

Andrew Gennett

Andrew Gennett, Jr. was born in Franklin, NC on 14 October 1919. Six months later his family moved to Asheville, where he lived in what he describes as “a beautiful home on Kimberly Avenue.” He went to UNC Chapel Hill in 1938. When he was just two classes short of a degree, he returned to Asheville to enlist. “I knew it (war) was coming; it was just a matter of time. I’ll be honest with you. I didn’t want to be in the mud. And I wanted a commission, so I joined the Navy.”

In June of 1941 Mr. Gennett went to Chicago for officers’ training, fully intending to return to finish his degree upon completion of the training. Unexpectedly, the entire battalion signed up for active duty the day before graduation—with the exception of Andrew Gennett. He was called to his commander’s office, who sternly asked why he didn’t volunteer. Mr. Gennett explained his situation at UNC. He was told that if he expected to be graduated Ensign Gennett the next morning he would be volunteering for active duty. And so he did.

Mr. Gennett proceeded from Chicago to Texas to begin training at the Higgins Training School. Mr. Higgins had been a successful rum-runner during Prohibition, continually eluding the authorities. At the eve of WWII he received a contract from the United States government to build PT boats and landing craft. Mr. Gennett was very anxious in this program. Over the course of three months, one third of the recruits would be cut. Andy looked around at his peers, many of them Ivy League graduates. Here he was, “an average student from a state college.” Indeed he did graduate and was assigned to Mobile, AL to spend the next year as a machine gunner aboard the *Crescent City*, a 14 thousand ton attack landing ship.

He shipped out to the Pacific, briefly stopping in Pearl Harbor, where his college roommate had been killed aboard the *USS Oklahoma*. He remembers distinctly seeing “those black hulls and the bodies that continued to surface.” The sight stirred in him incredible anger.

One of his most memorable situations occurred during the First Battle of Saro Island on 08 August 1942. His ship, with only one sizeable weapon, was escorted by four cruisers. The Japanese attacked with six cruisers and a number of destroyers. The U.S. fleet was quickly overwhelmed. Mr. Gennett’s captain had already proclaimed that they would fight to the end. And the end seemed eminent. “We thought we were done for,” Mr. Gennett reflects now. At daybreak, however, the Japanese fleet pulled out. Evidently, they feared a daylight air attack from Allied planes. As Mr. Gennett now points out, “There were no planes.”

Nevertheless, the damage was extensive. At daylight the water was “full of blood, people, and sharks.” Gunners took to shooting the sharks and picking up survivors. The Crescent City dropped the First Division Marines they were landing and some limited supplies before leaving the area, as there was no support in the area. A year later Andrew Gennett met two of those Marines in a bar in Chicago. They discussed whether or not to beat him up for the privation they faced in the hungry weeks that followed. Mr. Gennett explained that his crew had done what they could at the time.

Mr. Gennett was aboard the first boat to hit the beach at Guadalcanal, bringing in the Marines. He also recalls that during the second day of the Battle of Guadalcanal his ship was under attack by 18 Japanese Navy Type 1 land attack planes, nicknamed “Bettys,” five of which were shot down by day’s end. One plane in particular had targeted the bridge of the ship and was bearing down. Andy was stationed next to the gunner above the bridge, who leveled his sights on this plane and brought it down just in time. It skidded across the deck before dropping into the sea. Mr. Gennett made his way down to the captain to recommend this gunner for an award. The captain tersely replied, “We don’t give medals on this ship. It’s the whole crew or nothing.”

In early 1943 the Crescent City pulled into New Zealand for fitting, and Mr. Gennett was assigned to the destroyer Barker for three months of escort duty. When he boarded the ship he made his way to his bunk thinking he would be due some sleep. He was immediately ordered to watch duty. His on-the-job training was characteristic of many veterans’ experiences.

Later that year, Mr. Gennett returned to Chicago for flight training. He entered the Naval Air Corps, where he eventually became an instructor. Ultimately, he became a senior check pilot, making the final flight with a cadet, “giving the yes or no. It was a hard job, and some of the men hated me for it.” Several of his students “went on to be aces. Made me mad as hell I didn’t get to go back.”

It was during this period, while stationed in Dallas, Texas that Andy met his future wife, Mary. Mr. Gennett was at the airport one day when he encountered fellow Ashevillean Norsie Grant, who was at the time a stewardess for Delta Airlines. He discovered that her brother, Roger, a pilot, was missing in action. “We cried about that together.” It was through Norsie that Andy met Mary. “She was trying to live on stewardess wages. She was mostly flying the military to Atlanta and back.” Whenever she was in town they would get together for a meal. Mr. Gennett now jokes about winning Mary’s affections, “It wasn’t my courting ability, but my ability to take her to lunch.”

At the end of the war, Mr. Gennett “got the hell out.” He was released from active duty on 18 September 1945. He went into the reserves as a Lieutenant Commander. He returned to active duty in September 1949 “on a lark.” When he arrived in Corpus Christi, Florida he had logged 2000 hours in the air—most of it as an instructor: “I spent as much time upside down as right side up.” After mostly flying search patterns looking for a lost Marine, he again left the military. “I could have been sent to Korea, but I wasn’t and I’m happy about that.”

He returned home to run the family business, Gennett Lumber Company. The housing boom that followed the war kept him very busy. While working 50-60 hours a week for the company, he worked on finishing his degree at UNC Chapel Hill through correspondence. “It took me eight years to finish my two classes.”

Reflecting on his war experiences, Andrew Gennett had this to say: “Most young guys go into the service as boys. But you can’t survive a war without growing up. The surest way to grow up is to fight a war in the military. The generations that came after may or may not be better. But the folks I served with were just fine.”