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Interview with
LOUIS ROFFMAN
December 8, 1980

Place of Interview: Orlando, Florida

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

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Approved:

Louis Roffman
(Signature)

Date:

8 Dec 80

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Oral History Collection

Louis Roffman

Interviewer: Ronald E. Marcello

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Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Louis Roffman for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on December 8, 1980, in Orlando, Florida. I'm interviewing Mr. Roffman in order to get his reminiscences, experiences, and impressions while he was a member of 31st Bombardment Squadron at Hickam Field during the Japanese attack there on December 7, 1941.

Mr. Roffman, to begin this interview, just very briefly give me a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature. Just be very brief and general.

Mr. Roffman: I was born on February 22, 1922. I was born in New York City, and I graduated from high school in New York City. I joined the Army, was sent on over to Hawaii, and went on over to the 31st Bomb Squadron.

Dr. Marcello: When did you join?

Mr. Roffman: I joined the Army in 1936.

Dr. Marcello: That must have been before you were even out of high school.

Roffman: Well, I had just got out of high school; I had just gotten out. In fact, I had between six and seven months to the completion...to get the diploma. We were in the Depression era, and I joined the cavalry down in the Rio Grande Valley, Fort Rengold, Texas.

Marcello: How old were you when you went into the service then?

Roffman: I was just not quite seventeen.

Marcello: As you mentioned, you were born in 1922, and you joined the service in 1936. That's just fourteen.

Roffman: I was just seventeen. I had just turned seventeen when I joined.

Marcello: But what I don't understand is, if you were born in 1922 and you joined in 1936...

Roffman: I don't remember now. I know I was seventeen when I got in. I had to have somebody sign that I was of age to get in.

Marcello: Why did you decide to join the Army?

Roffman: Well, we were in the Depression era, and consequently jobs were very scarce; and there was long bread lines, but there was not very long lines in the military for chow lines. Consequently, that was easier.

Marcello: Economics, I think, is the reason a great many people of your generation give as being the reason for entering the service. Times were tough, and even though the service didn't pay very much, the pay was still was still steady, and you got the three square meals a day and a roof over your head.

Roffman: We were only getting paid \$21 a month. It was supposed to have been a three-year tour, and I changed from there to the Air Corps.

Marcello: When did you change from the cavalry to the Air Corps?

Roffman: In 1938.

Marcello: Was there any particular reason why you decided to change?

Roffman: Well, I've always liked airplanes, and I thought I had a better education at that time. I completed high school in the cavalry. I did get my diploma but there was no chance of advancement. There was some men in the cavalry at that time that had been in twenty-five years and were only corporals. You would see Air Force personnel come by, and there would be sergeants...and the rank seemed to be much easier. However, the prerequisites to get into the Army Air Corps was very tough, and they weren't taking too many people.

They did accept me, and they sent me to Chanute Field in Illinois to go to mechanic's school. I went to school for one full year, and when a man ended up as a mechanic there, he could tear an airplane apart by himself and rebuild it.

Marcello: You were specifically listed then as an aircraft mechanic.

Roffman: I was listed as an aircraft mechanic. In 1939, I went to New York City, got on a ship, the U.S. Army Transport Republic. It was sometime in August--the date slips my mind--that we went around to Panama, and we arrived in San Francisco.

If my recollection is correct, the 1st of September is the day England declared war on Germany.

Marcello: September 1, 1939.

Roffman: September 1, 1939. That is correct. We were going out that same day, out of San Francisco. However, we stayed on over there for three days so they could paint an American flag on the ship. And they put a big light on the outside so that there was no chance of anybody missing it that it was an American ship. We then sailed on to Honolulu.

Marcello: How long did it take the Republic to go from San Francisco to Honolulu? Do you recall offhand?

Roffman: Eight, nine days.

Marcello: The Republic was not a very fast ship, was it?

Roffman: Not at all.

Marcello: You mentioned, of course, that you were in San Francisco when World War II officially started in Europe. Is it safe to assume that at that time you had no idea or inkling that there would eventually be trouble in the Far East, at least involving the United States?

Roffman: No, not at all. There was a lot of people or personnel on the ship that were heading on to the Philippines at that time. However, most of the people on the ship were all Army and were in the Army or on the Air Corps at that time. Then when you got to your station, Hawaii or the Philippines...a thing to me that was funny. It wasn't funny at the time, but

I had gotten off the ship, and there two big MP's...one was an officer. There were three and the other two were enlisted men. As you came on off, they picked you out: "You, to the MP's; you, Schofield Barracks; you, somewhere else," like that. However, I was a mechanic graduate, and they'd spent a whole lot of money--whatever it cost at that time--to send me to mechanic's school, and they assigned me to the MP's. There was nothing I could do about it. I told them I was assigned to the Army Air Corps unassigned. They said, "You're an MP driver." I was too small to be an MP; you had to be almost six feet. Well, I was in the MP's for five days until somebody along the line found out that I belonged to Hickam Field, and fortunately they transferred me to Hickam Field. Well, it wasn't Hickman; I wasn't at Hickam Field. I was transferred to Luke Field, which was on Ford Island.

Marcello: That must have been around the time that they were in the process of converting that into a Navy seaplane base and were moving you guys over to Hickam Field.

Roffman: When we finally did move, the barracks wasn't complete, and we moved to what we called "Tent City."

Marcello: What was life like in "Tent City?"

Roffman: Here you're a young kid, nineteen years old, and things didn't bother you too much. You could sleep outside in a tent. That wasn't too bad. I know I wouldn't do it now, but in those days you took everything with the time, and it didn't bother you.

Marcello: What kind of a tent was it?

Roffman: It was a large canvas tent that slept six.

Marcello: How long did you remain in "Tent City?" I know that they were in the process of completing the large consolidated barracks at that time, but I was wondering how long you had been in "Tent City."

Roffman: I'd say about between two and four months.

Marcello: During that time, was the hangar line and flight line and so on completed?

Roffman: The hangar line was all complete. We worked at Hangar Number Nine.

Marcello: Did you automatically become a crew chief, given your training and so on? Describe your advancement up to crew chief, if, in fact, you did not become one right away.

Roffman: Well, we had at that time a line chief by the name of George P. Stanland, and the man is living today. He is a member of the squadron, our 31st Bomb Squadron. Unfortunately, he is in a hospital in Chanute today. He lives near that area.

I came out, reported to the flight line. I was very proud; I had my diploma that I had graduated from mechanic's school. And I showed it to him, and he said, "You're just the man we are looking for, and we have a job for you that is really important." I was going to help clean the airplanes. This man had an awful lot of psychology behind his thinking and his talking to me. He says, "You may not think this job

is important, but with the dirt on the airplane, the dirt on the propellers, you've got one of the most important jobs." For instance, he said, "Some of these 'props' have to be oiled down when they come down at night. You'll get that oil, and you'll put that oil on them, and make sure, because we don't want those propellers to rust, do we?" I shook my head; I understood. He said, "Now in the morning, when the airplanes take off, we don't want that oil on the propellers, because consequently it will splatter all over the fuselage and the wings, and the airplanes will get dirty. Now you've got one of the most important in the service."

And on my first day out there, I got my bucket of oil when the planes came down, and I thought I was Rembrandt, the way I was oiling those propellers. I saw those mechanics on the line, and the crew chiefs. They didn't have the important jobs; I was the one, because if those propellers got rusted, they would crack and break off. He really had me convinced that I was important (chuckle).

Marcello: So even though you had gone to aircraft mechanic's school for an entire year, which, I would assume, made you an exception rather than the rule you still basically started from the bottom and had to work your way up to crew chief.

Roffman: I was a private in the service, and then shortly after that

we had what they called "A.M." Examination, Air Mechanic Examination. When you took the examination for 2nd A.M., your pay increased from \$21...I don't recall the pay scale. I know the 1st A.M. was about \$70 or something a month. That was a good pay scale when you became a 1st A.M., but you had to hold the 2nd A.M. first.

Marcello: Was it, like, from \$21 to \$36 to \$72 or something like that?

Roffman: It was a graduated pay scale when you went in. As a matter of fact, if you were a buck sergeant...from buck sergeant to staff sergeant, you couldn't hold the A.M. ratings. The staff sergeant couldn't, and a lot of people didn't want to except staff sergeant because they were a buck sergeant, 1st A.M., and really making real good money. However, here I was, fresh out of school, and the exams were very easy, and only so many A.M.'s were allocated to squadrons. It was the top number that got allocated, and as soon as it was given, I was fortunate enough to become an air mechanic.

Marcello: What kind of planes were you working on there at that time?

Roffman: B-18's.

Marcello: This was basically the forerunner to the B-17?

Roffman: That's right. Then shortly after that, maybe a year or so, we got our first B-17D's

Marcello: I'm sure that was a real wonder weapon, so to speak, for its time, wasn't it?

Roffman: Well, to show what a wonder it was, on the B-18, when you

became a crew chief on the airplane, the mechanic on it, you were able to run it up yourself. You didn't need an officer to sit in the pilot's seat while you checked out engines and instrumentation. On the B-17's, when we first got them, we had to have a rated pilot in the left seat before you ran the engines. That's the difference to the new airplane from the old--what we considered.

Marcello: So when did you finally make crew chief?

Roffman: I made crew chief shortly after I got the A.M. rating, and I was assigned to an airplane.

Marcello: Which in a sense then meant that you had several people working under you, isn't that correct?

Roffman: I had a couple of assistant crew chiefs working under me. I immediately, after I got in the squadron, in no time at all, made PFC and then shortly after that I made corporal. When I got my A.M., I was a corporal.

Roffman: Now as a crew chief, that also enabled you to fly with a certain degree of regularity, did it not?

Roffman: You flew most all the time with your airplane. They didn't use the term, as I recall, of "flight engineer." That came only when we went into the B-17 program. For a while there, I was the crew chief on a B-18 and a crew chief on a B-17. I had two airplanes.

Marcello: You in essence were right up there with the pilot and co-pilot most of the time, weren't you?

Roffman: All of the time; all the time. Your missions basically, before the war, when they would get new officers in, we would make strange field landings and hop around to various islands. Another mission we used to have--this is with the B-18--another mission we used to have is when the Army transports would come in. They would call in to the radio, to Hawaii radio and military radio, their position, their speed. This was transcribed and sent over to our operations. Our operations would carry it over to navigation, and we would plot a course, using where they were, and intercept them. We would go out with three or four airplanes, and we would hit the various transports the day before they got in. It was sort of a welcoming for them coming into the islands; plus the fact that it would give our people navigational training and locating the airships.

Marcello: Now this flying was also pretty good for you in that you would have received extra pay.

Roffman: At the time when I was an A.M., I wasn't receiving extra pay. I didn't go on flying status until I made sergeant. I flew because it was my job. I was making more money as 1st A.M. than I was at that time. Then when I got promoted later on, I was on flying status. But I flew at least three times a week.

Marcello: I guess they figured that the plane would have to be in pretty

good mechanical shape if the crew chief were going to be aboard it.

Roffman: Well, we had--the term used is scarce now--we had what we called pride, and we had inter-squadron competition between my airplane and the airplanes next to us, because if we would have the early morning mission, the crew chief on the other plane would say, "Oh, my God! Are you gonna...that thing's gonna get off? It's impossible!" It was this continuous ribbing that you would take from the other crew chiefs on your capability of keeping an airplane up. You did have pride in yourself and your work. It was quite evident, because the forms used to maintain airplanes were forms called Form 41's. The Form 41-A was for the airplanes. This is a form that if anything goes wrong with the airplane, you put it on this Form 41-A. At the end of the flight, you went into a hangar, and then had what was called a Form 41-B. Now this was hung on the hangar wall, for all the airplanes there, and this let the line chief go out there, and he would be able to look at the form and tell you about anything wrong with the airplane by any discrepancies. If your airplane was coming back with all kinds of discrepancies, continuously, you weren't around very long. Your line chief wouldn't keep you; he didn't need you. You had better do good work or else.

Marcello: How would you describe the morale of the people in your squadron during that pre-Pearl Harbor period?

- Roffman: It was just great. We had a sort of an organization where everybody knew everybody else. In as small an organization as we had, it was so great. It's quite evident now. If you've been around here today, and you see the 31st get together at this convention, we're all one, and we're all concerned. If you were ever involved in an airplane hangar there that had additional maintenance, and you needed additional help, without a doubt a man would cancel his going to town to help you--to help you fix your airplane if you needed help. All you had to do was call on him.
- Marcello: Describe what living conditions were like in the consolidated barracks after you moved over there.
- Roffman: This was great! Now we lived in the barracks; we had a wall locker; we had showers...it was in the same building, and we didn't have to walk to various showers. We had the mess hall in the building, in the wing.
- Marcello: A huge mess hall, wasn't it?
- Roffman: It was a large building, and we had these wings coming out, and these wings were where the barracks were. We had a day room; we had pool tables. The only thing indifferent on the whole base was the fact that our theater was in a hangar way at the end, called the Hawaiian Air Depot at the time. That's where our theater was.
- Marcello: What was the food like?
- Roffman: To me I thought it was great. We had ample of everything.

You never were hungry. It was a good staple diet. I could eat as much as I wanted, and I never got fat. You were able to work off or run it off.

You see, our duty in those days...I could give you a quick rundown of what it was. Monday was a full day of work. We got on the flight line around eight o'clock, and the airplanes flew but they had to be down usually around three or four o'clock. We close the airplanes down, button them up, fix them, service them if they were getting ready for the next flight the next day. Tuesday was half a day; we only worked a half a day. We had athletics, and athletics consisted of...we used to go to the beach in Honolulu, Waikiki Beach. Wednesday was a day of rest. We only had half a day, we just laid around the barracks, slept, did what you wanted to do. Thursday was athletics again--baseball, beach or anything you wanted. Friday was a full day of work. The airplanes had to be down again at four o'clock. Saturday was usually inspection. But if you were on an airplane, you could always get out of it because you had to work on the airplane. You could always find something to do. Then Sunday was a free day. So it was great to be on the islands; our duty there was great.

Marcello: What was the liberty routine like?

Roffman: You maintained a pass at all times in your pocket.

Marcello: A Class A pass.

Roffman: A Class A pass. I was an NCO then, and I never had to answer to anybody except in case I had airplane problems, but then you knew...you didn't ask to go to town; you didn't ask to get off; you had a job to do. There was no question about it, and it's not going to be done until you finish it. When you were finished, you were on your own.

Marcello: I assume that with a Class A pass you could even stay overnight, if you had a place to stay or something like that.

Roffman: Oh, yes. However, you still had to be back for roll call in the morning. That was a prerequisite.

Marcello: How far was Hickam from downtown Honolulu, lets say, from the YMCA, because I believe that's where the bus and so on would drop you off.

Roffman: Fourteen, fifteen, twelve, fourteen miles.

Marcello: So it was not a very long ride into Honolulu?

Roffman: It wasn't too long, and the buses would go right on into Hickam, go on to Fort Kamehameha, turn around and head out to town.

Marcello: Did you usually take public transportation, or did you have a car?

Roffman: I got a car about a year before December 7. I finally bought a car.

Marcello: What was it? Do you recall?

Roffman: Yes, it was an old Ford, a '37 or '38 Ford. I bought one. I used to make a little extra money by taking various people

around the island. We'd drive around the island.

Marcello: I would also assume that by the time we get into 1941, you probably had semi-private quarters in the barracks, did you not, given your rank and so on?

Roffman: No, I didn't have semi-private quarters. I stayed in the bay. The semi-privates was for the first three graders that stayed in the barracks and that weren't married. The married men had their own quarters. I don't know...you never thought of looking for private quarters or asking permission to live off base.

Marcello: You mentioned married men. I would assume that there were very, very few of those in the service at that time.

Roffman: There were very few, but there were a couple. I recall one was our "prop" man that was married. I think a couple of the flight chiefs were married, but that's about all I can remember.

Marcello: What did you do when you went on liberty in Honolulu?
Now I want the truth (chuckle).

Roffman: All right (chuckle). I was a fairly good-looking kid then, and I had a routine, and I enjoyed it. I used to meet the Lurline, the Lurline would bring in a lot of schoolteachers, and they would be kind of looking for excitement, for fun, to meet people and everything else. I was quite available, and they had a heck of a lot more money than I did. I don't think the term was coined really as it is now--gigolo--but

I was partially a gigolo.

As a matter of fact, I met one gal there that came in on the Lurline, and I really don't know if I loved her or not. I liked her. She was a lot of fun, She lived in New Orleans, and she wanted to buy me out of the service. At that time, if you could come up with \$350, you could buy yourself out. She wanted me to get out of the service and move to New Orleans.

Marcello: How much time did you spend in downtown Honolulu? By that, I'm referring to places like Hotel Street, Canal Street, places like that.

Roffman: I'd been there. I frequented them but not often. I did it a couple of times. I won't say that my virtues are that good. I was part of the thing. However, I was very fortunate. I did meet a different class of people, and I didn't have to go there often. I wasn't like the sailors that were out at sea, and they'd come back and they had to go there. That was their only outlet.

Marcello: We're, of course, referring to the houses of the prostitution, and I gather that there were simply long lines to get into those place on Hotel Street.

Roffman: I used to drive by there, and it was amazing to see the lines of people waiting to get in. It was almost like a production line.

Marcello: I gather that prostitution was legal in Honolulu at that time?

Roffman: Prostitution was legal.

Marcello: What kind of recreational activities were there on Hickam Field itself. Obviously, you wouldn't be going into Honolulu all the time.

Roffman: In the hangars we had basketball courts; we had a baseball team. If you wanted to, in the winter months we had a football team up in Schofield Barracks, and you could go there. The Army Air Corps never did have a football team. We did have a basketball team; we had our own baseball team. I used to support that. I enjoyed it. I played--not very well, but I did. I used to go out for something I enjoyed very much, and that was to take the bus to Schofield Barracks and watch boxing. They had some terrific fights up there.

Marcello: The so-called "smokers" were a big attraction, were they not?

Roffman: Yes, and they had a boxing arena that was just beautiful. Up there they had the military term called "Jockey Strap Soldiers." When they got an assignment, if they were on a baseball or football or boxing team, that's all they ever did. They never did any military duty. They were "jock straps." The Air Corps at the time didn't have the time to train and just put all our effort into boxing or football. That's the reason in the Army Air Corps always got beat; we never could win anything.

- Marcello: Did you ever frequent the "Snake Ranch" very much when you were there at Hickam?
- Roffman: (Laughter) I'm surprised you know about that. Yes, I did (laughter). Yes, that was a beer place over there, and we used to have little checks where, if you didn't have the right amount, if you didn't have any money, you'd be able to get...it was almost like a loan from the PX, and you'd sign a receipt, and you'd buy your beer with those checks.
- Marcello: As one gets closer and closer to December 7, 1941, and as conditions between the United States and Japan continued to deteriorate, what changes could you detect in your routine, that is, in your daily work routine and assignments?
- Roffman: Well, I'd say approximately seven months, maybe, before December the 7, we were starting various types of maneuvers, dispersing airplanes, concentrating primarily on more German aircraft recognitions. We did have a few Japanese recognition sessions but nothing of any significance.
- Now an incident happened with my crew. I was a B-17 flight engineer at that time, and we would take a crew and go on a three-day cruise on the Saratoga.
- Marcello: You were going to take a B-17 on the Saratoga?
- Roffman: No, it was a B-17 crew, not the airplane. We were going to go on the USS Saratoga, and we were going to watch them on tactical and actual wartime maneuvers. This was to

more or less give us an idea of how the Navy, the flying end of the Navy, did their operation. We sailed out of Pearl Harbor, out to sea, and they had their landings and their takeoffs.

An incident happened that almost made me cry. The Army Air Corps got the lowest end of the budget for airplanes...for their expenses to run the Army Air Corps. When we changed an engine at Hickam Field...we would change anything--a starter, a generator. We would take the cotter key out. A cotter key is a...after you tighten up any...you put this cotter key in to hold it so it wouldn't turn. You would "safety it," was what it was called. You would take the cotter key out, and you would straighten it out and put it in our tool box, because we used that cotter key again. Today you just take it out and throw it away.

Anyway, they had a Brewster fighter that landed on the carrier deck. I don't know which way he was coming, but one of his brakes locked. He hit the superstructure and tore the wing off. The pilot wasn't hurt; he got out. The horn sounded and the whistle blew, and some men came up from an elevator from the lower deck on to the flight deck. They had these helmets on, and they had this long sheet, and they were checking the various things on this airplane. They took the sheet up to the flag officer on the bridge. He looked it over, and he gave a "thumbs out" signal. They

took the airplane, the whole airplane the way it was, and they threw it over the side.

Now this was before Pearl Harbor. We weren't allowed to save cotter keys, and I was sick because they wouldn't even take the clock out of the airplane. I was flabbergasted that they ever did anything like that. What a waste! I was down in the chief's quarters later, and this guy was explaining to me what it was all about. Then I had a different attitude toward it. He said that under wartime conditions, either you play it or you don't play the game. He said that we were under actual war conditions. If that plane would land in that condition at that time, they had no room to salvage this airplane. They couldn't even take a thing out of it. It's got to get out of the way for other airplanes that were coming in for landings. They played the game right up to the letter. But I was still sick.

Marcello: What was your purpose in being aboard the aircraft carrier here?

Roffman: The purpose was basically, as I said earlier, to indoctrinate the ground crews and familiarize themselves with their type of operation? We do it now in the service. We take air force personnel, and they go aboard carriers. Every carrier has Air Force personnel on. We also have probably English personnel from the navy and air force on our bases

and on the carriers, too. This was to familiarize ourselves with it.

Marcello: And you say this took place about seven months prior to Pearl Harbor?

Roffman: Seven months prior to Pearl. Okay, then a couple of weeks,...maybe a month...between a month and a couple of weeks before Pearl Harbor, we were bombing the battleship Utah.

Marcello: This was the old target battleship.

Roffman: That's right. It had wooden planks. As a matter of fact, we had one of the 31st Bomb Squad personnel that was assigned to the Utah. It would go out on a Tuesday or Wednesday, and it would stay out there until Friday and come on back. We were using fifty-pound water bombs to bomb the ship. The bombardier would always try to put it in the stack, which we were told not to do; however, he was hoping to put out their boilers.

Marcello: Did this practice bombing on the Utah take place at regularly scheduled times, or was this something entirely new when you did it here a couple weeks prior to the actual attack?

Roffman: No, other airplanes and other crews were doing it all along. My crew didn't get it until, I think, about two or three weeks before Pearl Harbor.

Marcello: In those weeks immediately prior to the actual attack, would

the base ever undergo any kinds of alerts?

Roffman: Yes, we were continuously having alerts. We would all be called out; we would disperse. At that time I was just a crew chief on a B-18 and a flight engineer on a B-17. I had two airplanes. I used to get my assistant crew chiefs to disperse the B-17, because I could taxi the B-18. I wasn't allowed to taxi the B-17. We would put it up on a tow bar and just haul that airplane away.

Marcello: What was the reason for dispersing the planes?

Roffman: We were dispersing in case of an air attack, so they wouldn't get them all together, which they did on December 7.

Marcello: Isn't it also true that they were dispersed in order to guard against potential saboteurs?

Roffman: Yes, that's right, too. That was another thing.

Marcello: Were you ever warned about the possibility of sabotage coming from Japanese living on the Hawaiian Islands in case war came between the two countries?

Roffman: I don't ever recall them saying per se the term Japanese. They always said sabotage, and when we were thinking of sabotage, I was more thinking of German sabotage.

Marcello: Why was it that the planes were normally lined up in the nice, neat rows, which was standard procedure, was it not?

Roffman: Convenience, was my thinking. It was easier for the pilots

and the crews to come out of operations and walk a few hundred feet into the airplanes.

Marcello: I would assume they would also be easier to fuel.

Roffman: Well, the fuel wasn't anything, because the fuel trucks would come up wherever you were, and the oil trucks. There was no convenience in that end of it. It was convenient for the crew. In my thinking, that's all it was. You would go in in the morning if your airplane was supposed to fly--you knew the night before-- and you would go in for the briefing to see if it's a navigation mission, a bombing mission. It had to be one of the two--it was either navigation or bombing-- or it was transition, the training of pilots, landing, or the other type mission was maintenance. If we changed an engine, a controlled surface, it had to be flown for a maintenance check.

Marcello: I also heard that it was easier to guard those planes if they were lined up in nice, neat rows.

Roffman: This is probably true. I never thought of that, but I'll go along with that.

Marcello: I do know from my background research that in the weeks immediately prior to the attack, Military Intelligence had lost track of the locations of certain units of the Japanese fleet. I was wondering if, during that period, any of your bombers were sent up on reconnaissance

missions or anything of that nature to perhaps reconnoiter the area around the Hawaiian Islands, within the very limited range of those bombers.

Roffman: Well, first you have got to remember...no, is my answer to that. Another thing you have got to remember is that the Army Air Corps could not go more than 200 miles out to sea without the okay of the Navy.

Marcello: In other words, your jurisdiction was basically short-range reconnaissance?

Roffman: Even though the airplanes could go farther, the Navy wouldn't let us go farther. On December 7, when we had airplanes coming in, they had to okay it with the Navy, and the Navy had to send picket ships, two or three along the way, in case any of the planes went down.

Marcello: I also know that during that week immediately prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, there was a week-long alert at Hickam Field. Do you recall that?

Roffman: Yes, Yes, I do.

Marcello: What would be your routine during one of these alerts? Let's concentrate specifically on this one right prior to Pearl Harbor.

Roffman: Okay, you would go out to your airplane with all your flight gear, your oxygen mask and your sack with whatever you had in it, and your tools. Well, you kept your tools on the airplane, and you would sleep right under the airplane or in the airplane. I stayed right in the

aircraft, never went back to the barracks. If you had to go to the toilet, well, you got hold of the line chief, and the line chief would lend you his tug, if he had one, and you would drive back up to the barracks. Sandwiches were brought out, and you just lived under the airplane.

Marcello: I'm sure that all liberty was cancelled.

Roffman: All liberty was cancelled. As a matter of fact, I had a couple of dates, and I couldn't keep them, and I was mad about that.

Marcello: During these alerts, when you and your buddies had a chance to sit around and hold a (bull) session, was there any talk about the possibility of Japanese attack in the Hawaiian Islands?

Roffman: Yes, there was at all times. However, when the two ambassadors were on their way to Washington, the thought of an attack diminished immensely. We knew there that nothing could happen; we would not be in a war with Japan; and there was nothing to worry about no more.

Marcello: Even if war came with Japan, what was the possibility of them hitting the Hawaiian Islands?

Roffman: We never gave it any thought that there was a possibility that we would be involved in it. The only people that we thought would be involved in it would be possibly the Philippines, if anyone, and they were hoping to strengthen

up the Philippines by sending some airplanes down to the Philippines.

Marcello: When you thought of a typical Japanese during that pre-Pearl Harbor period, what kind of a person did you usually conjure up in your own mind? Did you have a sterotype of a typical Japanese?

Roffman: I did not have any sterotype of a Japanese. I didn't think he was aggressive. The only thing I can remember of the Japanese, that I can recall, was the Japanese fighting the Chinese in China. The Chinese did not have the military capability, but they almost beat the Japanese. I was never concerned. I knew without a doubt that we could beat them if we ever did fight them.

Marcello: Okay, this brings us into that weekend of December 7, 1941, and like we were talking awhile ago, there had been that week-long alert, which was called off when?

Roffman: It was called off, I think, on Friday or Saturday, December 5 or 6.

Marcello: I think it was Saturday noon.

Roffman: That's about right, because I know I went to town, and I really "hung one on."

Marcello: I assume everybody else went to town.

Roffman: Everybody went to town.

Marcello: Describe what you did that Saturday after you got off alert.

Roffman: I got off, I went to town, I went to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, and I hung around there for a while.

Marcello: You were really living it up then, weren't you?

Roffman: I was a sergeant, and I was making good money.

Marcello: That was one of the "uptown" places.

Roffman: Yes, it was, and that's where you met the best people. I did meet this lady, and I can't recall her name now, and we really "hung one on" together. We got pretty well "tight". As a matter of fact, I left her at two or three o'clock in the morning, and I headed on back to Hickam.

Marcello: Feeling no pain?

Roffman: Feeling no pain. I went to bed, and the next thing I heard were these explosions. One of them woke me up, and my comment was "What the hell is Fort Kamehameha practicing?" Fort Kamehameha is was an artillery base, coast artillery. I thought they were practicing with those artillery guns. Knowing it was Sunday, I turned over, and I heard a buzzing of the barracks with airplanes, and that still didn't bother me. Again I heard more explosions, and I was starting to wake up a little.

Marcello: Why didn't the buzzing of the barracks by airplanes not bother you?

Roffman: I still was half in a daze from sleep and a hangover. The next thing I recall was that I heard this "rat-tat-tat"

of machine guns over the barracks, and I heard an explosion about three or four wall lockers down from where I was, and there was a big hole in the wall locker. I needed no more convincing. I knew it was something real.

Marcello: What else was happening in the barracks? What kind of stirring or activity was taking place?

Roffman: Some of the guys were getting up, and there was a lot of noise going on after the first buzzing, but I still wanted to sleep. I put on my flight suit, which I kept on my footlocker, and shoes and my hat.

Marcello: Did you do this hurriedly?

Roffman: Very hurriedly. I went outside and some of the fellows were lined up outside the barracks where we used to have our roll call, and I had never seen a dead man in my life until then. Out on the parade ground, men appeared to be sleeping, laying down, which were dead.

Marcello: By this time, that is, by the time you got outside, did you know that it was an actual attack and that it was the Japanese?

Roffman: Not right then, I didn't know who it was. While we were outside, there was another explosion that hit the mess hall. If it hadn't have been for the old-time sergeants, I mean the fellows that had been in the First World War and their coolness to tell us not to bunch up and to get away from the buildings, a lot more men would

have been dead.

Marcello: You mentioned that when you went outside, men were lined up in formation. Was somebody lining them up in formation, or was this just habitual on their part?

Roffman: They were just getting out there. Nobody knew what to do or how to do it. There was mass confusion.

Marcello: In the meantime, what is happening in the air above?

Roffman: Planes were flying over. You could see the Pearl Harbor-- the smoke coming out of there. Planes were coming out of the sky, heading toward Pearl Harbor and hitting Hickam at the same time.

Marcello: What kind of activity was taking place there at Hickam? In other words, were these dive-bombers, strafers, or what?

Roffman: The bombers were at higher altitudes.

Marcello: I'm referring now to the first wave coming over, when you first came out of the barracks.

Roffman: When we first came out of the barracks, I don't know if they were dive-bombers. It was the strafing-type coming in, and at higher altitudes you could see the bombers. I didn't recognize that it was bombers at that time.

Marcello: Okay, so you go outside the barracks, you see some of the dead lying out on the parade ground, and you said that it was also at this time that the consolidated mess was hit.

Roffman: Just a few minutes or five minutes later or something to that effect. While we were out there, outside, the

consolidated mess was hit.

Marcello: Do you recall it being hit?

Roffman: I don't recall it being hit. All I do recall was when I got outside, I saw the first dead person. I don't know who it was or who hollered, but he hollered, "All you men that have airplanes, get down to the hangar as fast as you can get them away from the hangars!"

Marcello: At that point then, I assume you...

Roffman: I ran! I ran to the hangar!

Marcello: Did any thing eventful happen between the barracks and the hangar?

Roffman: Well, you could see the airplanes coming in and heading toward Pearl Harbor, and, also, when we got down to the flight line, they were making runs at the aircraft on the flight line.

Marcello: Describe the runs on the flight line as best you remember it.

Roffman: The best I can remember, it was only, I'd say, a block maybe a block-and-a-half at the most, from the barracks to the hangar. A few minutes is all it took us to get there.

Marcello: You were unmolested along the way, I gather.

Roffman: Nobody bothered us there. I got into my airplane, a B-17, and I was going to taxi it, I started the number one engine up, and I started to hit the number three engine-- you used those two to taxi--and the Japanese made a

strafing run down there. They hit the number two engine and the number three prop on the strafe. I came tearing out of the airplane at that time, and somebody had come along that had a tow bar, tugging a tow bar. I stopped the engine immediately. I wasn't about to taxi it.

Marcello: The plane was not on fire or anything?

Roffman: No, the airplane was not on fire. Later on, not that minute or that time, we found out that we had a hole in the number three propeller; the number two engine had two cylinders that had holes in them. We put the tow bar onto the tug, and we towed the B-17 into one of the bunkers.

Marcello: In the meantime, are you under attack as you are towing this B-17?

Roffman: The airplane and I and the tug driver were not under attack. I went back into the airplane--somebody had to sit there to unlock the tail wheel--and they did not make another strafing attack on us after that one.

Marcello: You mentioned that you went into this B-17. I assume that you did this on your own.

Roffman: Yes,

Marcello: Under no circumstances, as you mentioned, you were not allowed in that B-17 to perform that kind of function.

Roffman: Time changed real quick. You were told to get the airplanes away from the hangar, and that was your airplane, and

you wanted it safe,

Marcello: When you say that you are getting the airplane away from the hangar, are you under any kind of a shelter or anything like that?

Roffman: We are taking it to the other side of the field, and they have embankments. You would back the airplane back into the embankments, and if a shell would hit, it would have to be a direct hit to hurt the airplane.

Marcello: Approximately how long did it take you to get the airplane from the hangar over to the shelter?

Roffman: About fifteen minutes,

Marcello: Awhile ago we mentioned that when you initially got out to the flight line or the hangars, the Japanese were already hitting those airplanes. Or had they already hit them?

Roffman: They had hit them, and they were still...while we were towing the airplane, we saw the last hangar, which was the Hawaiian Air Depot, get hit by a bomb.

Marcello: What tactics were these Japanese using in hitting the hangar line?

Roffman: They were trying to get all the airplanes they could so that we couldn't get any airplanes off. There were one or two airplanes that landed during the attack.

Marcello: Were these the B-17's?

Roffman: These were the B-17's that were coming in from the States.

Marcello: You actually did see this.

Roffman: Yes, while I was towing, you could see them landing.

Marcello: Describe this activity.

Roffman: I had no idea that any airplanes were coming in, and during the attack here comes a flight--I only saw two--coming in for landings. I didn't know where they were or where they had come from. They landed and just as soon as they got to the end of the runway, they turned off and just got out and ran.

Marcello: Awhile ago, to go back to something you mentioned earlier, you were talking about the Japanese hitting the airplanes on the line. Was it simply a matter of them coming down the line of airplanes and strafing?

Roffman: It was a strafing run that they made right on down. They made it from the highway, coming right on down and right out to the water.

Marcello: How low were those airplanes coming in?

Roffman: Twenty-five feet.

Marcello: Right on the deck.

Roffman: Right on the deck, just on a straight strafing line.

Marcello: Your airplanes would have had a certain amount of fuel on them.

Roffman: Yes, they hit...I don't know who...one airplane got hit and was afire. I don't know which squadron it was...ours...no, it wasn't the 31st. I think it might have been the

23rd or one of the other squadrons that lost an airplane right then--a B-17 was burning. Some B-18's got hit good; some aircraft in the 4th Recon were hit. A complete inventory...I don't recall how many airplanes were hit.

Marcello: They did a pretty good job on the line.

Roffman: They were well-informed. They knew where the airplanes were, and their intelligence was fantastic.

Marcello: What happened after you got your B-17 safely out there under the shelter?

Roffman: We just stood near the airplane. The flight chief finally came out, and he wanted to know how we were, and he wanted to know the condition of the airplane. I told him that I needed a prop change and a cylinder or maybe two cylinders.

Marcello: Who was the flight chief?

Roffman: Tech Sergeant Casey Woods. We used to have a lot of fun with Woods. He wasn't a mechanic. He had come down from Schofield Barracks. He used to be a mess sergeant, but he promotions were so great in the service at that time that he was too high a rank to be mess sergeant, so they brought him out there and made him a flight chief. He was told, "You just listen to your crew chief. Don't you do anything without their okay."

Marcello: Okay, so what happens at that point then? You are out there standing by your airplane. I assume nobody is really giving orders.

Roffman: Nobody really is. Somebody finally went out and had taken inventory of any airplanes that were in commission. There was a few B-17's...

Marcello: Now by this time has the high-level attack also been completed?

Roffman: The bombing attack had all been over with by that time.

Marcello: Were you out at the actual flight line when that high-level attack occurred?

Roffman: Yes, I was out on the flight line then.

Marcello: Describe that high-level attack.

Roffman: Well, in the high-level attack the airplanes were up about fifteen and twenty thousand feet.

Marcello: One-engine or two engine bombers?

Roffman: Two-engine bombers. We didn't know where they came from. I had no idea where they were coming from. I couldn't comprehend that they were coming off carriers.

Marcello: Approximately how many were there?

Roffman: I couldn't give an estimate. I don't know. I was too scared to even think about how many.

Marcello: Incidentally, what kind of day was this in terms of weather and climate?

Roffman: The weather was beautiful, as it usually is on the islands.

Marcello: Clouds or cloudless?

Roffman: Very few clouds.

Marcello: A good day for an air attack?

Roffman: Oh, perfect!

Marcello: Okay, I interrupted you. You were going to mention something about this high-level attack.

Roffman: They were coming over in high-level. They had already done the damage on the ground with the low-level attack by the fighters, and now they were pinpointing the barracks and hangars, hitting some of the ships---pinpointing their bombing. They were very good at it.

Marcello: Fortunately, you are away from the barracks and the hangars at this time, are you not?

Roffman: I'm away from the barracks. I'm in an embankment way on out on the other side of the airfield.

Marcello: Could you actually watch these bombs coming down?

Roffman: You can actually watch them.

Marcello: Did they all seem to be heading toward you (chuckle)?

Roffman: At first they did. That was an amazing thing--you don't know where you can hide; there's nowhere to go. You want to get away from that airplane, too, because you think that the whole bombing mission is only for your airplane, and that's scary (chuckle). Everytime they drop them you don't know whether to run or stand there or anything else, because it's only less than a minute

before you hear the explosions eight, ten, fifteen miles away.

Marcello: How long are you out there before you leave that particular position?

Roffman: I was there all night. I did not leave that position all night. At about five o'clock in the morning, somebody came on a tug, and they said they were looking for Sergeant Roffman. I said, "That's me." And they said, "Have you had breakfast?" I said, "No." They said, "Come on." They put me on the tug, and we went to operations, and we had coffee and toast. I had that and they said I was going to make a flight in about half an hour or forty-five minutes: "You are going to go out looking for the Japs."

Marcello: Let's back up a minute and continue to talk about the aftermath of the attack on December 7. What did you do specifically the rest of that day and into the evening and so on while you were out there with the B-17?

Roffman: One of the fellows came by with a flatbed and a tug, and I told him I needed a couple of stands. I was going to try and get the airplane into commission. He came out with the stands; it took him about two hours to get the stands for me. I took the cowlings off. I called for a prop man, but I couldn't get him. I wanted to take the prop off of that engine. I got the other cowlings off to take

the cylinders out. Finally, just before dark, I got the cylinder off.

Marcello: How many of you were working on that airplane?

Roffman: There were three of us--myself and two assistants.

Marcello: Was that sufficient to do the job?

Roffman: I had more people, but I didn't know where they were, and they didn't know where I was. Any one of my people could have done it themselves--take off the cylinder. They had enough tools in the airplane. The only thing was that there was some special tools that we used to have to go into the shop for. If you needed anything, you figured the guy--if you sent him in for anything--would be gone for at least an hour, hour-and-a-half. I got the cylinder off and covered her up. Then they would eventually tow the airplane into the hangar to fix the cylinder.

Marcello: How well did you sleep that evening?

Roffman: I didn't sleep. I was scared, cold, couldn't imagine that we let ourselves get into a predicament like this, and I was just really feeling bitterness toward the Japanese for doing something like that.

Marcello: So your feeling was one of bitterness or anger?

Roffman: Bitterness and anger, to do an attack like that. You lost some friends, and, as I say, I was a young kid--more scared than anything--and looking for leadership at the time.

Marcello: And no leadership was there at the time?

Roffman: Not at that time, no.

Marcello: What rumors were flying around the base that evening?

Roffman: Oh (chuckle), somebody opened up, later on, the armament shop. I went back in, and there was two other fellows with me, my assistants. I signed out three guns, and they wouldn't let me sign it out, and I told them I wasn't going to let them leave the airplane and that they had to have side arms. So I got a pistol, and we got two rifles for them. I signed for the rifles.

Marcello: They were still actually going through the formalities...

Roffman: ...of the old times where everybody, when you drew a weapon, had to sign a thing and get the ammunition and so forth.

We had heard that the Japanese had landed over at Bellows Field. That was around 5:30 or six o'clock. Then somebody--some infantry people--came very close, maybe two or three hundred yards, and they set up a machine gun post, and we thought we were safe. We thought, "Boy, this one machine gun will take care of everybody!" False security (chuckle).

Marcello: Did you hear very much firing going on that night?

Roffman: All night long an airplane would come in, and there would be firing at the airplane. It didn't make any difference who they were--anybody in the air got fired on

that day and that evening.

Marcello: I guess it was very prudent to stay right by that airplane and not walk around too much, either.

Roffman: You had better not walk around because we never had any password or challenge or anything else. They were shooting, and spasmodic gunfire you could hear all night long, going around all over the place.

Marcello: What resistance was the base putting up that day, that is, during the attack? Did you notice any kind of resistance at all being put up?

Roffman: No, I didn't. As I said the flight crews and the people down on the flight line were in a world of their own that day. They were around the hangars and the airplanes, and that was it. I was out there quite a ways from everything, so I don't know what was happening. I didn't even know the damage that was done over Pearl Harbor. I didn't even know the barracks was hit. I did not know until two days later that the barracks was hit--when I got back to the barracks.

Marcello: You mentioned that on December 8 you were called back down to squadron headquarters, I guess it was.

Roffman: Well, I was called...in the hangar was our operations, and they made up a mixed crew. They loaded an airplane on a B-17, and I was going to be the flight engineer on it.

Marcello: Who was the pilot?

Roffman: Carmichael. Incidentally, he was the one that brought the task force into Hawaii with the airplanes.

Marcello: He brought the task force into Hawaii?

Roffman: He was bringing in the B-17's, and that was called the task force. He was bringing them in on December 7.

Marcello: He was the guy coming in from the West Coast?

Roffman: That's right.

Marcello: Waldron went out in another airplane, did he not?

Roffman: "Gatty" Waldron? We had two or three airplanes take off looking for the Japanese that morning.

Marcello: Okay, describe your reconnaissance flight.

Roffman: We got into briefing, and we were going to make a search. I don't recall the bombardier, and I don't recall the navigator. It was a make-up thing. I do remember my radioman. He was a 31st man--a guy by the name of Szymonik. As a matter of fact, he was the one that reminded me the other day about the taking off. We had gotten airborne. As I said, we got the crew together, and one of the airplanes was already serviced, already had bombs, and we got in the airplane. We started the engines up, taxied out, and we got airborne.

At the briefing we had a heading. I attended the briefing, myself--the flight engineer--the pilot,

the co-pilot, and the navigator. We were the only ones at that briefing. Ordinarily, on missions like that, I mean, on any type of mission up until then, the flight engineer most of the time would give the first heading out. So I gave a heading, and the pilot looks at the heading after he makes his turn. He looks down, and he says, "That's toward San Francisco!" I say, "I know! I don't want to go looking for the Japanese!" He says, "This isn't the time to be funny!" I didn't know Carmichael at all. The other pilots, I could always kid around with and have a lot of fun, but it was a little more serious, so we swung toward the heading that we had originally, that they called for for the search.

Marcello: What went on during the briefing?

Roffman: The briefing was that we had heard from Navy Intelligence that there was a Japanese task force out there with an undisclosed and an unnumbered amount of aircraft carriers. If we could get through, we were to bomb them; if not, we were to report. In other words, if they didn't have aircraft up there to meet us, and if we could get through, by all means we were to bomb them.

Marcello: As you look back on it, it was almost like a dog

chasing an eighteen-wheeler, because even if you had caught up with that Japanese task force, you don't know what you would have done to it.

Roffman: I wouldn't have been here today if we had have caught up with the task force. In no way could we have made it, because they could send up everything at us. They would have picked us up right away.

Marcello: And I'm sure you were to experience this later on, but we are talking about a bunch of Japanese pilots that are pretty damn good at this time.

Roffman: And we had never been in any kind of combat at all.

Marcello: These guys had all been combat tested in China.

Roffman: That's correct. And as I say, I was so glad that we never found them.

Marcello: Approximately how long did this flight take?

Roffman: We went about four hundred miles out, approximately four hundred miles. We did a hundred-mile leg...in other words, whatever heading we had, we went four hundred miles, we made a hundred mile leg, and we came back another four hundred.

Marcello: It was kind of like a pie-shaped sector or something.

Roffman: Two or three airplanes that did get off, plus some of the Navy aircraft were making search legs. I don't recall what sector we had or what leg we took, but we had a lucky leg--we never found them.

Marcello: Did these reconnaissance patrols keep up for the next several days?

Roffman: Yes. Then the reconnaissance increased. We started later on doing eight hundred-mile legs, and that was the normal, routine flight until the Battle of Midway.

Marcello: And in the meantime, I think they also dispersed those bombers to other little fields and so on around the island.

Roffman: We all moved shortly after that--I don't recall exactly when--to a place called Kapappa Gulch. We moved up there, and we operated out of Kapappa Gulch. We never did go back to Hickam.

Marcello: How much damage had been done to your hangar back at Hickam?

Roffman: The hangar wasn't really hit really too bad. It was operational; we were still able to use it. The hangars at the end of the flight line, the Hawaiian Air Depot hangar, was severely hit, and that sustained most of the damage.

Marcello: What was your hangar number? Do you remember?

Roffman: Number nine.

Marcello: How many planes were operational as a result of the attack?

Roffman: I actually don't know. All I know is that in my squadron, I didn't know the whole number, and actually your concern is yourself, your airplane, getting your airplane ready.

When I had to fly the next day, I informed my assistants that we had to get the airplane to the hangar. We had to change the cylinder; we had to change the prop. When we got back, the airplane hadn't gotten into the hangar yet; however, we had arrangements made for the next day. We were going to the hangar to get the airplane in commission.

Marcello: So your airplane was made operational within the week?

Roffman: Within the week, yes. We had the term that our plane was in the "red cross." The "red cross" indicated that the airplane could not fly.

Marcello: When did you finally leave the island?

Roffman: I left the island shortly after the Battle of Midway.

Marcello: Where did you go?

Roffman: I went to Townsville first, in Australia, and then from there to Darwin and from Darwin to Batavia. As a matter of fact, I joined an ill-fated organization that had the distinction of retreating farther in the war than any one outfit advanced. Now I'll explain that. We used to always get into arguments

with the ground people, the Army, especially when we got back to the States. They were saying that their outfits made the whole trip to Africa and the "boot" of Italy and right on up to Germany. I just told them how far my outfit had retreated. I joined the 19th Bomb Group in Australia, and the 19th Bomb Group got run out of the Philippines; they got run out of New Guinea; they got run out of Java. No one outfit advanced as far as we retreated (chuckle).

Marcello:

I think that's probably a good place to end this interview, Mr. Roffman. I want to thank you very much for having participated. You said a lot of very interesting and important things, and I'm sure that historians will find your comments quite valuable when they use them to study Pearl Harbor.

Roffman:

Thank you very, very much. It has been nice to be able to do it with you.