My fourth year in the Navy was spent as a primary instructor in Kansas City at old Fairfax Field. This was in the days before the Olathe Naval Training Station had been built. It's about thirty miles southwest of Kansas City.

ARENA: And after that?

DYER: Well, of course, Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, changed all our plans. I happened to be visiting my parents when that news came over the radio. We all dashed back to our duties, and the next year was spent in quite stepped-up and intensive training, and we were in the process, also, of building this new base

out at Olathe, That summer, the summer of 1942, a request came out for pilots with at least 2500 hours to volunteer to go through a training school with American Airlines at Fort Worth, Texas, to become multi-engine pilots. So I sent in my name.

ARENA: About how many hours, if you recall, had you by that time?

DYER: I think right around 2500 hours, something in that area. Anyway, I was sent down to Fort Worth the first of October, 1942. We spent a month in school, and then we were transferred around to various civilian bases of the airlines, and I was fortunate to get Burbank [California] with American Airlines as my base. I flew with American Airlines for the next two months. I flew two days out of three on cargo planes with their regular pilots, and this way we were able to get a great deal of experience in a day-to-day operation of the airline and the day-to-day operation of the airplane. After that, I reported down to San Diego and I was assigned overseas, and arrived in Noumea, New Caledonia. It's the main town in New Caledonia, at the southern tip of the island of New Caledonia. We arrived down there in March or April of 1943, and I was assigned to the Marine Air Group 15, MAG 15, at Tontoutta [New Caledonia], and I believe it's named after a river. It was about forty miles north from the town. This was a spot selected because there was room enough for an airport. It was very mountainous, but there was a nice area there where we could have a . . . I say that nice area with tongue-in-cheek. It was something like Burbank; there were plenty of hills around it, but still there was a spot for an airport, and this was our main base for our group.

ARENA: By way of bringing this up to date, when did you leave the Navy, and what has been your career since that time?

DYER: Before we do that, I might tell you a little more about what this group was that we reported to . . .

ARENA: Fine.

DYER: . . . if it hasn't been documented before. Admiral [William F.] Halsey, as you know, was the Commander of the South Pacific area.

ARENA: Nicknamed Bull. Do you recall his first name, by the way?

DYER: I don't think I do. I know I've heard it. Everybody called him Bull Halsey. That came up, I think, during the war. I don't think he was called this before that. But we just called him Admiral Halsey. I never thought of anything else. But Admiral Halsey recognized a need for transportation, and he was the type of individual who plowed a straight furrow to get a job done. If things were in the way, he tossed them aside. He wasn't afraid of anybody, or to try something new or different. I think this is the reason he was such a success.

ARENA: And possibly, Bull Halsey.

DYER: Yes. [Laughter] So anyway, he formed this group called the South Pacific Air Transport Command, and once you've said it you can forget that, because it was known as SCAT. It was a special group set up on Halsey's orders and it existed as a command for two years. It was known as SCAT. First of all, we always had a Marine as a C.O. [Commanding Officer] and we had an Army Air Corps officer as the Exec [Executive Officer]. We had five squadrons; three Marine squadrons and two Air Corps squadrons. The Marine squadrons were transport squadrons and the Air Corps squadrons were troop carrier squadrons. We all flew the old--the Air Corps called them C-47's, you know it as the DC-3, and we in the Navy and Marine Corps called it the R4-D.

ARENA: I was in the anti-aircraft myself, and in the South Pacific as far as Hawaii. We were trained to recognize Sky Train and Sky Master. Sky Train was a two-engine job and Sky Master, I remember, was a four-engine job.

DYER: This was two-engine. It was the workhorse that Douglas [Aircraft Company] built that was used all over the world, a two-engine airplane. It originally held twenty-one passengers, and I think we put in twenty-eight, normally, and who knows how many in emergencies. But we operated over an area that was about the size of the United States. We had, eventually, at the time I left, forty-three stations, airports where we had detachments, and we operated regular schedule, plus all sorts of extra sections, and we ran it a whole lot like an airline, and we were as big as any U.S. airline at that time, as big as TWA [Trans World Airlines, Inc.], American [Airlines, Inc.], United [Air Lines], any one in the United States. We had our headquarters at Tontoutta. Later on they moved the group headquarters up to Espiritu di Santos--and don't ask me to spell that one. This was above the island of Efante, and it was seven or eight hundred miles west from Nandi and Suva in the British possessions over there. I can't remember the name of the island now. (Fiji Islands). It's very close to Samoa, just west of Samoa. And it was a sort of halfway stop on the route up to Guadalcanal. And of course, this is where the action was, from Guadalcanal on up in the Solomon Islands. So that gives you a little picture of what SCAT was and what we did.

ARENA: And of course, President Nixon was assigned to SCAT. I'll come back to that.

DYER: We'll pick it up there, if you want to go back to that other question.

ARENA: Well, I just would like you to complete the summary of your own career, say, since that time, and of course, if you have come across or had any direct contact with the President or his family since then, without going into detail, but just stating whether or not you did. And then when we go into detail we can look into that.

DYER: Well, all right. I was released from active duty in September, 1945, and I went with TWA. This was something I had wanted to do all my life, be an airline pilot, and fortunately I was able to get a job, and I've been with TWA ever since then, since September, 1945.

ARENA: And you are flying now?

DYER: I'm presently flying as a captain with TWA. Well, I was a copilot from 1945 to 1955 and have been a captain since that time. I was based for two years in Kansas City. Then I was assigned to New York and flew international on the old Constellations, on international for six years. I came back to domestic operations and checked out as a captain on the Martin twin engines, and later on the . . .

ARENA: Martin twin engines?

DYER: Yes, the 202 and the 404. Quite a famous airplane. It didn't last long because we advanced so rapidly then. It was the counterpart to the Convair 240, 340 and 440 that were flown quite a bit.

ARENA: Did you fly the Pacific, by any chance, in the civilian years?

DYER: I have flown across there as a . . . TWA has an around-the-world route now. I've been on that route a time or two, but not as an active crew member. I was requalified, but I just haven't happened to be on that route. We have people based in San Francisco [California] who fly it every day, but I haven't been based up there. So I've checked out on the various airplanes as they came along. The jets came in 1959, and you understand that the condition of a pilot rises and falls with the economy and the condition of your airline. We go through technological reverses. When you suddenly do things like replace a 300-mile-an-hour airplane with a 600-mile-an-hour airplane that carries twice as many people, why you don't need as many people to work. I was bumped back to copilot in 1961 for a year. But we bought more airplanes, and I was very soon a captain on a Convair 880 jet and on the Boeing 707. Two years ago I qualified on the 747--now THAT'S an airplane, fantastic. So at the present time I either fly 747's or 707's. And I'm based in New York and most of the time I fly international routes. It's most all of Western Europe, main capitols. We can go as far as Hong Kong out of New York, and we go down to Africa some, and we fly charters in all that area. Part of the time I fly domestic to places like L.A. [Los Angeles, California], San Francisco, Chicago [Illinois].

ARENA: You have always been with TWA.

DYER: Yes. One thing a lot of people don't understand is that you cannot change around. You have a seniority system, and really, it's the only thing that would work. Once you go with an airline, you're married to it for life. So your career hinges on your airline and how well it does, and we're very interested in how well it does.

ARENA: Observing how much traveling the President does by air, and even before he was President, has circumstances ever brought you two together in any way?

DYER: Well, I never did get to carry him any time when he was riding on TWA. I was requested one time, and I wasn't up high enough to get the job. I found out afterwards that one of the chief pilots from another city had taken it; he wanted to fly it. This was when the President was Vice President and he was campaigning for the Presidency, so I didn't get to fly that. But speaking of incidents which I find rather interesting, probably not of any historical value, but . . .

ARENA: We're not the best judge.

DYER: Right. The first realization that I had that Nick [Richard Nixon]--that's what I call him--was interested in politics or was going to go into politics, was when I picked up Time magazine the week after the election in the fall of '46, and here his picture was as having beaten [Jerry] Voorhis, who was quite well-known all over the United States because he was considered to be rather tainted, or a little bit of a "Pinko", Red-oriented and whatnot. I don't really know that much about him, but anyway he was known by a great many people. And also, he was . . .

ARENA: Where were you residing yourself at the time, excuse me?

DYER: Well, I was living in Kansas City, but also Voorhis was the Congressman from my grandparents' district, so when I'd be out here visiting I would read the local news, so I knew who Voorhis was, and I had no idea that Nick was involved in any way until I read this the next week, and of course, that was a great surprise and a wonderful thing to read about him.

ARENA: You had no inkling all the time you knew him in the Navy, either?

DYER: Well, I don't think . . .

ARENA: That he would have gone into politics, I mean.

DYER: I don't think he had any intention to be a politician. I would assume that these things happen as they come along, and that he had this opportunity, he would like to do this,

and then he took another step. I don't suppose anybody ever assumed that they were going to be President when they were twenty-one years old. There might be a few people that wanted to be that didn't make it, but I doubt that anybody that ever became one ever assumed it, or ever desired to be, or had his eye on it; I don't know. That's my opinion.

ARENA: On the question of history, by the way, history per se, and for the record, have you any papers, letters, any correspondence with the President in your possession for future reference?

DYER: Well, I do. To go back to one other point I want to make, I had gone with my uncle who was my age, my mother's youngest brother [James] Jim Paddock. We had gone to a Hi-Y meeting in Baldwin Park [California].

ARENA: This is a Hi-Y meeting.

DYER: Yes. You know, YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] Hi-Y. [High school age YMCA group].

ARENA: I happen to be a Y's man, myself [Adult YMCA group].

DYER: And so you know. Well, anyway, we had gone to this meeting. It was a supper and program, and it was I guess a whole lot like Kiwanis [Club], Lions [Club], etc., and at that meeting we had a political speaker, and he got up and extolled the virtues of Mr. Voorhis for thirty minutes. I had no idea who was running against Mr. Voorhis, and have ALWAYS regretted that I didn't know, because I would have demanded equal time if I had ONLY KNOWN. But that's just one of those things that happens.

ARENA: I want to be sure, by the way, on this question of whether or not you met the President after the Navy period.

DYER: Oh, yes.

ARENA: You have had direct contact?

DYER: I was on active duty in 1948 in Washington at headquarters and went over to his office and we had a very interesting conversation. I was in the Ambassador Hotel one night at one of the affairs there and got to say hello a few minutes. I was in the line that met him after he was defeated and came back to the west side terminal at LA one night and he was shaking hands with thousands of people and here I came up out of the dark, and he's fantastic; he came up with my name instantly. That was the first time I had ever personally talked to his wife. But I have some personal letters from him. I've written personal letters to him. I wrote one about a week ago, for a completely different reason.

I have two sons and both are in the Marine Corps, by their own choice, and they're both commissioned. My oldest one is a pilot and the second one was not so inclined. He was smaller and very gritty, very gung-ho, and he was an honor graduate from the University of California at Riverside, a political science major. He went through the Marine Corps P.L.C. program.

ARENA: Do you know what the letters stand for?

DYER: Yes, I do. It means Platoon Leader's Class. A platoon leader is a man who leads the platoon. It's the lowest job an officer has in the Marine Corps, but that's where they make him . . .

BEGIN SIDE II OF TAPE I

ARENA: Thanks for explaining that. And you were saying how this ties in with your meeting with the President again--correspondence, excuse me.

DYER: After he graduated then, the rest of the program was that you were commissioned and you went through the Basics School in the Marine Corps, which is a basic training for officers. It's a very tough school. It's like Boot Camp, only it lasts a lot longer and the officers have to do everything any boot does and a lot more. When he came out of there he was commissioned, and he was very interested in artillery. He went through the Army Artillery School at Ft. Sill, Lawton, Oklahoma. And he went back to somewhere near Newport News, Virginia, and somewhere in that area, at the Navy Artillery School, and then he came back here and he was sent overseas. He landed in Vietnam at Da Nang, and he had sixty-five days before he was killed.

ARENA: How old was he at the time?

DYER: He was twenty-two.

ARENA: Was he married?

DYER: No.

ARENA: What was his full name?

DYER: His full name was Frederick Lee Dyer. But he was killed up on the DMZ [demilitarized zone] and his job was as a forward observer, and this job entailed going out on patrols or setting ambushes, operating out in no man's land, so to speak, but within range of your own artillery. You looked for trouble, and when you found it you called in your own artillery to destroy it. His life expectancy in that job at that time was forty-two days. He was ordered back--not ordered--he was asked to come back as a

battery exec and he turned it down. The only way he could operate was to have a radio man with him constantly, almost tied to him with an umbilical cord.

ARENA: That man who was with him. . . . Excuse me, what was that term?

DYER: I said he had to have a radio operator with him all the time, plus whatever group he might have. He might have a company, a patrol or a platoon, or some group. It might be anywhere from ten to. . . . I would think not less than ten, probably several more than that. So even though he did everything he could to disguise the fact that he was in command of this group, the dress, he carried a rifle like anybody else, still, anybody observing him would know if they watched a while--this radio operator, you can't disguise him. So, he lost two or three radio operators in that time who were killed, and he became rather vindictive about it and he wouldn't go back. Well, the next day he was ordered back but it was too late. And he walked into an ambush about dark about a half a mile below the DMZ. He was killed, and one of those AK-47's

ARENA: Was he the older or the younger of your two sons?

DYER: He was the younger.

ARENA: Where is your other son now, Mr. Dyer?

DYER: He's working for TWA as a DCS, we call them. He's a Director of Customer Service in the cabin of a 747, and he hopes to be flying with us one of these days soon as a pilot.

ARENA: Did I understand you to say, as you were beginning to tell this about your son who was killed, that this touched on you and the President in any way?

DYER: Well, this happened on July 2, 1968, and I wrote a lot of letters to a lot of people, and I wrote a very long personal letter to the President. I called his law office in New York, and I talked to his secretary. I think I talked to seven secretaries before the buck stopped, and I told them who I was and what I wanted to do, that I was going to write a letter that he was going to get, that wouldn't be shuttled off somewhere. So she gave me an address, and I got an answer after the campaign

ARENA: Are you sure it was '68, by the way? Because he was running for the Presidency, and

DYER: Oh, yeah. There's no doubt about when it happened. I guess I know that. But he wrote and answered me after the convention.

ARENA: Of course, he was not President at the time.

DYER: No. So that letter is a very prized letter. I wrote to a lot of people. I got some very interesting letters. I wrote to [President Lyndon B.] Johnson at the time. I got a very nice letter back from him.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, in this letter from the President, did he refer to your past associations, your past friendship?

DYER: Yes, I think so. I haven't read that for a long time. I guess I'll have to look at it. It's too painful.

ARENA: Thinking back to the period when you did know the President personally, can you recall the very first occasion when you met him in the South Pacific?

DYER: Well, when we had this organization down there, we had it, as I said, although it was a military organization, it was doing a job in a lot of ways compared to an airline and we ran it in a lot of ways like an airline. We had a lot of airline people in it. There were Navy reserves, Marine Corps reserves, Air Force reserves who were in this, came right in and took over. And it became large and unwieldy so the top staff decided to divide it into three divisions. We had one division which took in Australia, New Zealand, down in that area. Then there was the Central Division, and then a division up at Guadalcanal and on up through the Solomons. Well, Carl Fleps was the First Division Commander at Guadalcanal, and I was the First Division Commander in the central area at New Caledonia there at Tontoutta. We were directly responsible for the whole operation. We made a lot of decisions on our own, and we were the liaison between the staff and what happened. And although we had regular scheduled flights, and this and that, we made a lot of impromptu changes which were determined entirely by the "needs of the service" at that particular moment.

I was quite aware of the magnitude of this thing, because I had a collateral job in New Caledonia as being the C.O. [Commanding Officer] of Headquarters Squadron. With your military experience you can realize what a weird situation we had. We had forty-three bases with enlisted personnel, and personnel from the Air Force-- Air Corps, Army, Navy and Marines, scattered all over there. We had their pay records and everything. It was really something. And a lot of these fellows in the Army for instance, were guys that had been over there caught when the war started, part of the old Americal Division--they'd been wounded or they'd had malaria, so they had light duty, back area duty. It was very boring, a lot of them wanted to go home, naturally, and we had some real problems. A lot of them were real fine people, but we picked up a few that we didn't need. [Laughter]

So when Carl Fleps came home why I was sent up to relieve him. I relieved Carl as the officer in charge of the division, which started at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, and we had, I believe, eleven stations all the way up through the Solomon Island chain. This was where the real action was. Everybody wanted to go on trips up there because it was something to do, it was interesting, a lot going on. We had, oh, seventy-five arrivals and departures a day out of Guadalcanal. You just about saw every plane every day, and we had about seventy-five airplanes. Some of them were rather long, non-stop flights. A flight down to New Caledonia was seven or eight hours. The other flights were three or four hours. We had flights that were milk runs. But we performed a very vital task. Although I said it operated like an airline, it was a lot different than an airline. We hauled whatever was needed. If there was a shortage of gasoline, we hauled gasoline. If there was a shortage of ammunition, we hauled ammunition. When they needed dynamite to build more of the Green Island Airport, we hauled the dynamite up there. Things like this. We hauled all the wounded out. If they were able to be flown at all, we would haul 'em out, or as soon as they were able to move them back to their area hospital they came out. We hauled all of the flight crews in and out. If they were in the combat zone, they would go up and stay a certain period and then they would come back to the rear area to regroup and get some rest, and a new group would go up. And we hauled a lot of ground people in and out for relief. We hauled a lot of food. For instance, at Munda one time, they were having a lot of trouble with their long-range bomber crews and we hauled fresh food up to them every day.

ARENA: Did you say Munda?

DYER: Munda, which is on New Georgia. That was one of the points.

ARENA: Did you actually, while you did have this command, get to visit all of those points yourself, including where President Nixon was stationed?

DYER: Well, I made it a practice. Well, you asked me awhile ago when did I meet him. Well, I met him. . . . Sometimes I would take a flight and go off as far as I could, occasionally when I was based on New Caledonia. And as soon as I went up to the Solomon Islands I had these eleven bases. Some were more important than others, but I had eleven bases there, and I always made a trip once a week and sometimes twice a week, and tried to hit all these various points. And the way I did it was, I would usually relieve the captain of the flight I was going to go on and take his place and fly his airplane. Sometimes I did it with an Army plane, sometimes Marine Corps, and let him stay that day. Or, if I was going to stay overnight somewhere and come back on another one, then I wouldn't relieve him, I'd just take him along. Some of

the places were basically supply bases, or bases for strikes against advanced Jap areas.

ARENA: How would President Nixon's base be categorized, as basically supply?

DYER: Well, the President and another chap named Sullivan--and I can't remember any more about him. We weren't supposed to keep notes or diaries or take pictures in those days, and you know things get away when you don't have any records, but the President and Sullivan were both two of the top base commanders that we had.

ARENA: Sullivan was in a separate position. They were not together.

DYER: He was at another base. I don't remember which one now. I know that he went on up to Emirau Island when we opened Emirau Island. It looks about like a four-leaf clover. It was a beautiful coral island up beyond--it's on the equator, way on beyond the end of the Solomon Island chain, above New Ireland and New Britain. We were almost in [Douglas] MacArthur territory. That was the last place we could go as a Halsey man. But there was a great deal of rivalry between the commanders of these bases for any new bases that opened up. Nick and Sullivan were two of the top people.

ARENA: The rivalry being between the admirals, you mean?

DYER: No, between the individuals who would want to go open a new base. When you went to a new area you were getting into Japanese territory again; you're operating under fighter escort.

ARENA: And it would be more exciting.

DYER: More exciting, that's the thing you wanted. No one wants to be in back; you want to get up where the action is. You want to help and do what you can and be there. I would like to tell you a little bit more about Bougainville. I don't know whether anybody's covered that or not.

ARENA: Not that I recall.

DYER: Bougainville is a huge island. And these are guesses now, in size, and so forth, but I guess it's about fifty miles across.

ARENA: Do you recall the spelling of Bougainville?

DYER: Oh, it's just like the flower, B O U G A I N V I L L E. Maybe the bougainvillea comes from there, I don't know. But anyway, it's a tropical island, mountainous, has volcanos on it. Maybe they're not very active, but some; and

earthquakes are common, little tremors. Probably fifty miles wide at the widest point and a hundred and twenty-five miles in length. There was a narrow channel at one end and a little extension of another island, which really was practically all part of one island. It was oriented northwest southeast, covered with heavy jungle, and except before the war, I suppose, a few little plantations right on the shore, it was completely wild and natural. The Americans decided to go into this. They bypassed a lot of Japanese area and decided that here was a place to make a base to have to go on up and take New Ireland and New Britain. So they went into a place called Emperor Augusta Bay on the west side. And they landed and they secured an area with a perimeter of thirty thousand yards. This was twenty miles. A little less than that, I believe. It's a semicircle, and inside this semicircle which we secured and we had surrounded by barbed wire and Marines and all sorts of defenses, we had four airfields, a tremendous amount of supplies and troops and everything else. The Japanese had about fifty thousand top troops on this island. Of course, they could infiltrate more and more, and we never attempted to take the island. We just took this area and went in there with our Seabees and built these airstrips. You'll never talk to any Marine that was in the South Pacific that doesn't think that the Seabees are the greatest builders in the world, because they were. They were all U.S. builders who went in and took a commission or a job in the Navy. They moved right off a construction job in the United States, and you know, they immediately started doing this same thing. They didn't have to be trained. They knew what they were doing and they knew the reason for it.

ARENA: Would one particular feature of them be, though, that they also had military training, in addition to . . .

DYER: They went through a minimum amount of training of course before they sent them overseas.

ARENA: Do you think there were any Seabees on President Nixon's island, or he had contact with them?

DYER: Oh, of course, absolutely. We went hand-in-glove. You couldn't have one without the other. We took the spot and they built the roads and the airstrips and maintained the roads.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, are the Seabees still in existence, would you know, or was that just a temporary wartime outfit?

DYER: Well, the nucleus would be there. You would have construction and if you ever needed them again you'd have 'em. Port Hueneme [California] was their training base and the point where their supplies came from. But anyway, this was the situation. We had this base here and we operated in there with, oh, I think we ran twelve or fifteen flights a day into Bougainville. It was a big thing for us. And we might have six or eight planes there overnight.

So the Japanese decided they were going to push us back, and they had a major offensive, I think in February of 1944. And the Marines were ready for them, and they were waiting for them to try to come through these barbed wire entanglements with interlocking machine gun fire, and the slaughter was fantastic. I think the body count was as high as five thousand one night, I don't know, but they broke their back, anyway. They didn't get in. But they did force us back to one airstrip. I don't know when the President took over up there as the commander of our unit. I know that I had seen him when I'd flown through there. I know that he was on top of it, had his finger on it twenty-four hours a day, and then when I took over I was up there as often as I could get up, once or twice a week, seeing how things were going, talking with him and others.

ARENA: You're saying where this action had taken place was where the President took over, himself.

DYER: Right, right, he was there.

ARENA: You don't recall when. In other words, had that already taken place, as far as your recollections?

DYER: I think it started in February of '44. I would just put my finger down and say the 15th of February, I'm guessing, I don't recall. And Carl Fleps left right after that, and I came up and this thing continued for several weeks. It was quite a long time before we were back to normal.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal or isn't official, do you recall that Carl Fleps passed on any information about his subordinates, people under your command, especially one Richard Nixon?

DYER: Well, I recall that Carl, when I came up to relieve him, we got an airplane and went together. We made all the stops. We met all the officers at all the various places, and met the person in charge, and I recall that he gave me his impressions about this one and that one. And I recall he was very high on three or four of our top people, and one of those was Nick.

ARENA: Do you recall why, or what particular trait stood out in his mind concerning Richard Nixon?

DYER: No, I couldn't say that. I just recall going up there and being introduced. But I do have my own impressions that I recall.

ARENA: I would appreciate your putting them on record, if you will.

DYER: Well, I think that the thing that always impressed me-- people ask me this question and I've answered it many times--was that he was so dedicated, and working so hard,

and so interested in this and so eager to get the job done, and of course, very anxious to go on to any other achievement that might be offered in this line. I don't know; I assume this was probably his first overseas duty. I don't know. I've never found out what all his jobs were in the service, where all he went and what all he did.

ARENA: Did he have any particular problems, or did that area have any particular problems that came to your attention? Any particular crisis, for example, that faced him?

DYER: Well, we had this situation here of this area, I explained to you, which had a semicircle of six or seven miles in radius with four airstrips on it with thousands of people and supplies, and so forth, and we were pushed back till we were on the one airstrip, which was located right on the beach. We couldn't use any of the rest of them. We were having these attacks every night. You were under fire. You had lookouts of the Japanese who were up in the high mountains and they could see what was going on. So you were under mortar fire, you were under seventy-five millimeter cannon, and although they were limited in how much of this they could do, it was a real harrassment, and you were operating under very undesirable conditions there for a long time.

I was going to mention that probably the only time that Nick was ever mad at me was when things had quieted down. We were getting back to normal and moving back into the strips and the Seabees were rebuilding all the damage that had been done. Nick had been working twenty-four hours a day, and I being in and out, I observed that I thought he had pushed himself to about the limit. And I have lost people in the past from too much work. I've seen various categories break under the pressure, and I thought he was entitled to a little rest, and he wasn't the type to do this. It had to be done and he was going to get it done. And I told him, I said, "You need a week off." And he didn't agree to that at all, and I ordered him and sent him on a week's R&R [rest and rehabilitation], and I know he was pretty mad at me. But he came back in good shape, and he needed it. I've never discussed that with him, you know that?

ARENA: R&R, of course, is rest and rehabilitation. Do you recall where you sent him?

DYER: Yes. He went down to Sydney [Australia], and I think I gave him the names of some folks that I stayed with, but I'm not sure. I'd love to ask him about that, if he recalls, because I think that I fortunately happened to meet one of the nicest families that any person could run across. An old gentleman by the name of Carr. He was a Scotchman who had come down there as a young boy and made his way in Sydney, and at the time he was the general manager of Peters Ice Cream Company.

ARENA: You think that possibly the President may have met Mr. Carr there?

DYER: He may have; I don't know.

ARENA: Do you think that Mr. Carr may still be there, or members of the family?

DYER: Possibly. There were two girls and a boy. They lived in a town out about. . . . There are four or five suburban towns north of Sydney, after you go across that beautiful Queens bridge down there.

ARENA: Are you saying then, in effect, that the President didn't like that order? He did not want to take time off?

DYER: No, he didn't want to quit. NO, SIR. He was visibly angry with me. I was a major; he was a senior grade lieutenant [Laughter] and I was his boss, but you know, we never thought about that. Senior grade lieutenant, same as a captain in the Army.

ARENA: Thank you. By the way, did you have any notion, or did you know, as a matter of fact, that he was of Quaker background, and did that come up in any way, first of all, in your own mind, did you think about it at the time; and secondly, did it come out openly? Did you and he have any discussion about that?

DYER: No, we didn't that I ever recall, but I know that I always thought that he conducted himself with a great deal more decorum than some people did.

BEGIN TAPE II, SIDE I

ARENA: Do you want to continue explaining the conditions under which the President was operating around the time that he went for his rest period in Australia?

DYER: Well, the reason I told him to go was because this strain, this attempt by the Japanese to push us off the island had been going on for weeks. The pressure was off now, but there was no rest. There were bombing attacks at night, and firing from time to time, and then this attempt by these troops to infiltrate and come through the lines, and so on. His very nature was one that he was on this job twenty-four hours a day and doing his utmost, and I could see that he needed the rest. He needed a break and he had good subordinates there that could take over, and they had all had a chance to get away a little bit, but he hadn't taken any. So I insisted he do it. He came back rested and it was good for him.

I recall one time being there when we were getting back to normal, and he said he wanted me to go over and look at the area where SCAT was supposed to be but had been forced to leave. We had a parking lot there where we could park ten or twelve of these

airplanes at night, and the day the Japs attacked they had this zeroed in and all these shells fell right in there, except we fortunately had no airplanes that night, so we didn't lose an airplane. And they destroyed his office and his tent area, and the whole area where he would have been, but no one was hurt, that I know of.

ARENA: A moment ago you did mention this idea regarding the Quaker background that he had this gentle side, or this refined side, or however you put it, but did he not--if I may be frank, and if it's not too personal--let out a Navy cuss word here and there? Did you ever see him exemplify some good solid Navy characteristics, let me say, of wartime conditions, obviously?

DYER: Well, I think so, but not to the extent that some of those people did, because there was an obvious difference, see? On this particular day I came back and he said, "We've got the Seabees over there and they've got our area all rebuilt. In a short time we ought to be able to move back in there."

ARENA: This was the area that had just been shelled.

DYER: Been destroyed, yes, several weeks before. This was after we had broken the back of the attack, and things had quieted down, and we were going to leave what Japanese were left to "die on the vine" back in the jungle. So we got in his jeep and we rode three or four miles through the jungle, by various routes to this area. We inspected it and got out and got in the jeep. We probably spent fifteen minutes in there, no one else around. Absolutely dead quiet except for the birds and usual jungle noises. And we started to drive away, and we hadn't gone two hundred yards till shells started falling where we'd been. So we were under observation from some mountain spot up there. This didn't mean anything to him, but it did to me, because I hadn't been under that kind of attack. Of course, there was absolutely no danger; we had left. If we had been sitting there, it could have been a different story. But I remember that. I would think that he probably doesn't even recall it.

ARENA: You're saying that he was very calm, cool and collected after such a narrow escape?

DYER: It really wasn't, because we were in this car driving away.

ARENA: But just the idea.

DYER: The idea was interesting, and it also brought out the fact that it wasn't quite time to go back into that area to operate. It wasn't safe yet. But very soon after that we did go back.

ARENA: Excuse me. Earlier I had mentioned the name Joe Foss. Would you know, as a matter of fact, whether or not the President and Joe Foss ever did meet during this period, ever did know one another, because there's a possibility of an interview with him?

DYER: I absolutely don't know. Joe Foss was very famous as a fighter squadron commander. He was based on Guadalcanal, Henderson Field, and up in the Russell Islands, which was the next stop, and I don't know how many other places. But I met some of these people. We hauled them back and forth and we got to talk to them, but actually to know who they saw and what they did, it was pretty difficult. I met Joe Foss. I met Marion Carl, and I knew [Gregory] Greg Boyington. I never called him Pappy. I met them when they came back and forth, but whether or not they or any of them were based at Bougainville. . . . I have a feeling Joe Foss had gone back by the time we had Bougainville. I think he was earlier. And of course, somewhere in there, Boyington was shot down and captured.

ARENA: Would you mind reviewing, even for my own clarity of thought here--Bougainville was a part of what chain, or what particular big island?

DYER: Bougainville was just a part of the Solomon Island chain, which is. . . . We should have a map, and I think I have some at home.

ARENA: A map that goes back to that period, by the way?

DYER: Oh, I think I have some. We were using the old British Admiralty charts that were dated way back before 1900.

ARENA: And who owned--if you recall--these islands at the time?

DYER: I think they came under an Australian-New Zealand protectorate of some kind.

ARENA: I see. Another point that was raised in the interview with Mr. Fleps, I was just wondering if maybe you and he got together, or if this matter continued under your own direction for a while, the recommendation for some commendation, some award, some merit for the President as a result of his work during this period? Does that ring a bell in any way in your own mind?

DYER: We made recommendations to our staff immediately above us.

ARENA: By we in this case, you're saying you did this yourself and he did it when he was there?

DYER: Yes.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask if you yourself put in a recommendation for the President?

DYER: I can't even recall. I recall that we went back to our staff, to the Colonel, and highlighted the jobs that these people were doing. The Marines weren't too big on recommendations or on decorations. I recall a friend of mine who was a squadron commander with a dive bomber squadron and he got an Air Medal for leading fifteen strikes against Rabaul, but the Army nurses--and this is taking nothing away from them--that were riding on my airplanes used to get Air Medals and DFC's [Distinguished Flying Cross]. They'd get an Air Medal every five missions and a DFC every twenty, and they'd have formations to get decorated. We were inclined to look at it as a guy doing the job he was supposed to be doing. It wasn't anything so much above-and-beyond.

ARENA: On the question of the presence of Navy, Marine and Army personnel all working together, do you want to comment on that, including if there's anything particular, we'll say, about the President's own role? For example, if you WERE in a position to observe, did he have Army, Navy and Marine Corps people under him, along side of him, and how did he relate?

DYER: Well, this thing worked out beautifully, I think. There were times when there was a little jealousy at the very top perhaps, but the crews worked together fine. We had all kinds of the officers in charge of the various details to be handled at any big base. One might be Navy, another'd be Marine, another was Army. There was never any big problems there. I think, by and large, that most of the ground officers were either Navy or Marine. You know, there's lots of kidding between the Navy and Marine Corps, but we're still one big, happy group.

ARENA: As a matter of record, and again if this is personal or official so you can't go into it, of course don't do so, but did you receive any complaints or any either formal or informal, concerning the people under Richard Nixon at that point, to you?

DYER: No, no, no. People didn't do things like that. You would only come to. . . . It would have to be a very, very serious thing where you would bypass a person. That's what you're doing, going over his head. We had some very serious things happen from time to time that would come to my attention, like the first sergeant comes and tells me that so-and-so took his rifle to bed with him and all his ammunition--this is back in the rear area--and he's been sharpening his long bolo knife for a couple of days, and we observe him and we know he's just ready to go, and we have to take him before he hurts somebody or before he hurts himself.

ARENA: By being ready to go, you mean a mental problem here?

DYER: Yes. This happens, you know. The boredom and the long months and months of pressures and things that may have happened to a person's family, one thing and another.

ARENA: Do you recall if there were any USO [United Service Organizations] show visits, especially while President Nixon was there and he may have seen the same show?

DYER: I don't know. I don't think we ever. . . . We haven't even mentioned all the natives around on these islands. They were coal black, or a real dark chocolate, and you never saw any of their women. We had Army nurses flying with our airplanes, and we finally, just before I left, had some Red Cross women at Guadalcanal passing out coffee and donuts, and this was it. I never saw any shows. [Anna] Eleanor Roosevelt came to New Caledonia one time to our base at Tontoutta, but I think that was as far as they would allow her to go toward the forward area. We didn't have any shows.

ARENA: What was there in the way of reading material? Those pocket book things; any Army, Navy newspapers, movies?

DYER: We had movies every night, and we had . . .

ARENA: Every night; is that a fact?

DYER: Some kind of a movie, somewhere.

ARENA: Would this be true of the President's island?

DYER: I think so. As soon as you were able to, safely, you would have it somewhere. That would be the first thing you would have, a Seabee outdoor theatre. [Laughter] What I'm laughing about is that it would be a level place with a screen and a projector. Perhaps, if it was real nice, you'd have coconut logs to sit on. That was the theatre, though, under the stars. We had daily news sheets that came out. You usually were busy, one way or another.

ARENA: Was there any such thing as a beer or liquor ration?

DYER: We had a beer ration, and that was one of the things that we made sure, that everybody at the forward bases got their beer ration.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, do you know if the President did drink, or smoke, during this period, from your own personal recollections?

DYER: I don't think I ever saw him smoke. I don't know whether he smoked or not. As for having a drink, I was never around at a time when we could have a drink together. I don't know whether he did or didn't.

ARENA: Did you personally ever get into his quarters? What were his quarters like, for example?

DYER: Oh, if I did, it wouldn't have been anything unusual. We all had tents, anywhere you went. You'd probably have a tent with a wooden floor, if you had time, and some sort of a mosquito bar around it to keep the mosquitoes out.

ARENA: You don't recall, or it doesn't come to your mind, as to whether or not you went in and saw what he had in his tent, maybe some law books or anything like that?

DYER: No, I don't recall anything like that. I recall one time being in his tent, but I don't know what was there.

ARENA: As you know, there are accounts of his playing poker in his Navy years. Were you possibly ever in any poker games with him?

DYER: No, I never was. I wasn't a poker player. Usually at this time on this job I would be moving back and forth, and I'm sure that I stayed all night at Bougainville a time or two. After all this trouble came, there was a shortage of places for people to stay and we didn't want the airplanes there overnight, so there wasn't any reason for me to stay there, so I didn't very often.

ARENA: Do you recall the situation when the war came to an end, when the Japanese surrendered? Where were you and where was President Nixon at the time?

DYER: I don't know where he was. I came back. . . . I was his boss for about four months, and I finished my tour and came back to the United States in June of 1944, and I was assigned to Edenton, North Carolina, which was a twin-engine bomber training base, and we had a lot of the old pilots from our group at that place. And we stayed there for several months and then moved out to Cherry Point, North Carolina. In 1945 I was sent back to a group similar to the one I'd been in, to be based in Guam or Okinawa. I was in San Francisco [California], waiting transportation. I had space on a Pan-Am [Pan-American] clipper when the war ended, so they delayed my orders, and about a week later I was released to come back for release.

ARENA: You called him Nick. Do you recall what he called you, or what was your nickname, if you had one at the time?

DYER: Well, my nickname was always Chic, but I doubt if he called me that. He probably called me Major, because I was his boss and I outranked him at the time. That's something you don't think about.

ARENA: I was wondering, thinking back now, though, how formal were relations between officers and noncoms in this type of situation, this type of an area, and even between officers, where obviously you were higher ranked than he, but inside the tent would it be Chic and Nick, say?

DYER: I don't know. It was never extremely formal, but you always recognized your boss. The full colonel, Colonel Auggie Koonce, who was the man in charge of SCAT, used to come up to Guadalcanal, and I had an extra bunk in my tent. I kept it, and he would always stay there, because he could relax and he wasn't under the pressure of the general's staff, and he was always Colonel to me. He was a great person, but there he was completely relaxed and taking it easy. He wasn't out on parade or having to meet certain requirements in his official capacity. It was kind of a chance for him to get a break.

ARENA: This is a personal opinion question, and it's not to go into politics per se, but I think my fellow historians would never forgive me if I didn't put this type of a question to a person like you, who knew him during the war years, and of course, knows who he is now. What part of that period in his life, your life, anyone's life, do you think is still a part of him today? And of course, this would obviously be your personal opinion, but I would be interested in having it for the record. What do you think those years would do to a man like that? As you know, he was a lawyer before he went into the service, and then he entered politics. And I could maybe add to that, from your knowing him at that time, from comments he may make about different situations, whether it's the Vietnam war or what-have-you, not going into politics, but do you see anything of those years coming out in him today?

DYER: I think that his dedication and his integrity and his Americanism, his patriotism, are always visible, although people don't realize this. He is maligned by the liberals and the left wing and by people who are in opposition politically, and they destroy him in every way they can. But I have always felt that he was an extremely sincere and dedicated person who was doing the best job he could, and I never had any feeling that he was ever going to sell us out or not be honest with the American people. And I would get this from my impressions of what little I knew him at that time.

ARENA: Such traits as honesty, dependability, loyalty--would you say these you recognized in him at that time?

DYER: Absolutely.

ARENA: Are there any others? By the way, by traits, I mean any characteristics besides these attributes.

DYER: I think he's a basically shy, retiring person. He doesn't probably give that impression any more; I'm sure he's overcome it, but I think that people talk about him being cold and distant, hard to get acquainted with and this and that. I've never been privileged to be a close friend or have the opportunity to really chat with him a lot of times, and I'm sure that I would enjoy it. I just would say that his basic nature would be an introvert, and he would enjoy not being crowded. It isn't that he isn't outgoing, at all.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, and if you recollect, did you find conversing with him difficult in any way? Did you find that he was hard to talk to?

DYER: No. No, I don't think so. I'm, myself, not one to talk a lot, so it doesn't bother me if the air isn't full of words all the time, so I don't think so.

ARENA: As this interview is coming to an end, Mr. Dyer, is there any point that I have not raised, that you would like to raise, that comes to mind, before we do bring this to a close?

DYER: Oh, maybe not an important one. A lot of little interesting things happened. I've always followed his career since he got started as a congressman, and visited him a time or two. I've talked to him on the phone and we've written some. After he was defeated for the Presidency and he came out here to run for Governor, I went to a rally one day in Ontario, California, with the intent of getting to talk to him, you know, and chat a moment. Well, there were no Secret Service and no guards, and one old police sergeant and a fantastic amount of people, and he was really being crushed. And I worked my way up there to be in a position to get to talk with him. I had on a black silk suit. It was a hot day and very few people had on a coat and tie. And there were very few people in the crowd knew who I was, and they thought I was some sort of a guard, and I escorted him through this mob back to his car and stood behind him and maintained a one-inch clearance at his back, and he was so busy that I didn't get to say hello, and he never knew I was there. And I always recall a little incident. There was a little girl, a three-year-old, all of a sudden was getting trampled, and he stooped down and grabbed her up, dried her tears, reached in his pocket and pulled out his pin and gave it to her and gave her back to her mother. The things he said, the expression, showed his humanity. I always wanted to tell him about that.

ARENA: I'm glad you have it on the record. Anything else?

DYER: Of course, I get a Christmas card every year. I wrote him a letter just the other day, since the last convention, and sent my little contribution to his campaign for the year. I think I'll get a reply.

ARENA: If this isn't personal, had you been a Republican, say, during the war years? Had you been interested in politics before.

DYER: My grandfather and my uncle were both members of the Missouri State Legislature as Republicans, but in the area I lived in you knew everybody, and if you had a good man who was a Democrat, even though you considered yourself a Republican, you might vote for him. In my time it wasn't a disgrace to vote for a good Democrat. My father-in-law was a Democrat, and he was what you would call a county commissioner in California. They called him a county judge, the same job that Harry Truman had when he was coming up. I didn't get to vote for him. I wasn't old enough at the time, but I would have. During the war nobody talked about politics. We weren't interested in politics. But I'm a registered Republican and generally vote Republican. There's a few times I don't.

ARENA: I was just wondering if--again, not interested in politics per se--through this personal connection you became interested in politics? Let's say, an active role, anyway, where you would have written to presidents, or written to political leaders, or is this personal?

DYER: No. I wrote to him because I knew him, but when I lost my son I wrote to a number of leaders. I wrote to our senators and our congressmen and our President, and to President Nixon--of course he wasn't President yet--just saying what I felt. I felt strongly, and I gave it a great deal of thought. I think there are times like that when you can say and write things more clearly than you ever will again.

ARENA: And you can't even speak them at the time, sometimes.

DYER: No.

ARENA: Mr. Dyer, I can't thank you enough for taking the time and trouble to come to the office here and grant us this interview and answering all of my questions so frankly and fully. I know my fellow historians would join me in [appreciating] your doing this.

DYER: I told the President the other day in a letter that I had had this call from Mrs. [Evlyn] Dorn and that I was looking forward to this taped interview with a great deal of pleasure. I thought it would be a lot of fun to recall a lot of things that we did together, and that I would enjoy very much the opportunity to discuss them with him.

ARENA: It certainly has been that way for me. Thank you very much.