

**Interview of Captain Warren Charles “Mitch” Mitchell, USCG (Retired)**

World War II Coast Guard Veteran (1942-1946)

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**Captain Warren Charles “Mitch” Mitchell, USCG**

## Biographical Summary:

Born in Forest City, Iowa on 23 August 1920, Warren Mitchell grew up in Buffalo Center, Iowa with two sisters and a younger brother. His father was a farmer and rural letter carrier. In high school he participated in football, baseball, track and basketball. During his senior year he was captain of his basketball team.

Following graduation from Upper Iowa College he attended Coast Guard Reserve Officers training the following September and was commissioned an ensign on 20 December 1942. Following his commissioning he returned to Iowa to marry Georgia Grimes. His initial assignment was to Captain of the Port office in Astoria, Oregon where he supervised Coast Guard Auxiliarists and Temporary Reservists. In January 1944 he reported for flight training, earning his wings the following October (Coast Guard Aviator 243). His initial assignment as an aviator was at Coast Guard Air Station [CGAS] Elizabeth City, North Carolina. A short time later he was assigned temporary duty at St. Simons Island, Georgia for the remainder of World War II. They would have a son, David, their first child, while in St. Simons.

Following the end of the war he left active duty and started teaching in Iowa. He accepted a teaching position at Crystal Lake, Iowa High School. However, approximately a year later, the Coast Guard requested he come back on active duty. He accepted and was sent to CGAS San Diego, where his second son, Charles, was born. While at San Diego he was sent to St. Louis for six months to patrol for ice on the Mississippi River. He later served with the Coast Guard Air Detachment at Argentia, Newfoundland as Executive Officer [XO]; CGAS Traverse City, Michigan as XO (where he qualified as a helicopter pilot); Coast Guard Air Detachment Arlington, Virginia as Commanding Officer [CO]; Coast Guard Air Detachment Barbers Point, Hawaii as XO; Chief, Search and Rescue [SAR] Branch, 8th Coast Guard District; CGAS Port Angeles, Washington as CO; Chief of Operations in the 1<sup>st</sup> Coast Guard District, Boston, Massachusetts; Atlantic Area Operations Officer and retired as the 17<sup>th</sup> District Chief of Staff in Juneau, Alaska in 1973.

During his aviation career after the war he served with Chester R. Bender, George Thometz, Julian Johansen, and William Brinkmeyer, and many other Coast Guard aviators.

Following retirement he remained in Juneau and worked for the governor. Following that he returned to Upper Iowa University and earned a degree in Business Administration. He then moved to Michigan, where he sold real estate. Not happy with the winter weather of Michigan he and his wife moved back to Port Angeles, where they still reside.



**Captain Warren Charles "Mitch" Mitchell, USCG (Ret.), 2013**

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**INTERVIEWER:** When and where were you born?

**MITCHELL:** I was born in Forest City, Iowa on August 23, 1920.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you tell me something about your family, your childhood?

**MITCHELL:** I have a sister two years older, a sister two years younger. All of our birthdays are in August. I have a brother born in October 1930.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you grow up on a farm or in town?

**MITCHELL:** Mostly on a farm.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you go to all the public schools in Forest City, Iowa and graduate from high school there?

**MITCHELL:** No. When I was less than a year old my father got a job in Buffalo Center, Iowa. That's where I grew up and went to high school. My father was a rural letter carrier and he liked farming. He rented a farm just outside of town. I did a lot of farming. When he got home from delivering the mail at about 1 o'clock my father would work on the farm as well.

**INTERVIEWER:** What did you do after you graduated from high school?

**MITCHELL:** I went to college.

**INTERVIEWER:** What college?

**MITCHELL:** I attended Iowa State Teachers' College, now called Northern Iowa University, and then transferred to Upper Iowa University, which is a private university in Fayette, Iowa.

**INTERVIEWER:** What year did you graduate from college?

**MITCHELL:** 1942 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology.

**INTERVIEWER:** Why did you join the Coast Guard?

**MITCHELL:** I became 21 years-of-age just before I entered my senior year of college. I was planning on getting a job teaching school. The school board that I applied to asked me what my draft number was. I told them I had just registered and didn't know. They told me they didn't want to hire somebody that was going to be drafted. I checked with my draft board and was told that I was number sixteen to go to the Army. I quickly applied for Coast Guard Reserve Officers' Training that I had heard about. At the time they called it Candidate Reserve Commission, CRC, and I sent my application in. The Army called for a physical exam. I decided that I would go down and enlist in the Coast Guard before they drafted me into the Army and once in the Coast Guard I would apply for officers' training. The day that I was going down to enlist in the Coast Guard a letter arrived telling me to report to Chicago for an interview. I went to Chicago and was accepted into CRC for the September class of 1942. I was commissioned as an ensign on December 20, 1942.

**INTERVIEWER:** Where was that reserve officers training held?

**MITCHELL:** We spent the first month at Groton, Connecticut Training Center then a month at the [Cosat Guard] Academy in New London and then another month back at Groton and then the final month on a ship at the Academy. They had the *Atlantic*, a couple of sailing vessels and some yachts. I was assigned to the yacht *North Wind* which someone had loaned to the Coast Guard during the war. We spent about a month cruising on Long Island Sound.

**INTERVIEWER:** What things did they teach you at reserve officers training?

**MITCHELL:** All kinds of navigation, communications, and I can't remember everything.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you remember what the food was like at Groton and the Academy?

**MITCHELL:** There was plenty of it and it was pretty good.

**INTERVIEWER:** Where did they send you after you graduated and were commissioned?

**MITCHELL:** They sent me to the District Office in Seattle for further assignment.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you ask for that or did they just assign you there?

**MITCHELL:** They just assigned me. They gave me ten or fifteen days to get there, so I went back to Iowa and married Georgia Grimes. She was teaching school. She went back to teaching and I went on to Seattle. I reported in about the first of January 1943. They gave me a choice of staying in Seattle and working in the decoding room in Communications or going to the Captain of the Port Office in Astoria, Oregon. I took Astoria, so they sent me down to Astoria.

**INTERVIEWER:** How long were you in Astoria and what did you do there?

**MITCHELL:** They put me in charge of the Coast Guard Auxiliaries and the Temporary Reservists. They were trying to get them to do all the waterfront patrols. I was also the communications officer and the commissary officer as an ensign. I made lieutenant (junior grade) in September.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was it like working with the Auxiliaries and the Temporary Reserves?

**MITCHELL:** We had Auxiliaries and Temporary Reserves at several places up the Columbia River and I would visit all of them.

**MITCHELL:** At the time the Soviet Union was sending ships into Portland to get supplies because they were also fighting the Germans. We had to board all those ships. I would go aboard with two or three enlisted men and a Public Health Service doctor. We would seal their radio, and fill out forms. It was a big deal then. There were a couple of Soviet ships each week. There were female officers aboard these Soviet ships, several had women in command. There was usually at least one Soviet sailor who spoke English so we didn't need a translator. The Soviet officers were always very friendly and gave us a bottle of vodka when we left their ship. I also worried about the Public Health Service doctor climbing up the Jacobs Ladder, because they were considerably older than the rest of us.

Towards the end of the year the personnel officer told me he had received an ALCOAST [a communication message issued to the entire service, i.e. "All Coast Guard"] which said they wanted ensigns and J.G.s to apply for flight training. He suggested that I apply for it. He said he would even help me with the application. One of the prerequisites was a year of sea duty. I had no sea duty, so the commanding officer put a favorable endorsement on it and recommended me for flight training.

About January 1944 I got orders to report to Alameda for further assignment by Headquarters. I reported into Alameda and I thought they would be putting me on some type of a ship. A few days after arriving the assignment officer called me in. When I arrived he said, "holy cow, get in here Chief!" His orders say "for further assignment by headquarters. Find out what we are supposed to do with him." This is on Friday, and on Saturday they had a big muster of all the personnel. Since I was a big [Lieutenant] J.G. they had me in charge of a whole bunch of ensigns and others. They came up to me and handed me a note and said "find these three officers", one of which was me, "and have them report to Personnel immediately." This is about ten o'clock Saturday. Personnel told us that we were to be in Dallas, Texas for flight training on Monday morning. It was Saturday noon. I left my car with a friend there and the three of us got on a train to Fort Worth, Texas and then got on a bus to Dallas. I think we went to Hensley Field [Naval Air Station Dallas], about half way between Dallas and Fort Worth. Georgia was with me. She went to the bus depot.

**INTERVIEWER:** When did your wife come out to the West Coast?

**MITCHELL:** She finished her year of teaching and then joined me in Astoria. We had driven down to Alameda together.

Georgia went on to the bus station and I went and reported in to Hensley Field. We couldn't find a hotel in Dallas. I went down to the bus depot the next day and we finally found one but when we got there the taxi driver looked sort of funny at us when we arrived there. We walked into the hotel and to one of the upper stories to our room. The sheets had been slept in so we had to make up our own bed. We found out this hotel was in the red light district. In the middle of the night some guy opened the door and walked in and said "What are you doing here? I thought Susie was in here." The next morning Georgia told me she wasn't going to stay there. I took her back to the bus depot. That night she found a place for us. We ended up renting a house with a single lady. She had two bedrooms and we shared the house with her. That was January and I finished flight training about June.

I then was sent to Pensacola, Florida for more flight training.

**INTERVIEWER:** What kind of training did you have at NAS Hensley Field?

**MITCHELL:** We flew the N2S [Stearman (Boeing) Kaydet], a biplane. It was basic flight training.

I think when I arrived at Pensacola they sent me to Saufley Field where I flew the SNV [Vultee Valiant] which had fixed landing gear. From there I went to Whiting Field for SNJ [North American Texan] instrument training. Then they sent all the Coast Guard flight students to a base to learn to fly the PBY [Consolidated Catalina].

**INTERVIEWER:** Where did they send you for the PBY training?

**MITCHELL:** I don't remember the name, but it was near Pensacola. They had older PBYs that didn't have the "blisters" on them. When we finished there we were sent to Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you receive your flight wings before you left Pensacola?

**MITCHELL:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** How long did you spend at Pensacola?

**MITCHELL:** I think I got out of flight training about October 1944. January through June in Dallas and the June through October at Pensacola.

**INTERVIEWER:** What did you do when you got to the Coast Guard Air Station at Elizabeth City?

**MITCHELL:** They checked me out in various Coast Guard aircraft. I don't think that I was there over about three months. When I finished there they sent me and a couple of crews with one aircraft down to St. Simons Island, Georgia for temporary duty to do search and rescue. By the time I got to Elizabeth City they had discontinued anti-submarine patrols so all we did was search and rescue. We had two complete crews for this single aircraft so that we could do 24 hours on and 24 hours off. I wanted to take about ten days leave but they wouldn't send another pilot down to St. Simons. The other pilot was an [enlisted—NAP] Aviation Pilot, an AP. We worked to out where he stood continuous duty for ten days while I went back to Iowa and then I came back and did ten straight days while he too [went on] leave.

**INTERVIEWER:** Were you at St. Simons Island when the war ended?

**MITCHELL:** Yes. About October I went back to Elizabeth City and told them that I wanted to go back to inactive duty. I did various jobs around Iowa. I signed a contract to teach school at Crystal Lake, Iowa. Georgia and I were both going to teach there. We had a little trouble with her salary there. They were paying another female teacher a higher salary even though she had no credentials. While we were trying to work the salary issue out I got a letter from the Coast Guard saying that they really needed aviators back in and wanted to know if I would come back on active duty. After I sent in the letter telling the Coast Guard that I was coming back in, the school board finally came back to us with an acceptable salary for my wife, but by then it was too late. I had orders to Air Station San Diego and would stay in the Coast Guard for a full career. While in San Diego I was offered to change from reserve to regular Coast Guard, which I accepted.

By the time I left the Coast Guard, at the end of the war I was a full lieutenant, but when they took my back in I was back as a J.G.

**INTERVIEWER:** During the war, when you were at Hensley Field and Pensacola, what was the relationship like with the Navy or other military service personnel?

**MITCHELL:** No problems at all.

**INTERVIEWER:** During World War II did you ever serve with [Coast Guard] Academy graduates?

**MITCHELL:** Yes, a few.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was your most memorable experience during WWII?

**MITCHELL:** I think it was working with the Soviets while at the Captain of the Port in Astoria, Oregon.

**INTERVIEWER:** What comments, impressions, or thoughts would you like to share; areas that I have missed and that you think are important for future generations to know?

**MITCHELL:** No, I think you got everything.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

