

Oral History of George Balazs

Conducted on February 10, 2026

GB: George Balazs

SRM: Sarah R. Meiners

Please note that this is not an exact word-for-word transcript and has been lightly edited for clarity and to remove some interjections. People seeking word-for-word quotations should view the videoed oral history.

GB: Let me just give you a capsule summary of myself...

SRM: Great!

GB: ...as it relates to Midway...

SRM: That's a great place to start!

GB: ...because I date back to, well, first of, I committed myself in the mid-'70s to study Hawaiian sea turtles, okay? And Hawai'i, well, Hawai'i is from south point, Cape Kumukahi, closest spot to San Francisco, the west coast, extending all the way up to Kure Atoll, 50-some miles past Midway.

So, back in those days, it was, if you could catch a ride on a fishing boat that was going to fish in an area, or you could somehow talk the Navy into letting you go on a 141 up there, where the jet runway and everything is at Midway--which is still, by the way, an alternate landing site.

The only reason that twin jets are allowed, this is my understanding--twin jets, like the fuel efficient, ones that only have two jet engines on them instead of four, okay? Not dreamliners! They're allowed to fly that far because Midway is an alternate landing site. And in the past couple of years, there was a Japan Airlines or some, one of the airlines, did have to make an emergency landing there, and the couple hundred people were put up on Midway by the Fish and Wildlife Service that operates the place now. And so Midway continues to be an important place.

But in the early '70s, mid-'70s, I was committed to going to all of these places and trying to learn. And up until probably 1978, the Navy had 2,500 or so people living on it, including dependents. There's a high school there. I remember the graduating class was N equals three.

I'm still in touch with what was then a young couple that were DOD employees that were teachers at Midway, Gary and Linda Means that now live in Phoenix, retired, and they hosted me because I guess there was a dive club there and they were seeing turtles. They were actually eating a few turtles every so often. Okay, so be it.

And I was able to go over there and establish relationships, give talks, some of the people I'm still in touch with to this era. If over the many years--and Obama got there too! They named a

fish after him, and Obama was, took a trip up there. I don't know if you know that? Obama's right here in Hawaii and went to Punahou, and you probably know that story.

But I am not aware, nor are my contacts there with Fish and Wildlife Service able to find in any of their history books, even the case that we're referring to the Yu Xing, or however we want to pronounce the ship, that there was, there is no record there, according to the historian for Fish and Wildlife Service that focuses on Midway, no record of this event happening although I lived it, I knew it happened, of course. INS knew it happened.

And by the way, they were, those INS women and men, my perception and memory of it looking at the video and remembering in person, they were exceptionally sweet to those people. They were as kind as they could--the fact that they that they let the one group and me go over there and show them what sea turtles are, and they knew what turtles are, but the handout that you see me giving them was a little, I think I had found somebody to translate into Chinese about: What do sea turtles do in Hawai'i? They migrate. They lay eggs, blah, blah, blah. That's what I was handing out to them.

And I only wish that I could have done that with all of them, the whole group, but they never took them all out at once for a walk, get some fresh air, et cetera, et cetera. Get some cold air, maybe, because it was it was September, so it gets chilly at Midway, very chilly. The water gets very chilly, too. It can.

So I've stayed in touch over the years. It was the only place on my travels to that end of the chain that I was able to take my wife with me in the '70s. I forget what year it was, but she had a wonderful time. I think I paid 100 bucks for her seat on the Mac 141, and we stayed with some of the dependents up there. We stayed with the Bradley family who--I haven't heard from him in years--but it was one of those lifelong memories and stuff like that.

So yeah, my last time there was, oh my goodness, it's been a while, I guess. I think '97. No, I don't remember my last time there. I could look that up, but I can tell you this: I was there with a group of high schoolers tagging turtles and woke up at 6 o'clock in the morning with everybody running up and down the hallway in the barracks, screaming and looking at TVs because it was 9/11. And we, all planes stopped, and I wondered for a week if, would I ever get home again? It was one hell of an experience being at Midway on top of everything that was shown on TV over and over and over again, those planes hitting the World Trade Towers. I looked the other way when I see them to this day and remember Midway and everybody, you know.

So that's me.

Midway is one of those one special places. I've been to every site in the Hawaiian chain that's called an island or an atoll, and Midway stands out because it's not part of the state of Hawai'i, which is always crazy to me.

Yet Kure is, and Kure, K-U-R-E, still falls under the city and county of Honolulu, which is crazy, but it is. It's a state seabird, a sanctuary, wildlife refuge. It's not operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Back in those years, Kure had on it a LORAN (L-O-R-A-N)-A station,

which was the old LORAN, which was invented at the end, towards the end of World War II. And the Navy would fly these seahorse helicopters, twin rotors on top, once a week or twice a week to supply the Coast Guard people at Kure, which was, as I said, 50-some miles away. So I was able to access Kure that way as one of the ways in addition to fishing boat stuff back then. 625 foot LORAN--Oh, I'm mixing up. It wasn't LORAN-A at Kure. It was LORAN-C, which was a more advanced one that stayed in service much longer than the A's did.

So, all right, that's probably enough babbling. Ask away, and then I'll give commentary at the end if I have something.

SRM: I have a question based off what you said. Do you think any problems were caused by Midway not being part of the state of Hawai'i? Because you said it surprises you that it's not part of the state. Is it just because of geography and being a part of the archipelago?

GB: Well, I guess it's because of the history, as I roughly understand it.

You know, Roosevelt in 1900 whatever, 9, he drew that big circle around all the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands because the Japanese were reportedly coming in getting the millinery trade, which is feathers for hats. And some pictures were sent back of the Japanese slaughtering the seabirds at Laysan Island and others. So he drew a big circle around it. Teddy Roosevelt, he was, I guess, quite a conservationist in his day, and said: "this is a seabird sanctuary. The Japanese shall stay out."

So, Midway was in the circle, but even before that in the late, I'm thinking the late-1800s, there was the recognition that Midway would be an ideal place for a cable, cable station where the undersea cable could, could be serviced and maintained as it continued on under the ocean to Japan, to Hong Kong, somewhere, somewhere in Asia. But when you think about those years, oh my God, laying a cable?

So has it caused any problems? Now that all is said and done: no, that I'm aware of, and in fact, may have been the place that kept Japanese from invading Hawai'i after Pearl Harbor, you know? The Battle of Midway was not fought at Midway although there was dive bombers and other action at Midway Island, two islands, there, Sand Island and Eastern Island in the atoll known as Midway.

There's a Hawaiian name to it now, but I couldn't pronounce it and don't remember it. It's not my era, so let the Hawaiians have their name. I'm happy for it, but I can't integrate into that.

The Battle of Midway was a ship battle that was 100 or 200 miles north of Midway. And that's where the pride of the Japanese fleet, I forget what it was, was sunk and turned the tide, pretty much turned the tide of World War II. And then the two A-bombs sealed it when the Emperor and Tojo, my dad was in World War II, but he didn't see action, but he was on B-29s that dropped, that was part of the group of planes that practiced for the Hiroshima and the Nagasaki ones. So he always used to tell me, yeah, it was horrible. We killed all those people, but if the emperor hadn't been convinced that he was defeated, he would have had his people go fight to

the last man and woman, and there would have been ten times as many killed on each side than it was. So, I don't know, the good and the bad.

Yeah, I guess I, the good in the bad of Midway, I can think of goods. I can think of bads. The whole picture, Midway, known not for sea turtles. Turns out it's not that wonderful place, it never has been for sea turtles, but it's part of the Hawaiian archipelago. And the green turtles in Hawai'i are as genetically distinct as the Hawaiian ancestry people are genetically distinct. So we show that in molecular genetics of samples from Midway although we did have one or two turtles that had Malaysian ancestry. That was interesting.

But you're getting up there. How did I? In fact, I even put it in one of my short papers. It's like a needle coming out of the ocean. It's the abyss all around it. And here's this little pinpoint of dry coral that subsided 30 million years ago, and at one point was a volcanic island in the Hawaiian chain. And over time, the tectonic plates shifted, and the islands went down, and if you go look at a map or photos, you start with Kure and Midway, and then you go to the southeast along each chain, and whoops, you suddenly get to Gardner Pinnacles, where there's volcano, volcanic rock above ground. There then you get to French Frigate Shoals, has La Perouse Pinnacle, is a 125 foot remnant of a volcano. And then you get to Necker and Nihoa. Whoops, they're a bit bigger-- not much. Then you get to Ni'ihau and Kaua'i and whoops, there we are, Madame Pele's still above the ground and all of that.

So I'm babbling. Go ahead. Next question.

SRM: No, it's okay. I like hearing about it.

So to the point of the interview, and you've spoken about this in email and things like that, but how did you come to learn that there were Chinese migrants, Chinese asylum seekers in Midway?

GB: Well, in that year, there, I'm trying to remember, not remember and also, yeah, the Navy had long gone. There may have been--Yes, there was. There was Steve Barkley should have been there. Wow, I think I could get you in touch with Steve Barkley still. He would have been there. He worked for, he was kind of he worked for Fish and Wildlife first, and then he switched to this company called Phoenix Corporation.

SRM: Right.

GB: They were running the place and they interestingly, maybe relates to what you're looking at. I'm remembering that they had all of the hired help, if you will, were from Thailand is my recollection. So you got a lot of Thai food in the mess hall, if you will, was called.

And Phoenix Corporation was running tours. You could go, they would charter Aloha Airlines 737 and maybe some other jet smaller than that, because there couldn't have been that'd be too expensive. There must have been a smaller type jet that they were running. Must be some history online Phoenix Corporation. Maybe you found it. I didn't search for it. I'll have to refresh myself with it.

It was like the Coconut Wireless. Here's Balazs and Marc Rice and Denise Parker, who still my good friend in touch with her weekly. She lives in Oregon. She's the one in the video where Mark, who's filming the video says, "Denise, you're blocking the way!" And Denise says, "whoops, sorry" and bends down. I'll ask her if she has any memories of it and you may want to consider asking her if she does.

The coconut wireless, small numbers of people, we all knew who everybody was, and it just spread like wildfire. What I don't remember, and I should, but I don't, and back then, it was still remember 35-millimeter slide. So it was expensive to take pictures, and we were cheap with the film because of that. Over my career, though, I do have, and I converted them now at several maybe \$3, \$4,000 worth of expense. I've got all my 17,000 35-millimeter slides converted to digital. But didn't take a lot of pictures back then.

And what I'm saying that I'm not remembering is if the Coast Guard brought in a hundred of them, and clearly, I have no memory of them towing anybody towing the ship. There's an inner harbor at Midway, and then there's the fuel piers and the cargo pier in the lagoon. It would be the inner harbor, World War II was a sub-pen and other stuff, that the ship, I have no memory of a Coast Guard ship being in there. Maybe they dropped them off and left. I would remember a derelict ship being towed in because I was familiar with them over my career of Japanese and Taiwan longliners smacking into Laysan Island and leaving wrecks there. Nobody ever took them off. They just hit the islands, Phoenix Islands. I went there and did overflights with the Air Force and seeing wrecks all stacked up. So how did they actually get there and transfer? It's a blank to me. And I don't think it should be, but suddenly we were aware that the INS was there.

You know what? More planes must have come in in the middle of the night from Honolulu. And it's only this screech of birds and stuff there, although it wouldn't have been so many albatross in September. There had to have been some planes coming in that picked them up. I do have a memory of a large plane when they left. You know, it was probably a 141, which is a military cargo plane that they used that my wife and I went up in '78 on.

So yeah, I've got missing memories. I guess I was focusing on the turtles too much, but I can guarantee you it's never left me for very long, all these years. Oh, my God, what happened to them? Their faces touched me as I walked around, handing out those things. And I guess, I should mention to you, that my first trip to Taiwan was in 1994 [correction] for sea turtles. And I was touched by Chinese culture and Chinese people then as I am to this day, making trips, having friends there. There is an error in the either the filing by Phil Lowenthal, which amazing, looks like him and his son or daughter are still in business here.

SRM: I'm talking to him next week.

GB: Good for you. Good. On Maui, I think, yeah, good for you. In his filing or somewhere in what I have online, it does say, ROC: wrong. And then suddenly I said, oh, my God, am I forgetting it? It was it a Taiwan boat? No, no, it was not a Taiwan boat. It was a PRC boat. So that was just a little slip up somebody made. There probably no big deal. Although it would have been very important if it was an ROC boat because connections back and forth.

I've lost train of thought, what we're focusing on. Please go.

SRM: So you do have that video of you interacting with the women and showing them the sea turtles. How did you, do you remember how that happened? I know you said it's only just the one group, but did you know someone from Phoenix Corp. who asked you to show them the turtles? Or is that something you volunteered to do?

GB: As I approach 83, let me tell you this, I'm not the sharpest whip in the world as a scientist. I have a master's degree. I came in to see turtle science by the backdoor. But someone asked me once, how do I describe myself if I'm not particularly an academically inclined sea turtle scientist? Although I've got a lot of journal publications. First author, nobody wrote it for, well, one, one case is done different, but of the 60 or 70 that I'm first author of, I wrote them. I consider myself as a conductor and a conduit. I think of those two "c" words. I conduct research with people.

Look at me, Sarah. And I consider myself a conduit, like electrical wire. Data, energy, people flowing through to match up and empower others. And interesting question. Glad it opened that door. I can say for myself that I saw them. I felt sorry for them. I wanted to do something for them. And I marched over to Steve Barkley or whoever was running Phoenix at the time, or I interacted with the INS people directly. Most of them were women, which make sense. At least to my eyes, they were women. You don't toss men in with 90 women. I don't think you do. Anyway, it wouldn't be appropriate. They, by the way, it was the basketball court area and the basketball indoors. And I have in my notes that they had put up very prominently black screen all around the course. And I believe that was just as much for the women to have privacy when they went walking out around the basketball courts, fenced area, as it was for the people on the island to be gawking at them inside.

So, I think it was, so I like to create, I like to do things that other people think. Never say never. And it struck me that we're doing these turtles. I knew from trips to Taiwan, and other reading, that turtles are significant in different ways, longevity, et cetera, in Asian and especially Chinese culture. And, okay, let's try to what do I have that I can give to them that these guards will let me do? I'm trying to remember, I wish I would have saved a copy of it, who actually translated it into Chinese. We put a lot of pictures on that handout and if it doesn't show in that very short video, I can tell you that a couple of the women were very short. I suspected they were more shy than the others, maybe younger, maybe whatever. And I'd do this to this day, if I'm working in the crowd, so to speak, I always like to find somebody way in the background that's and give them special attention. So, yeah, I created it. Let's do something for these people. Okay, next.

SRM: And that's the only time. I just want to make sure I had that straight. It was just the one group?

GB: I think so. I don't remember. It seems like because I have still pictures of those, too.

SRM: Oh, okay.

GB: The video must have been, I guess it wasn't such a great quality that it doesn't come across real well, but it is what's there. It looks a little blurry. I will see. One of the things about Google photos, if I put in a search "Midway" into 17,000 photos, it will do a pretty good job about finding it.

SRM: It's pretty slick.

GB: Okay, go ahead.

SRM: Yes, and so I also read on your website--which is great. It has so much cool information--I was reading about turtles. I saw that you wrote letters to representatives to try to figure out what happened to the people who were actually taken to the United States. And in one of the letters, you were given the name of like the detention facility and things like that, but you were never able to actually track down anyone or figure out their fates or things like that.

GB: No, I wasn't able to track down. I saw that again in refreshing my memory of the detention center. I can't imagine that I would not have made some communication of facts or what, you know, I don't have apparently had no copy of it, but nothing ever came of it.

What did surprise me, too, is that I'm certain I got a hold of Amnesty International. And I thought, maybe it was a phone call. Maybe I'm thinking that something was a phone call. But there is in one of the letters, I've got a "cc" too, I don't know what kind of name it is. I think it's S-A. Very short name. Do you know what ancestry S-A would be? It's not an initial. It was a person's name. That might be easy to find. And either they phoned me or faxed me and I didn't save it or wrote me a letter and said they incredibly difficult to track. They couldn't find anything of any of the cases.

SRM: And that unfortunately doesn't surprise me.

GB: Yeah, yeah, well. Did you say in the beginning you've been to Saipan and Guam?

SRM: Not Saipan, but I've been to Guam. I went in 2023 a couple months after that big typhoon.

GB: Oh, a couple of months after what?

SRM: The typhoon Marwar. After the big typhoon in 2023.

GB: Okay.

SRM: So I went, yeah. I was supposed to go that May and then, I saw the storm getting bigger and bigger. So then I pushed my trip a couple months back. So I was at the University of Guam, and I was at Anderson Air Force Base.

GB: Well, it's turtle country around there. Yeah, and I know some folks up in Saipan. I think that was the same year I went to Hong Kong and maybe stopped there on the way back. Oh, no, no, no, maybe not. I think the Fishery Council, Western Pacific Regional Fishery Council was

meeting in Saipan, and they got stuck there during that one. And you were there for the same purpose that you're...

SRM: I was studying other, so refugees in Guam, not this specific article, but looking at when the Vietnamese refugees were in Guam in 1975 and then in the '90s, there were Kurds and then also more Chinese people in Guam on the bases.

GB: So what I skipped over that I'll just finish up my loose thought was the hired help, for lack of a better word, contracted employees at Midway during that time for Phoenix Corporation and post-naval with abandonment of the island. My recollection, most of them were contracted from Thailand and paid four bucks an hour is what sticks in my mind. And they could get away with that and also doing long hours, which, you know, I think the Thai folks were delighted to have that job, but it wasn't fair by U.S. standards anyway. But they got away with it because all the laws didn't apparently apply to Midway during that time.

So I think it was a cherry picking because how come the U.S Endangered Species Act laws applied there if others didn't, you know, I think it was what was comfortable and convenient for the caretakers, if you will, which would have been the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Just like, you know, I wonder if there are any refugees ever at Johnston Atoll?

SRM: I don't know. I tried to look. There's discussion every once in a while about using it, but I think it's too logistically difficult. But that's one of the things I'm trying to look at.

GB: Yeah, I took multiple trips there during the '80s when they were when they decommissioning the poison gas destruction plant that cost a billion dollars to build and a billion dollars to take apart. Alright, alright.

SRM: Go. So I have one more question.

GB: Just one?

SRM: Yes, and then you can speak about your final thoughts. But so you said you talked to the Fish and Wildlife Service historian who has no record of this happening. Do you think that--

GB: Let me clarify that now. I have a very dear friend. She kind of, I don't know that she would mind her name being out there, but she's a little spooky that way. Sometimes government employees are. I never was, and that's why I didn't get along too well in my 32 years with NOAA. I wasn't a party member. I ask her to, at Midway, she's been at Midway for a year or two. She did her master's degree years ago on sea turtles here in Hawai'i, and I helped her out. And I said, in the records, what do you know about this ship, the year? They immediately, she immediately found the one where the derelict Taiwan boat had been towed in with no lifeboat, and apparently the whole crew is missing on that one. And she dug, said no record here. Let me check with somebody she knows in the historian end of Midway. I mean, obviously Midway's got a hell of a lot of history to it. And she came back and said, I think she even sent me the email address and the name of the person who said he went through the records and could find no record of it. So I didn't talk to him directly, but I do, I believe, have a copy of his email. I'd be

perfectly fine sending you that address and that name, and you can just pretend you pulled it out of a thin air and see if he says the same thing.

SRM: Yeah, I just find it interesting what is remembered. So that was why I asked that question. If it's part of the history of Midway or is this just something that happened once and most of the history is World War II?

GB: Yeah. So my friend there is probably 50 years old and she's been around Hawaii and in Guam, she was in Guam with a fish and refuge out there. And then took this assignment at Midway where you only get to go home every six months or so. Actually, I'll see her in a couple weeks at the Sea Turtle Center Symposia. She's getting to come for that. No record, no memory. And in fact, she's familiar with my website, the section on Midway, and I guess she went and looked there. She says, George, except for your website, I have no knowledge of this case, whatsoever.

So well, let me tell you something that might lead to something that bewilders me to this day. Bewildered me then, bewilders me now. And I guess Judge David Ezra went on the law as he interpreted, I will tell you, he was a very respected man during his era. He was the kind of judge, the federal judge, that nobody ever said bad words about. And I had the honor on a flight from here to Maui, he was in the seat in front of me. And as we were getting off, I said, I recognize you, Judge Ezra, and please know that you're honored and respected. And he smiled and said, thank you, thank you for that. So, you know, just little personal touches like that.

So what bewilders me...

[Interview interrupted by technology issues. Video edited.]

The issue was, were these people fleeing for their personal safety their life, for their, you know, or were they just seeking economic advantage and a better life, which everybody, many people in the world are, of course. At that era, and having learned what I absorbed in Taiwan, the difference between Taiwan and Big Brother across the channel, is with the one child policy and the cultural extreme bias, at least during those years, probably to this day, but extreme to prefer males. Why did they have to prove, I mean, look at the composition. Were there any men among them? Not that I'm aware of, if they were they were masquerading as a woman. Why did they have to prove things beyond the fact that they were women? Somebody in their family scraped together two, three, four, thousand US dollars, which is a huge sum, to get their daughter out of their hair and then go for a boy, if they could. I mean, it seems to me that that was, you know, the alternate thought would be, oh, this was a prostitution smuggling ring that was taken. I don't buy that. That was in the newspaper, possible smugglers to lead a life into prostitution. I don't buy that a bit. I just don't see it.

But that's my feelings perhaps supported a little bit by the history but maybe not admissible in court. But at this point in history, if you could find even one person to tell their story, and I'm wondering even if you could find one of presumably the 80 or 90 or whatever that got shipped back, that would be equally as insightful as a story of somebody that stayed and what was the trace of their life.

Chinese, Cantonese expression, look it up, Y-E-N-F-A-N? Yuanfen. I forget if that's Cantonese or Mandarin. Yuanfen. I think it's Cantonese. Predestination. Predestination, what did the forces have in mind for those that got sent back and those that could stay, the minority assuming any could stay, there must be a way to find out with AI and the resources we have available to us at this time.

SRM: Yeah, I'm going to look.

GB: Yeah.

SRM: I'm definitely going to search.

GB: All right. That's probably all I have.

SRM: And that's all I have on my list. That was very helpful, even just to hear your side of the story because all I had is the court document. So it's nice to hear from the people as much as possible who were involved in the situation.

GB: Yeah. And, you know, it's not, a praise thing. It's not a condemned thing. What I'm going to tell you now. And that is, I'll check with Denise. I haven't done that yet. But the guy who's taking the video, my friend for going on 40 years now, I'll see him on the 24th and I'll see him at the sea turtle meeting. And I contacted him and I said: "Marc, I'm going to be interviewed by this lady. It's just like yuanfen, predestination. After all these years, somebody's interested in these poor Chinese women that went through all this stuff, and no one knows what happened to them. Please, you keep a data book just like I do. Take a look." He knew of the video. He had the video. He has no other video. But he went through his data books for the Midway trips and the 1999 one and says, "I don't know why, George, but I didn't even make note that we saw them."

SRM: Wow.

GB: So, you know, in fairness, and this will say something about me equally with him, when they were there, I was more interested in them than I was in the turtles. Turtles are like wind up little toys. They all do pretty much the same things. Humans under stress and challenges in life all have different expressions on their face. And that probably interests me more than anything else.