

INTERVIEW
of
Bill Brown

7th Air Force 45th Fighter Squadron

Mr. Cox: Today is June 26, 2000. My name is Floyd Cox and I am a volunteer interviewer of the Oral History Program for the Admiral Nimitz Museum of the Pacific War. We are in Fredericksburg today and we are going to interview Bill Brown, who was an aviator in the Pacific during World War II. Mr. Brown, as well as being a veteran of World War II, is a volunteer docent, along with his wife, Mary, in the Educational Program here at the Nimitz Museum.

Bill, I'm certainly glad that you could find time today to participate in our Oral History Program. If we could start out our interview by getting a little background information regarding where you were born, the year you were born, education and so on.

Mr. Brown: I was born in St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1923. I was the son of a Methodist preacher so we moved around to West Plains, Poplar Bluff, St. Louis and finally moved to Texas and went to Dallas, Cleburne, El Paso. I went to college in El Paso. They used to call it Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy. Six of us from that college joined the Air Force there in El Paso.

They sent us to places like Shepherd Field, Texas A&M, the Cadet Center here in San Antonio. In Ballinger, Texas, we flew PT-19's and in San Angelo PT-13's. Got our first experience of night flying there.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you a question, Bill. What year was this that you entered the Air Force.

Mr. Brown: This was late in 1942 when we went and took our tests at Fort Bliss. Only the guys who had been in college and had decent math skills were the ones who were taken as pilot trainees. There was a whole room full of fellows, but we happened to be "juiced up" in academics and so they accepted us. I guess we were all pretty healthy guys as well.

I had been in El Paso going to school and then gassing up ferry command air planes. So I enjoyed doing that kind of thing.

Way back in 1927, when Lindbergh was flying around and the barn stormers were messing around the farms of Missouri, we had a barn stormer land across the railroad tracks from our little house in West Plains, Missouri. We were poor Methodist folks. My mother crossed the tracks and talked to the pilot asking him if he would take her three kids up. She told him "I'll give you the best chicken dinner you have ever had." So she marched us over there and we got in the airplane. I was a five years old and stood in the middle of the back seat with my two sisters on each side. We flew around West Plains, Missouri. My Mother went back and my Dad was painting a chicken house. He was up on the ladder and he said "George (he called her George) where are the kids?" And she pointed up and said they're in that air plane up there and he fell off the ladder. It was a real sight for him to see what she would do for the three children.

Mr. Cox: That was your first flying experience.

Mr. Brown: Yes, and I dreamed of flying and getting in the air at that time. Flying was just a piece of cake. I watched those ferry command fellows come in their B-24's and their P-38's and B-25's and B-26's. There were a variety of fellows. Wrong-way Corriagan was flying planes through El Paso at that time. A little guy about five feet tall.

We had a Russian pilot who didn't wait for me to pull the safety pins out of his wheels. So he had to come back and get that done.

It was a high time watching all these air planes go though El Paso at the time and then going to the Cadet Center was kind of a long hustle there. We enjoyed the Cadet Center. It just turned us into real athletes there. At that time they hired track people to train us so they would run us along the river by the Cadet Center. They took all of the energy out of us. It was a fun place.

Mr. Cox: Now you talked about a PT-19. Was that a training plane? Was that a bi-plane?

Mr. Brown: It was a 195 horse power engine, low wing, mono-plane and it flew quite well. In fact, after the war I bought one and flew one around for a year or so. Neat little airplane. It's like those twin-engine trainers that they used. It was almost impossible to crash them. If you took your hands off, it would almost land itself.

We started in Ballinger on a dirt field, a farmer's field. So you would take off and you have all of this dirt to take off from; it was a marvelous experience. Ballinger was fun because we had come out of Cadet Center and we had been working so hard and our tongues were hanging out. We got in there in the evening and they had tables filled up with tomatoes, and watermelon, and fresh corn, and we hadn't eaten food like that in years. Those folks there at Ballinger, which is a little town to begin with, fed us and sort of took care of us while we were there.

From Ballinger we took cross-countries, short cross-countries. The first time I had ever landed on a cement strip was at Coleman. That was a different feeling after just landing on dirt for so long.

Then we moved over to San Angelo and the BT. That was a loud crudely built airplane that shuddered all of the time.

That is where we got to go out at night and get our first night-flying experience. We took our planes out just before dusk. We had a full moon. We would get in a pattern, the farmer's field must have been 8 or 10 miles from the base and we shot landings. We would do our landings, taxi back around and take off again. We did that for about two hours and then, not so nicely, we got out of the air plane and they put us in a big army truck and drove us back to San Angelo. That was awful.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this, Bill. How old were you when you started your flight training?

Mr. Brown: Well, that was in 1943, I was just turning 20.

Mr. Cox: Just a very young man.

Mr. Brown: Yes, everybody was young. Our Captains and our Flight Leaders in combat were 23, 24, 25 years old. They were the mature guys and they were the ones that really taught us how to fly.

From San Angelo, we went down to Mission, Texas, down there near McAllen and took AT6 training. That was an interesting time. We got to take longer night cross-countries. We would go to Rio Grande City and Falfurrias and Hebbronville -

Mr. Cox: All those big Texas towns.

Mr. Brown: When we ever get down to that part of the country, I like to call out those names to my family and my wife.

Mr. Cox: Not too many people know those towns.

Mr. Brown: People say the AT-6 was a dangerous plane. They would say it was going to ground loop and you would kill yourself in it. It was very easy to fly. Our night flights with the oil wells glowing, were pretty neat; flying down South Texas and over the ranches in the dark and seeing the huge oil and gas fires.

Mr. Cox: They were burning off the gas.

Mr. Brown: Yes, they were burning off the gas. Then they moved us to Victoria where they gave us P40's. I was a little tall and they cranked up a P39 and told me to take it out.

Mr. Cox: That is an air cobra, isn't it?

Mr. Brown: Yes. I couldn't close the canopy. I crawled out of that plane right away. Then they gave me a P-40. So I got some P-40 training down there. Then they sent us to Richmond, Virginia. It was an RTU (Replacement Training Unit) where they sent people around the world from there.

They sent us up to Hartford, Connecticut and gave us P-47's. We flew those for a long time. That was a marvelous airplane. They sent us down to Long Island to Riverhead and we shot gunnery. We would take off at Riverhead, go up off the beach between 5,000 and 10,000 feet and shoot at sleeves.

I got to fly some awful airplanes over there. Most of them were worn out. Things they had sent back from England. My best buddy was up and the pin fell out of his carburetor and he had to belly into a farmer's potato field. He just took out potato after potato. That kid piled up so many airplanes that it was just another occurrence for him.

He sat on the wing and waited until the farmer came to get him. He wasn't desperate at all. He carried cigars with him and he was smoking when they picked him up.

The gunnery school down there was lots of fun.

When we got back to Richmond, Virginia, the war in Europe had just turned and they were sending all the pilots west, rather than to Europe. So we were right at the end of that list. They sent us to Seattle. They put us on a troop train and gave us the heaviest flying gear you have ever seen. We went through the country on a “sneaky” little troop train.

When we got to Seattle, they took away our heavy-duty stuff. After a while, they sent us by boat to Oahu, Hawaii, where we joined the 45th Fighter Squadron. While we were there we learned how to really fly. That Squadron had been down to the South Pacific for a few months and they had come back to train some new pilots. So, we were the new pilots there.

They trained us well. The first day we went up in these P-47’s. Our captain, Captain Art Bridge, was a 24 or 25-year old guy - he looked like he was about 45 years old to me. He put us in four-ship formation and he said “Now there is Diamond Head and here we go. Stay on my wing and don’t you move.” We did a huge loop and came back around. Then he said “Now we are going to do a nice little barrell-roll.” Captain Bridge was so smooth and we just did our barrell-roll and came out again. That was probably the moment that we really became formation flyers.

I learned a little bit about discipline. I learned a little bit about doing your job. It was marvelous to fly with competent pilots. It was the “candy store” everyday from that time on.

Mr. Cox: Really something for a young man to go through, wasn’t it.

Mr. Brown: Yes.

Mr. Cox: Now you said that the 147th Fighter...

Mr. Brown: No, the 45th Fighter....

Mr. Cox: The 45th, is that what they called the “Pineapple....

Mr. Brown: The “Pineapple Air Force”. The 45th was one of them. We were part of the 7th Air Force.

The 45th had already been down to a little bit of combat. They had been shot around. My flight leader, Bridge, had bailed out once. He had some experience. It was fun, seeing those men that had already had a little bit of combat, to be with them.

Mr. Cox: Is this where you learned your combat flying skills. Did they teach you....

Mr. Brown: That is really where we learned them. We went north of Oahu. We would go out and shoot at sleeves. We would start out making side paths at sleeves. You would get in a string of planes and take your turn and go in and shoot colored bullets. Later on we would do overhead passes. That was a little bit wilder.....a whole lot wilder.

And while we were there, we would go out on alerts. We get up before daybreak and go out and run Civil Air Patrol, or Combat Air Patrol. We would meet planes that would come in from the states. Maybe a Pan American plane coming in and some bombers coming in. So we did all sorts of things like that.

We took depth charges down and dropped them on a bay about 75 miles away. The military used this island for target practice. It was fun.

Mr. Cox: Yes, I can imagine.

Mr. Brown: They were dedicated guys. Back at Bellows Field on Oahu, we had our little scramble strip and we could get off the ground and get up and get the altitude quite speedily.

One day we went out about 30 miles over a carrier. The Commander of the carrier joined us and flew back with us. Those guys were interesting people.

Mr. Cox: What was your rank at this time, Bill?

Mr. Brown: I was a 2nd Lieutenant. I was a 2nd Lieutenant all of the time.

We started our night flying. A P-47 is just like all airplanes. When the flame comes out from the engine port, that thing looks like a big blow-torch. You don't really recognize that until you get up at night and your looking at that thing and you know you've got a lot of heat going out.

Our base was right at the edge of a sugarcane field. If you know where the Sea Island Park is on Oahu.

Mr. Cox: Yes.

Mr. Brown: Just 5 miles up the ridge from there is Bellows Field. It is a helicopter base or a training base of some kind now.

Then it was our scramble strip. You would ease into the end of the air field, shut everything back and pull it up and go around and land. We learned how to land quite speedily.

We stayed there about six weeks and they brought P-51's in for us. We started training in the P-51's and doing all the things we needed to do to prepare. We got ready to go down to Iwo Jima. They put our planes on a flat-top and took them down to Saipan.

Saipan was open at the time. They had already taken it.

We stayed on the ship at Saipan. We landed at Iwo on the west side of the island. It was probably D+8 or something like that when we went in. So we lived in fox holes for a while. The old guys brought the air planes in. Of course, they were the first to go to Japan and do the combat and that sort

of thing. And wisely, they took the old guys.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this, Bill. You flew a P-47 and then a P-51. What was your personal preference. If you had a preference, which plane would you prefer to fly and why?

Mr. Brown: If I was going to do low level strafing, I would want the P47 because it is stronger. It can take a lot of damage before it goes down.

The P-51, if you lose your coolant, you have about a minute before you had better get out of it.

We were assigned mostly to do escort work. To cover the bombers when they were dropping their bombs. When we were over Yokohama or Tokyo, that was our job, just to get above the bombers and try to be in front of them a little bit to see that the Zeroes didn't come in.

Mr. Cox: Did you act as an escort from Iwo?

Mr. Brown: We had a B-29 that led us to the target in Japan. We would rendezvous with it. It didn't take us very long to get up and get behind it and it would navigate for us. Then we would go in from there. Off the target, they would assign submarines. The submarines would pick up any of the stragglers. When one of the B29's got shot up, they could find a submarine and jump over it also. There was that safety net which was built into the program.

Mr. Cox: How many combat missions did you fly? Do you remember?

Mr. Brown: I think I counted maybe 17 missions of sorts. I think I went to Japan 4 times. Those rides were 8 to 8-1/2 hours. It required that you fly formation all the way.

My last ride was one where I got too close to a B-29 and he took me out. He shot me down.

One of our rides, we went in as the Kamikazes were tearing up Okinawa. They sent us over to take out something down around Kyushu, the southern island, I think it is Kyushu.

Mr. Cox: Yes, it is.

Mr. Brown: We went over there and our flight was assigned to cover a submarine. The rest of the guys went in. The flight leader went into the base and the guy in the Japanese tower gave him a green light. He didn't recognize who was coming in. So they stayed around and tore up the place. We lost some guys on that ride.

Combat is kind of a strange thing. We were covering this sub and I looked down and said "Hey, that's a P-47." And it wasn't, it was one of those, like we have in the hangar down here. You know that one --

Mr. Cox: The Japanese float plane?

Mr. Brown: The Japanese float plane. They put wheels on them also and they looked just like a P-47 from up above.

We covered the sub and we went home. It was an exciting day.

Mr. Cox: It sure was. On any of these escort missions, did you run into any anti-aircraft or Japanese interceptors?

Mr. Brown: No. The last ride I was on was May 29 and it was a fairly clear day. We came in just southwest of Yokohama. We could see Mt. Fuji sticking up beautifully. It was kind of a very, very pretty day. We could see the bombers. We were climbing up and preparing to cover them.

Up ahead, here comes a Zero. My flight leader and I were shooting at that air plane and we were having all kinds of fun. All of the sudden, there was no sound. My engine stopped. My flight leader disappeared in the sky some where. I looked around and I couldn't see the Zero we were shooting at. So I pushed over reasonably and got a lot of speed up and went out toward Tokyo Bay and south. In a few minutes, I saw some B29's who had already left the target and were heading south again. I stayed far away from them and just went parallel with them for a while. Not very long.

Then I eased in a little closer. All of the sudden I looked down and I didn't have instruments anymore. I looked out on the wing and the gasoline caps had popped off and were smoking. They had shown us movies on how to get out of an air plane. When you are in that condition, you have to trust your chute. So I rolled the thing upside down and tried to fall out. Our CO said that was the only way to go.

Well, I followed that rule and it didn't work. So I rolled it back and quickly crawled out on the right side. I had already dumped the canopy. The chute worked.

Just a month before, they had taken a dozen chutes from our squadron and put sandbags on them and dumped them off over the field and half of those parachutes didn't open. So the chutes of some of the guys that had jumped previous missions didn't billow. The bosses were worried that those chutes were not going to billow. But mine did.

I guess I was at about 8,000 feet. I went through these light cumulus clouds and on down to the water. I was able to see a little Japanese island over a few miles to the side. I saw the little circle that my plane made when it went plop. When I got in the water it was just like in the movies. Nothing to it.

They had trained us in Richmond, Virginia, in a swimming pool. They had shown us some movies on how to do this. We had a sergeant who showed us over and over and over again how to get in and out of a one-man life raft. It was a piece of cake. I got into that raft and had to decide whether I was too close to that Japanese island to mess around.

I thought about it for a moment and let go of two of my smoke bombs and waited a while. Maybe waited 10 or 15 minutes. Then I let the rest of them go. I was ready to be picked up. Before you know it, a submarine, the Pipefish, must have seen me. Or, a bomber saw me and called me in. So

they picked me up. I found out later that the Pipefish had picked up 9 flyers during their stint there in the Pacific. It was marvelous getting picked up.

Mr. Cox: I bet it was because the way the Japanese were treating downed flyers at that stage of the war was pretty bad.

Mr. Brown: Some of our guys met awful fates.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this. Were you wearing a Mae West also when you bailed out?

Mr. Brown: Yes. I had a Mae West. I had a bottle of water. I had Hershey bars. I had two pills to calm me down. And, of course, when I hit the water those two pills were in my open pocket and they just dissolved.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you about the incident of your being shot down. You allude to the fact that you were shot down by our own planes. I guess you would call that “friendly fire”. What do you think would cause them to do that? They didn’t mistake you for another

Mr. Brown: When you are in combat, you are excited. When you see something and it is an air plane, if you really can’t identify it, you shoot at it.

Mr. Cox: Shoot first and ask questions later.

Mr. Brown: The 29 had a very good firing system for that time. It worked. And I was living proof that it worked.

They wouldn’t let us get off at Iwo, they took us on a sub to Guam. There was a sub base there. They debriefed us down there. Then they flew me back to Iwo. The submarine in mid-Pacific transferred us to another submarine. We got in a bigger life raft. There were about 7 of us.

I asked the Navy guy that rowed us over to the other sub, “do you do this very often?” He said “no”. I said “Do you know how to swim?” He said “no”. Here we were in 30,000 feet of water in a life raft in the middle of the ocean. There were a lot of guys with courage then.

Mr. Cox: Yes, there were. All you guys had courage.

Mr. Brown: In this submarine, we had a guy who was blown out of the tail of a B-29. The only guy that got out alive. He stayed all night in the water with half of his leg gone and the other stripped of the skin. He stayed alive for about two weeks before he died.

There were just all kinds of things happening. We picked up a B-29 fellow that knew how to work the radar and the sonar machines. The fellows on the submarine didn’t know much about it. So he was a real asset to help work with them on that electronic machinery.

Mr. Cox: I bet he was. Let me ask you this. How long were you on that submarine?

Mr. Brown: I was on the submarine for three weeks. It took three weeks to get down to Guam. They have to play “pick up” taxi service and then transfer. When I got down to Guam, I learned that they had reported to my folks that I was killed. The Red Cross sent a message and was able to tell my folks that I was still alive. That was a very friendly thing for them to do.

My sister had married a B-29 pilot and he was in the Tinian group. I was hoping to meet him. On his first ride up to Kobe, Japan, the plane he was riding in on a familiarization ride was shot down and he was put in a camp. On the last day of the war, they lined the whole crew up and shot them. That week in June, I was reported dead and just a few days later my brother-in-law was reported captured. It was a trying time for the parents. Parents endured a lot.

Mr. Cox: Everybody endured a lot during that war, didn't they?

Mr. Brown: The impressive part is the selection of flight leaders and a willingness to learn your craft. Learning how to fly that air plane and shoot and do all sorts of things. This was a way of putting order into the lives of young men. That's why I feel that military service of some kind, where it demands attention, it demands learning. This is a very important thing for the American society.

Mr. Cox: I agree with you. If nothing else, learning discipline.

Mr. Brown: And that is where I learned it.

Mr. Cox: I did too when I was in the military.

Mr. Brown: It remained a part of my life. I was a school teacher and discipline is crucial. Whether you are going to teach or know what the learners need to use.

Mr. Cox: Getting back to your being picked up by the sub and you were taken to Guam. Where did you proceed from there?

Mr. Brown: I stayed on Guam three or four days before they could put us on an air plane. They put us on a C-46 going back to Iwo. We were all cruising along there, we were at altitude and had already passed Saipan heading on up. All of the sudden, silence! The C-46 engines cut-out. That was scarier than anything that had ever happened to me. I said “oh no, not again!”

It's ok I if I had to do this myself, but not have somebody else do it to me.

Mr. Cox: Exactly, because you are in control when it is your own plane.

Mr. Brown: We got up to Iwo Jima and checked in. They let us go to Honolulu to Hickam to the rest camp. They had a rest camp for those people who had been in combat. So we flew down to Hickam. My buddy and I both had trouble. He sat on a life raft for six days through a storm. At Hickam, they had psychiatrists there to check us out. They gave us good food. We relaxed a while. Then they sent us on back to Iwo.

By the time we got back there, the war was about over. Some guys from Europe who wanted to get into the squadrons and shoot a while took precedence. They sort of gave up on us and started getting our paperwork to send us back.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this, Bill. Being shot down, I imagine you probably remember the exact date and probably the time.

Mr. Brown: May 29, just before noon. It was a marvelous, beautiful day. It is the kind of a day that you would want to have if you were going to the beach. But I didn't get to go to the beach. I got to go to the water.

Mr. Cox: You said they started processing the papers, this was in 1945?

Mr. Brown: We got back the 1st of August. They had us back to Saipan when they dropped the first bomb. No body knew how fast it was going to close down at that time.

Mr. Cox: Then you processed from Saipan. Where did you go, back to Honolulu?

Mr. Brown: Saipan to Honolulu. We flew MATS back to Honolulu. Those lovely islands like Johnson Island and then Hickam.

Mr. Cox: You said MATS, that's Material Air Transport...

Mr. Brown: Military Air Transports. They were doing all that C-46 stuff. Hauling people. In fact, one time I got to come from Saipan to Honolulu on that China Clipper kind of plane. That is no air plane to ever fly in. It's dangerous.

Mr. Cox: Well, it's big. You got back to the states...

Mr. Brown: In September, I got back to the states. They had a cargo ship that we got on from Honolulu back to San Francisco. We went under the bridge, pulled in to San Francisco at the dock there. We didn't get off the boat. They had a military band playing "Sentimental Journey" and a few military songs. Then they took us to Richmond to a replacement center, where they sent you off.

Mr. Cox: How did you get to Richmond from San Francisco?

Mr. Brown: We didn't get off the boat.

Mr. Cox: You went around to Panama.

Mr. Brown: No, I meant Richmond, California. No it wasn't very far. We were dying to get off the boat and they wouldn't let us get off. From the Replacement Center, they sent us many places. I went to Camp Chaffee in Arkansas. My folks had moved to Arkansas so I got off at Camp Chaffee.

Mr. Cox: Were you and Mary married at that time?

Mr. Brown: No, I was single. Right after that I decided to go back to college and finish college. It took a couple of years to finish college.

Mr. Cox: I have heard a lot of veterans express their opinion about the atomic bomb. What is your opinion about dropping of the atomic bomb?

Mr. Brown: The atomic bomb stopped the war. The atomic bomb got the attention not only of the Japanese, it got the attention of the world. It was the one thing that made the United States the principal power in the world. I think some of our leaders didn't realize that. We instantly became the central player in the safety of the world. We just closed out one big war. The bomb did that.

The guys that trained to do that and the fellows that executed it did their jobs beautifully. It would have been fun to be on the crew, to be near those guys. I am sure you have seen the films of the two flights, the Enola Gay and the Brocks Car.

Mr. Cox: Yes. You are probably aware that General Tibbets is supposed to be here during the Symposium in September.

Mr. Brown: There is no question that world history was changed there. If the Germans had been dumb enough to hang on, they would have gotten a bomb and probably the Japanese would have gotten one also. It was a useful thing.

From our current year 2000 perspective, if we knew the facts of how Hitler and Tojo were going to carve up the world. And that they almost did it. They came very close to it, not once but many times, whether it was the evacuation at Dunkirk or many other times in history. Those leaders made some really bad decisions. That is the only reason we won. We were very close to losing the ball game.

Mr. Cox: Yes, sir.

Mr. Brown: That message is not taught. That message needs to be taught. We tend to teach some of the secondary issues and let very verbal people, or the news people, get away with building fires up in people's hearts to get them to support one side or another. But the bomb was necessary. The bomb was used properly. We should have probably used our clout more during that period in history than we did.

We had a symposium not too long ago "What were the mistakes that we made in the War". A huge mistake was not being willing to have sharp armies, being prepared to use them when necessary, and making clear that we wanted peace rather than crooks running the world.

Our issue now is how do we quit supporting the crooks.

Mr. Cox: Well, with that, I think that we will conclude this interview. Once again, I thank you very much, Bill, for taking the time. It is always a pleasure for me who was a young man, a school kid,

when you were over there doing your job. And thank you again, Bill.

Transcribed, August, 2000
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