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Oral History Interview
TAPE LOG

Please note that this is not a literal transcript. Many of the questions and answers are paraphrased and abridged. [Most of the information within brackets was added by Mr. Allen after the interview.]

Interviewee: Harry Allen, Jr., Class of 1948
Interviewer: Anna Dahlstein, NCSU Libraries Fellow, Special Collections
Date: October 6, 2003
Location: Allen home in Greenville, NC
Length: Approx. 45 minutes

004 Introductory information (same as above)

013 Date and place of birth?

I was born in Charlotte, NC on April 16, 1922 (Easter Sunday). My mother used to say that the Easter bunny brought me. I spent most of my boyhood in Charlotte [*attending Dilworth, Myers Park, Alexander Graham and Central high schools.*]

020 What about your parents?

My father was from [*Newnan*] Georgia. My mother was born in South Carolina. Somehow they met in Charlotte and were married and eventually had three children. I'm the middle child – I had an older sister [*Nancy Claire, "Tip"*] who married a musician [*named Skinny Harris*] and a younger sister [*Helen Elizabeth, "Betty", who attended Converse College in Spartaburg, SC*] and married Tom Morgan, a close fraternity brother of mine. He and both sisters are deceased now. They lived in Charlotte.

058 Parents' education and occupations?

Neither one of them were college graduates. In fact, my father dropped out of school early because of family problems. His mother became destitute because his father died and his stepfather was not a good parent. My father emigrated to North Carolina looking for a job and eventually got one with the railroad, which brought him to Charlotte. He worked for the Southern Railway. Later on, he transferred to the Business Department of the *Charlotte Observer*. All during this time, in his early years, he literally educated himself. He was regarded as a very intelligent, capable man, and of course I was proud of him. He eventually became business manager and Secretary/Treasurer of the Charlotte Observer organization, a pretty good position for a non-college graduate. He was very active in civic and social affairs in Charlotte.

My mother did not work; she was a homemaker and a dear mother to us three children.
[Recounts one childhood memory of afternoon naps and lemonade.]
[After we grew up and were gone, mother worked several years as volunteer director of the Candy Strippers at the Presbyterian Hospital.]

093 Why did you choose to attend college – it wasn't really that common in those days.

No, it wasn't. My father was, as I said, a self-made man. *[He valued education.]* He read history and I hated history. He read history and did a lot of delving into our family background. He conducted a lot of research. And in his later years, he even traveled to Texas to make contact with some Allens or McCains there. He was probably in his seventies when he flew to Texas to do that research. He has compiled a very fine family history, *[all in his beautiful handwriting.]*

He was a very ambitious man. From the very beginning, he was determined that we were going to college, the three children. My oldest sister attended Randolph-Macon *[in Lynchburg, Virginia]* and Queens College in Charlotte. My younger sister graduated from Converse as an honors graduate. My father even offered me tuition to go to military school instead of high school in Charlotte. I attended Central High, a famous old high school which is now known as Central Piedmont Community College. Some of my classmates had chosen State and we talked about it and I decided that State was the place for me.

My first interest in higher education was in Forestry simply because I loved nature; I liked the outdoors. I didn't hunt with a gun, but I hunted to see different kinds of animals and reptiles and just had an interest in them *[spurred on by scout work]*. So I matriculated in Forestry and only spent three days in it at State before I realized that maybe that wasn't what I really wanted, so I transferred over to Engineering.

133 What led you to make that decision?

The fact that I decided that I probably wasn't after all cut out to be a forest ranger or a forest manager, although State had a very good school in Forestry. My friends had entered into various engineering fields so I just changed over with them. I think they convinced me that engineering was my field.

141 Which branch of engineering?

Then, it was called General Engineering, which is very akin to Mechanical Engineering. General was a little bit of different kinds of specialties, and that's what I graduated in *[with a BS degree.]*

145 And you were able to attend two years of college before enlisting, is that right?

Yes. I was beginning to become bored with school. We were living in a basement apartment on Horne Street, right across from campus. I believe there's an Agriculture building right across the Horne Street-Hillsborough intersection. We were living in a basement apartment to get off campus. My freshman year I lived in a dormitory; I believe it was Alexander, down on the other side of the railroad tracks. We had a funny experience as freshmen that I'd like to tell you about. ... It was kind of exciting because we were away from home for the first time [*kind of feeling our oats*]... Somebody told us that two very timid freshmen in the dorm across the quadrangle from us were over there, frightened to death about being initiated. So my roommate and I went over there to find out what was going on... We were a little bolder, I guess, so we got these two freshmen to march up and down the hallway in their underwear with their guns. And we said, "hut two, hut two" – we didn't know anything about marching at that time but we were just brazen enough to have some fun. Didn't hurt anybody, but we wondered what they thought when they saw us in classes with them later on.

172 You had made them believe that you were upperclassmen?

That's right.

175 You enrolled in college not long before Pearl Harbor?
[*Actually, the year before, 1940*]

I remember distinctly where I was that morning of December the 7th, 1941. I was eating breakfast at Ma Hudson's. It was a boarding house right there on Hillsborough – it was quite a famous eating and boarding place for college students. Some of the older guys will remember that for sure. The announcement came over the radio and we were all stunned because none of us knew where Pearl Harbor was. We just didn't know. It wasn't famous before the attack. Some of us stopped eating. We stared off into space sort of in semi-shock and I noticed one of the young ladies who was helping to serve meals was doing her job with tears rolling down her face. I just remember that scene.

I've forgotten what happened after that but it got me wondering if maybe now was the time to volunteer and *help my country*. I had had two years of ROTC at State, which stood me in good stead for later military training in the Navy. I dropped out after finishing my second year. I went home and talked to my parents and told them what I wanted to do. And that was to volunteer to take naval air training in the V-5 program. It was a special program that the Navy had inaugurated to train Navy pilots fast. I did qualify for that. Earlier they had required two years of college but they needed more pilots so fast that they lowered it to, I believe, just a high school education. But anyway, I was fortunate to have had two years of college when I got in. So I was accepted and had to wait approximately three months to get called to active duty and start my training due to the large of influx of new volunteers.

Before being called, I busied myself in Charlotte by working for the Army. They had a quartermaster depot in Charlotte. They needed people, so I applied for a job there to keep me busy... When I got called to active duty in the Navy, I got word from the commander of the depot that they might freeze me on the job there. And I didn't want that to happen. They could've frozen me on the job because they considered it essential to the war effort. I think I convinced them that what I could do as a naval aviator was probably more essential and more important to the war effort. So that didn't hold me up. I got called up and began to get oriented into the naval program. I was ordered to go to Atlanta for the official indoctrination. So I went through that and my training started.

231 When did you ship out and where did you go?

Well, first of all, we spent two years learning how to fly. By the way, *the Navy had inaugurated a new program to the agenda to keep us busy while awaiting official positions as naval aviation cadets.* They sent some North Carolina boys to Tennessee Junior College in Martin, Tennessee for *CAA War Training Service.* That introduced us to flying. *We were issued old CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) uniforms and flew Piper Cubs. We had lots of ground school and learned the basics of flying, aeronautics and control, landing and taking off, all on land, of course. Later on came the training for landing on a carrier. That came about two years later. We took various stages of flight training all over the country. One was in St. Louis, flying Stearman Yellow Perils, another was in Fort Lauderdale for advanced flight training, where we actually transcended from training planes into combat planes. I was assigned to torpedo planes. Along with that, I assumed the responsibility for two crewmen. A 50 calibre gunner in the back turret behind the pilot's seat and in the back end was a radio/radar man who manned a little 25-calibre "peashooter" in the tail. So we trained with combat crew at Fort Lauderdale, Florida. We qualified for carrier landings up at Great Lakes Naval Air Station. We flew SNJs to qualify for carrier landing. I thought I was going to kill myself and everybody on the deck the first time. [Tells story of a touch-and-go practice that nearly went awry because the previous plane got tangled up in cables on the deck. I began to climb and go around, but I got the cut anyway. Hardest landing I ever made.]*

275 Did you serve in the Pacific Theater or in Europe?

Toward the end of all that training, I was assigned to join a squadron which was then training in combat activity in Pasco, Washington, a little, out-of-the-way naval air station out in the desert. So I was assigned to that squadron. I traveled to Seattle and Pasco by train. ... I noticed that *all the guys outranked me and were kind of loosey-goosey type flyers. They didn't observe all the rules that I had been trained to observe. [Relates example: other pilots parked on landing strip when practicing field carrier landings. Also, explains the role of the landing signal officer, the LSO, who brings you in with signals, which must be obeyed.]*

322 I'm afraid we are only going to be able to devote a minute or two to summarizing your military experience because we have to focus on the years after the war... Could I ask you: Where did you serve and with which unit?

Our squadron was assigned to join the carrier USS "Shamrock Bay." It was a "jeep carrier", CVE-84 [*explains term*], and we joined it at Pearl Harbor. We were all hanging around, kind of nervous, because we were going to ship out the next day. [*That was December 11, 1944.*] The ship was going to go out into the Pacific, into the war zone, to join other carriers and fleet components to form a strike force. [*Mrs. Allen brings over a photograph of a torpedo plane with Harry Allen in the pilot seat.*] We went out to Manus Island in the Admiralty Group.

Our first strike force was trying to take back the Philippines, which had been the Japanese second target after they bombed Pearl Harbor. Our first target on the takeback campaign was to support the U.S. landing at Luzon, the largest of the islands. Our carrier was one of several to support the landing of the Marines and the other troops. We were overhead, bombing and strafing designated coastal targets. [*I also flew photo recon missions.*] We later learned that most of the Japanese had withdrawn and ensconced themselves inland to fight a guerrilla battle. It seems like that's what they did on all the islands. That was our first campaign.

Our second campaign about three weeks later was Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima, a volcanic island, is famous for the stirring picture of the raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi by Rosenthal, and it is now displayed in the Pulitzer prize photo exhibit at NC State. I read the book about it and it's just a wonderful story. The last campaign that we were in on, and the last campaign of the war, was taking back Okinawa. Each of these campaigns took us nearer and nearer to the mainland of Japan. ... There was a small island west of Okinawa called Ie Shima –that's the island where the famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle was killed. We all knew Ernie Pyle because he was a friend of the WWII guys and he even wrote a famous article about how in the world those planes landed on a bouncing carrier... [*Sadly, our squadron skipper was shot down over Okinawa spotting Japanese targets for our planes.*] A little bit later on, the big A-bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and shortly after that the Japanese surrendered. And I was ready to come home.

374 Where were you discharged?

[*We were ordered out of the combat zone for some R&R at Guam before sailing back to the U.S.*] I was ordered to NAS (Naval Air Station) Fort Lauderdale, where we became combat instructors. I was discharged from Ft. Lauderdale but I had to go through the Jacksonville Naval Air Station for official detachment. By the time all that happened, our ship's captain had been transferred from carrier-based work – he was older than we were, of course – to a desk job in Jacksonville. So, on our way home, after we were detached to inactive duty, we visited him in his office, and he looked miserable behind the desk, because he was a real seaman.

386 At this point, had you heard about the GI Bill?

I think I had heard about it, but I did not attach too much significance to it because I wasn't totally dependent upon it. I knew my father would back me up on finishing my education. So I wanted to go back to State and finish my education, which I did. Backing up a little bit, in my latter days at Fort Lauderdale, after the war ended, they wanted to deactivate a lot of guys and save some money and get us home. So they took some of us off flight duty. During that time in 1945, a now famous disappearance of a torpedo squadron caught the public's eye. They were on a training mission and got lost and never came back. They flew out of Fort Lauderdale and I knew some of the guys. It has become a famous legend. People now attribute their disappearance to the "Devil's Triangle" – they were never found.

399 Is that the same thing as the "Bermuda Triangle"?

That's right. While we were not able to fly anymore, my buddy and I went down the flight line to volunteer to help with the search. They said they didn't need us. So we took up motorcycling and ploughed around the Everglades area. And when we got detached officially from Jacksonville, we attempted to ride our motorcycles home, but that was in December of 1945 and it became too cold. So we stored them and bummed our way on home and that was our return to civilian life.

410 So you never doubted that you were going to go back to NC State?

No, I was ready to go back and get serious with normal life. *[We had defeated the Japanese, and Germany had surrendered by that time.]* I wanted to take up where I left off in school.

Side B

002 You were just explaining what returning to school entailed?

Yes. I don't remember that the GI Bill was the main attraction. I just wanted to get on with life, finish my education, and move on. I do remember, though, that we had to undergo some kind of physical examination and I recall a lot of ex-GIs who came back to school standing around a pool – I guess it was the swimming pool on the campus – all standing around naked, hundreds of us, waiting to be examined, to re-enter school. I also remember that most of us were pretty serious, the ex-GIs, compared to the students that hadn't been in the military... [break for phone call]

024 You were just telling me that veterans were different from the students who had not served. Could you explain that a little more?

Just in general attitude. We didn't want to live on campus, of course, when we came back. My future brother-in-law and I, and another good friend, lived in a basement

apartment on Groveland Avenue. Our landlady was a Mrs. Rhodes. Her husband had been a pharmacist in the pharmacy on the corner of Oberlin and Hillsborough, which is now Darrell's [restaurant] – I think Darrell's is closed now. My future brother-in-law acquired a jeep and had it converted, had a top put on it, so we all rode around in his jeep to get to class and go different places and eat meals off-campus. We spent two years in that basement apartment, finishing up school. *[My future brother-in-law had remained in school longer than I did, got his 2nd Lt. Commission and served in the European Theater, so he graduated before I did.]*

049 What was your future brother-in-law's name and what fraternity were you in?

Before the war, we had formed our own fraternity to petition Sigma Chi. We were called Chi Sigma in the early years. In our freshman and sophomore years, we had been invited to join other fraternities, but my crowd just wasn't attracted too much to them, so we formed our own and petitioned Sigma Chi for a charter. We were still Chi Sigma when I left school to join the Navy. By the time we got back to school and were taking life a little more seriously, the chapter had obtained its Sigma Chi charter. Having been a Chi Sigma before the chartering, we were invited back to continue in the fraternity. Having done that, they made me one of the officers of the chapter. I was kind of proud to wear the white cross, our emblem, and call myself a "Sig." I still meet Sigma Chis in church and other places and we have a really nice bond – the white cross bond, I call it.

080 Did you have a particular profile – were you all engineering majors or anything like that?

I believe they were mostly engineers, yes, and we had a good academic record. They wanted fraternities to be excellent in every aspect: academics and athletics and school involvement. I think Sigma Chi portrayed that image. We began to win the intramurals because we had some good athletes and we had some well-performing students in our chapter. *[I ran Varsity track and taught some frat members to run hurdles.]* And of course we have big books now and life membership offerings and things like that. I continue to give to the fraternity headquarters in Chicago *and the Delta Epsilon chapter at State.]*

099 Could you tell me a little bit about the campus in the late 1940s? I've heard a lot about how crowded the classrooms and the dorms were...

After the war, I think every university and college had a veteran's living section. We had a "Victory Village" or a "Vet Village" or something like that on a part of the west campus that is now quite heavily housed. *[Vetville]* I believe they had trailers in that section, and pre-fabs, where married students lived.

110 Did you ever visit that? Did you have friends who lived there?

No, but I visited a close Navy friend who had chosen to go back to school in Chapel Hill, of all things *[laughs]*. I visited him because we had grown close in our Navy experience. He was a boxer and he chose me to be his second when we had amateur boxing contests in the Navy. He was from Southport, North Carolina. His name was Billy Bragaw and he was a real swashbuckling, independent, big-talking, square-jawed young man. The reason I remember him after the war is because he had married a long-time home girlfriend named Lou Niernsey *[who followed him around the country during his training to keep an eye on him]*. They were living in the vet village at Chapel Hill. We went over to visit them one weekend and had a nice little reunion with them and he had two or three children running around the place. Later on, I can't remember what year, he and his wife and children, and his mother and her mother, were all in a van traveling south in the rain one night, and a train hit them and killed them all. It was such a tragic accident. It wiped out two whole families. It just burned a place in my memory about losing a good friend and all his family.

141 Were a lot of your friends getting married around this time?

They were mostly getting married or courting seriously. Tom Morgan, my future brother-in-law, was becoming very serious about my younger sister Betty who was working in Charlotte at Ivey's department store, back then a very prominent high-rise department store – as a bridal consultant, and then in public relations and employee relations and various jobs like that. I later learned that he had proposed to her and they were going to get married. I was at home one weekend when he came courting and I told him that he couldn't come in unless he gave me his Hlinka Guard dagger that he had acquired in the European campaign. It was a Czechoslovakian dagger, a very ornate weapon, and he said "OK, I'll give it to you if you let me marry Betty." That was a deal. I still have that knife in my collection. *[Describes Betty's children and where they live.]*

171 I get the impression that you were mostly social with other returning veterans.

Pretty much. I kind of looked down on the non-veterans because they seemed so young and immature *[laughs]*. They hadn't quite seen what we had seen in the world.

177 Do you think your wartime experience influenced your studies in any way?

Definitely. I'm sure most veterans can say that. Not that I ended up being a Phi Beta Kappa, but I did graduate OK, with some distinction, and went to work with Union Carbide. They happened to have a battery plant in Asheboro, North Carolina, I went to work for them after having been interviewed by GE in Schenectady, New York. I thought it was the worst town I had ever seen so I turned down GE. I spent 37 years with Union Carbide, in the battery business, and was transferred to Greenville in 1952 as plant engineer and served in engineering, inventory control and purchasing positions. I ended my career with Union Carbide in 1986 and I spent ten years after that, since Sarah was still working (she was Assistant Principal at South Greenville Elementary School), as a

management consultant with the vocational center here in Greenville, Eastern Carolina Vocational Center. And then I retired in 1992 from them because that's when Sarah retired from the school. But I found out that I wasn't quite ready to sit at home, so I went to work for a small machine shop called United Machine, out in the country, for another five years as consultant. Then I finally quit for good and I'm now trying to be a good husband and take care of my disabled wife.

213 You retired three times, did you?

Yes, I did.

215 It really sounds as though you would have gone back to college one way or another. What do you think the GI Bill influence was on your education: Did it allow you to finish faster, did it give you more spending money...?

It did give us a little spending money. I guess I didn't appreciate it as much then as I do now – that it did relieve my father of some financial burden. Although he was doing well, he developed diabetes later in life and wanted to slow down. That kind of coincided and things worked out well. I do appreciate the GI Bill; it's a wonderful program and I didn't realize it had been deployed throughout the years for all the other military campaigns. But it's just a wonderful thing. We live in a great country. *[It's especially good for people who could not otherwise afford college.]*

228 Do you have any thoughts on how useful the GI Bill could be in the years ahead?

Definitely, it should be continued and expanded in some way to make sure that those who put their lives in danger for our country can come back and be assured of an education. It's just got to continue.

238 End