

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History interview
Subject: Eugene L. Bialek
Interviewer: Jonathan Dickey
Date: February 16, 2016

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MR. JONATHAN DICKEY: Good afternoon. My name is Jonathan Dickey. I'm an intern with the National Archives History Office. It's 2:45 p.m. on February 16, 2016. This interview is being conducted for NARA's Oral History Project in the Archives I Volunteer Office. Please state your full name for the record?

MR. EUGENE L. BIALEK: Yes, Eugene Leonard Bialek.

MR. DICKEY: What is your affiliation with the Archives?

MR. BIALEK: I'm a volunteer staff aide in the Navy Maritime Unit.

MR. DICKEY: What exactly is a staff aide?

MR. BIALEK: It's a little bit of everything. It's mainly writing finding aids for files that the archivist I work with feels are used quite a bit. It helps locate something in a box very rapidly, without having to look through a box. It has a list of the contents. It's labor-intensive, and it's not the type of thing an archivist would do. It's the type of thing a volunteer would do.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. So, before you started working with the Archives as a staff aide, what kind of work did you do? Was it a similar line of work?

MR. BIALEK: I was an oceanographer for the Naval Oceanographic Office at the Washington Navy Yard for about 25 years. I retired when the office moved to Mississippi. I went to work in private industry for a Navy contractor. I was a systems analyst for the Mark 46 Torpedo.

MR. DICKEY: That doesn't sound similar to what you're doing now. So, why did you start volunteering at the Archives?

MR. BIALEK: It's a good question. I've always been interested in lighthouses, and I took a tour here many, many years ago, and it really piqued my interest. This is a very interesting place, and I figured I could do a lot of lighthouse research here, so I took the training course, but that's not my thing. I wanted to be a staff aide, and it happened that they were looking for someone with a naval background.

Incidentally, I was not in the Navy, I was a civilian. They were looking for someone with a naval background that worked with Operation Neptune, which was the Navy portion of Operation Overlord, the Invasion of Normandy. Working with those files was one of the most interesting things that I've ever done in my life. I spent three years all by myself on the top deck doing finding aids, and that was really fascinating. When that project finished, they wanted me to work on some naval files from the Civil War, but at the time, the Civil War was not my thing. I had an opportunity to go to the Naval Historical Center. They were doing a remote-sensing survey of the Normandy beaches, which was sort of right down my alley, and I spent almost three years writing a publication. I was one of the co-authors. Incidentally, the publication was never published. It was finished 100 percent, it's ready to go. I wrote parts of it, including all of its mine-hunting chapter.

When that wrapped up, I stayed at the Naval Historical Center, and did another very interesting project. People had been searching for World War II submarines that had been lost in the Pacific, and some had been located, by a television channel, the Discovery Channel, as you've probably heard. They located a sub, and had taken photographs or TV footage of it. It was down around 300 feet, which is pretty deep for a diver. The sub had to be identified.

Meanwhile, I had switched over to underwater archaeology at the Historical Center, and I was the only one there who knew anything about World War II submarines. So, although I was a volunteer, they gave me the task of identifying these submarines. I did that for a couple of them by viewing the TV footage the divers had taken. I would look at that, then I would go back to any photographs of that particular sub, and try to pin down which sub it was. I used other information, too, like the log books, Navy inquiries. Whenever the Navy loses anything, the Board of Inquiry is to launch an investigation. The Navy's Board of Inquiry performed an extensive investigation when the Submarine Flier was lost. I used that data and then photographs, very unique photographs, of the location of the radar in relation to the sail of the submarine, which was rather unique. By myself, I made a most-likely identification of the Flier. I shouldn't say positive.

I identified another sub, which was very easy. The Discovery Channel had an image of the sail of the submarine, in a frame of the TV footage, and it showed—what do you call the badge of the ship builder or whatever was launched? That was the snap. I did things like that for a while.

I wasn't happy there, and wanted to come back here, under one condition, that I could work for one particular archivist. And that was Mark Mollan. He's a terrific guy. He's willing to share his knowledge, which is important. Not everyone wants to do that. I've been working with him for maybe three, four years now. I returned here from the Historical Center. This is my second tour here.

MR. DICKEY: How long were you at the Historical Center?

MR. BIALEK: That's a question for my wife. She keeps track of that. I'd say three years.

MR. DICKEY: So you went over there for a few years, and you've come back?

MR. BIALEK: Right. I wanted to work for Mark. And number two, I was not interested in the modern Navy. I was interested in the old Navy. I'm very much interested in sail boats. I had my own boat. I raced sail boats. I've always been interested in sail boats, and that's what Mark was doing. The Navy Maritime Unit here is old Navy. The modern Navy, World War II-onward, is in College Park. So this is old Navy and Merchant Marine.

MR. DICKEY: How does your current work with finding aids compare to your previous work here?

MR. BIALEK: Both times I worked on finding aids. My first tour here, three years, was all Operation Neptune. I did the complete file of Neptune, so I stuck with one project. Now, I'm working with JAG files, the Judge Advocate General at 1917 Naval Inquests. Like I mentioned before, any time something negative happens in the Navy, there's an inquest, and that could lead to nothing, or it could lead to a Court Martial. I'm doing that right now, the 1917 JAG files, and I do finding aids. I describe each folder that's in a box. I say what the case is, like a collision, who was the officer in command of the vessel, the code numbers for identification, and, if possible, the outcome of the inquest.

Also, if anything special comes up, Mark might ask me to help him. For example, the Weather Bureau wanted some data in the Aleutians. The data were kind of scarce. During World War II, when the Japanese had captured two islands in the Aleutians, our ships were operating quite frequently there. The Weather Bureau wanted to know the names of those vessels, and the dates they were in the Aleutians, so the Weather Bureau could go to the log books to pick out the weather data. I did that. That was a special project.

I've also done other special projects, like a really interesting one on lighthouses. The Coast Guard was coming up with a new class of cutters, fast response cutters. They wanted to name two of them after female lighthouse keepers. So I helped Mark in researching all 42 of the female lighthouse keepers. We turned that over to the Coast Guard, and they have named fast response cutters after two of the 42 that we submitted. As I mentioned, there were only 42 women. So, I do special projects, and I do the routine finding aids. Right now, it happens to be JAG files. But I've done custom files. That's it, mainly.

MR. DICKEY: How does he decide what files you're going to be doing the finding aids for?

MR. BIALEK: I think that he picks what I would call the most popular files, the files that are most in demand. For some reason there was a lot of demand for information from the JAG files. I would call the most popular files the most used, the most demanded, files he does. I don't think anyone orders him to do it. He's the type of person who has his finger on the operation of Navy Maritime. He serves in the reference room down here almost half a day, so he knows what people ask for. And that's what he selects for me to do.

MR. DICKEY: When you say most in demand, it's from the public coming in to do research, not the Navy or Coast Guard or some other branch of the U.S. Government?

MR. BIALEK: That's mainly true in so far as getting weather data from the Aleutians demanded by a Weather Bureau. In so far as the female lighthouse keepers, that was a request from the Coast Guard. So it all depends. You can't say it's the most in-demand group of files. There're also special projects, Coast Guard, the Weather Bureau, NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration].

MR. DICKEY: So do you work on Mark's special projects or just Mark's standard finding aids?

MR. BIALEK: I'd say finding aids. These special projects are infrequent.

MR. DICKEY: So, how do these finding aids help the researchers who come in?

MR. BIALEK: They're on a spreadsheet, or they're written out by the box number. Mark makes copies of those things. He hands them out to the archivist in the Navy Maritime Unit, and they use it. My Normandy study, Operation Neptune, that I did when I first came here, is still being used at our Archives II. I was amazed, after all these years, they're still using that.

MR. DICKEY: What is the file you brought?

MR. BIALEK: I just had an article published on one of the Coast Guard cutters named after one of the women, Kathleen Moore. I just submitted another article, about the grounding of an oil tanker off Cherbourg, France. Really interesting circumstances. I just submitted this one. It's on the Battleship Maine, not the Maine, but Maine Two. Ran aground at the entrance to the Mississippi in South Pass. The mouth of the Mississippi has the three passes, one going straight down, one on the left, and one on the

right. The ship ran aground, and the captain blamed the United States Coast Pilot, which is a publication telling navigators of dangers, of where to go or not go, like there's a shallow ledge here, you know to avoid it, stay on the other side of the channel. Things like that. So, there was a little set-to between the captain and what he said was an error in the Coast Pilot. It sounds as if the captain was wrong, and the United States Coast Pilot was correct. So, I'm going to try to write that up.

MR. DICKEY: You're writing on your own, or are you doing it for the Archives?

MR. BIALEK: No, it's all myself.

MR. DICKEY: You just got the information from the Archives?

MR. BIALEK: Yes, right. You know, there's an awful lot of information here. I mean, anybody who's searching for a subject, to write about, this the place. In every box, there are at least two or three articles that can be written. It's a goldmine if you're interesting in writing. So, I'm going to take it home, and see if I can work something up.

MR. DICKEY: Do you ever deal with the public, helping them look for information, or is it just doing the finding aids and that's it.

MR. BIALEK: No, I don't have contact with the public. If there's something really special that some person came in and asked about, Mark might ask me to sit in.

Oh, incidentally, there's another really interesting project. This is really good. There's a Frenchman who believes that there were two French pilots who tried to fly across the Atlantic ten days before Lindbergh did. There's evidence that they made it as far as Newfoundland, and then they crashed. No one has ever located anything about them. This Frenchman, who happens to be very wealthy and has a lot of contacts, is searching for their airplane. It's called White Bird because it was painted white.

I spent almost a year looking through the Coast Guard files, State Department files, all of those, looking for any information about that airplane. What we found was what appears to be the wing of that biplane. A small Coast Guard Patrol Craft, off the south coast of Newfoundland, near an island called Saint Pierre. The wing was floating in the water, and the Coast Guard went out to pick it up, and they evidently did pick it up, but the trail stops, period. Like I said, I spent almost a year trying to locate what happened to that wing, and there is no information. You can make your own guess as to what happened. It was the week before Lindbergh, the first person to cross the Atlantic in an airplane. If they would have found the White Bird, I don't know what that would have done to Lindbergh's reputation.

Also, an oil tanker off the Virginia Capes spotted what he says was the wing of an airplane, or both wings of the biplane seemed to be mashed together. He reported it to the Naval Hydrographic Office as a danger to navigation. At first, it seemed just a little bit far-fetched if the plane went down off Saint Pierre and it went all the way down to the Virginia Capes. Being an oceanographer, I knew that there's a current inside the Gulf Stream, called the Labrador Current, which goes all the way down to Hatteras, North Carolina before it peters out. We did a little math about the speed of the Labrador Current, and the time frame, and it fit. It could have gone down the Labrador Current to the Capes.

Again, nobody followed up on that danger to navigation. It was really interesting, but toward the end, it got kind of boring. I wasn't finding anything. Like I say, we went to the State Department files because we knew the French Government had notified our State Department that there was going to be a flight

across the Atlantic, and the French government wanted our help, they wanted the Coast Guard to be alert for an airplane. So, all these files with zero results, other than the Coast Guard spotting a wing. It was spotted off the northern tip of Long Island, Montauk Point. So, that was interesting.

MR. DICKEY: What sort of training did you have to be able to start working as a Staff Aide?

MR. BIALEK: My training, zero. I don't see how you could train anybody as a staff aide. You have to come in, yes, hopefully, with a little background, which I had. Like the Normandy study, I spent a couple years writing finding aids. I had a pretty good handle on that issue. Among the papers in the Normandy study, was the master plan for Operation Overlord. A big folder. It had "Top Secret"—big. I mean, I knew a little bit about Normandy, but I had no training.

MR. DICKEY: So you're saying your background as oceanographer helped you to be able to do a good job with the finding aids?

MR. BIALEK: Yes, I had a feel for the Navy portion. I was not a novice looking through the Normandy files. I was not a novice in the Aleutians. I knew a little bit about them. So background does help. I can do a much better job than a history major could. They would pick it up eventually, but I can come in running.

MR. DICKEY: Okay, is there anything we have not discussed that you'd like to talk about from your time here?

MR. BIALEK: I think I've covered everything. But I can say that when I did the Normandy study, I did that by myself. I would go for months without seeing the archivist that I worked for. With Mark Mollan, it's a little different. Every Tuesday when I come in, I talk with him, and I ask any questions I have, and he asks any questions he has. Like today, on the JAG study, he wanted information about two Army nurses, who were on a transport vessel going to Europe and somehow died. He wanted to know if I had seen that in the JAG files. Questions like that. So it's on a spreadsheet, and we can do a search for army nurses, etcetera. That's the contact that I have with him almost daily.

MR. DICKEY: But during your previous time, did they just give you a box of files and say, "Here you go?"

MR. BIALEK: Not a box. I was in a room up on the 12th deck, and the entire room was Neptune boxes. It took me three years. I was coming in twice a week then. I had a really good handle on it. One part of it dealt with mine warfare. I did a lot of work with mines. I mean I could tell you... when a folder was withdrawn, because it was classified, I could come pretty close to telling you what was in that folder, just from my background. Maybe not the details, but I could tell you about the general subject matter. You know, the first files are very similar to the middle one and to the last one. All the classified mines work had to do with mathematics, in probability in mines. I knew something about that, so that was a big help. When I write it up, I could maybe put in a little extra that I knew about. So definitely, I think background helps. It's not essential. The archivist has somewhat of a handle on it, compared to what a novice would write. I might have put an extra sentence in there. That's about it.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. Thank you for your time. That'll be the end of our interview. Thank you.

MR. BIALEK: You're welcome.

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Jonathan Dickey


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