

INTERVIEW
of
JAMES T. MURPHY

MR. COX: Good morning! My name is William G. Cox. The date is October the first, the year 2000. I represent the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas, and I will be doing the oral history today with James T. Murphy. We are in the auditorium of the Fredericksburg High School. And without further introduction I will introduce Mr. Murphy. Would you please tell us a little bit about your background—where you were born, what state, and what you feel that you can tell us about today?

MR. MURPHY: I certainly would. I was born in Ryegate, Montana, to Mr. & Mrs. S. W. Murphy. My Dad was a railroad conductor on the Milwaukee Railroad, and my Mother was a housewoman. She had worked, of course, before she was married and I was raised initially in Harlowton, Montana, which was also on the Milwaukee Railroad, and my Dad was there so for about five years I grew up in Harlowton. Then due to his job on the railroad we moved to Roundup, Montana. I spent a number of years there and did not leave until I went to college in 1938. My Father and Mother were the kind of parents that one would really envy having. They were just such wonderful people. I was the youngest of three. My older brother was less than three years older, my sister was 18 months older, and we had a very close knit family for a number of years until the fricassees began in the world. My brother initially went into a pre-army thing for about six months and then they sent him to college. My sister wanted to be a nurse because I had an aunt that was a nurse and so she, too, went to college. Both of them at Seattle College in Seattle, Washington. Then when I was in high school I was playing a lot of baseball and also running track. It would have been almost impossible for my Mother and Father to send me to college at that time with two in front of me but I was able to get a scholarship in track at the University of Utah. They paid me more money there, and this big sum I'm talking about of 28 dollars a month which was over that that was offered by Montana State and by Idaho, so I, of course, grabbed the University of Utah's big offer and went there. I spent then two and a half years at the University of Utah until war, it looked like, was going to come and come fairly rapidly, this was in late 1940 early 1941. So in 1941, I then signed up to go in as an aviation cadet or a flying cadet. This was in May of 1941, and I graduated from flying school early in 1942. So that brings my career, if you will, from a fast grown up stage to one out of college and to one going into the war, World War II. Can I stop you here for a moment?

MR. COX: Yes, you can. I notice you grew up in a relatively rural area of Montana in small communities. Perhaps you can fill us in a little bit on what it may have been in high school, classes that you really liked, maybe there was an influence from a teacher, and how did the classes that you liked best and your teachers, how did that affect your future life?

MR. MURPHY: Let me start a little earlier than high school. When we moved to Roundup from Harlowton, I was in the first grade and I went to a catholic school in Roundup, and I had a very very favorite teacher. She was, even in the first and second grade, very prone to getting me and the rest of the class oriented into a thing called mathematics. And I mean that even at an early age it was the the multiplication tables and a few little things like that. It really formed a basis of later understanding of math and problems of math. In high school I had a coach who taught math, and he too was very prone to push algebra and geometry so that helped too. So that was kind of a basis of the part of an education that I did like very very much, and as the years progressed certainly it

was a major aid to my education and so that was kind of a basis of the pointing into a direction that I had from the first teachers.

MR. COX: We can understand by the mathematical background there that how that perhaps helped you in your cadet program as well as later when your flying assignments and understanding of navigation, etc., the mechanics of the aircraft. Thank you, that's a good point. You did mention a little earlier there that you were into the flying cadet program in 1941. Where did most of that cadet training take place?

MR. MURPHY: In three different places. We had primary training that I went to in Thunderbird, which was a flight school run by civilians with some military there in 1941 called "Primary Flying Training". I graduated from there, and then for basic training went I to Taft, California at Gardner Field where they had a basic training school. Then I went back to Arizona. The Thunderbird was in Phoenix and I came back to Phoenix again but this time to Luke Air Force Base for my final training, the advanced training, and I graduated from Luke Air Force Base and received my wings.

MR. COX: Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on December 7th, 1941?

MR. MURPHY: Oh, very well. I had a car that I had bought for about a hundred and twenty-five dollars, as I remember, and was keeping that car up in pretty good shape when I went in as cadet. So I was one of the few people that was able to have a car because I had registered it first. I had a couple of friends and also a young lady or two that we went to the movies with that day on that Sunday. We were sitting in the movies when a big sign came up on the screen and said the Pearl Harbor had been bombed and all personnel that are in the military check into your base immediately. Well, I was a little arbitrary, and my friends were right along with me, and so we left the movie and went out to a place that we knew had dancing and would serve us a little beer. We took off for that and stayed out until the very last flag when we had to be in by ten o'clock. So that's where I was on Pearl Harbor day and that's probably my last day I had off the base for about three weeks.

MR. COX: In other words, it was probably a little bit of a shock but you managed to enjoy a little of it also.

MR. MURPHY: Yeh, we knew it was going to be really tough from then on.

MR. COX: You knew it wasn't going to get any better for a long time.

MR. MURPHY: Not a bit.

MR. COX: In your training, do you think when you look back on it now, was that training that you received in these early years was it really adequate, and was the type of equipment you were training with adequate for the time?

MR. MURPHY: Oh, I think yes, very much so. I trained in the PT-17 initially, which was a bi-wing airplane and you had a gasport for talking between the instructor and the student. You wore your scarf and had all the trimmings. That was the primary training kinda thing but I think it was very very important because at that point and time there it was before World War II they were washing out (of the program) and that means eliminating over half of the class that went in. That

was just the way it worked and had worked for some time in primary training. Fortunately, I was not eliminated, and so then when we went to basic, they eliminated another 20 percent of the class and fortunately, again, I was not eliminated, but, again, it was just one of things that if you loved flying and you had the capability to relax and fly, which I did have, then it makes it fun. So flying to me from day one until I last flew was really a wonderful time. It was the most relaxing time I ever had was flying an airplane.

MR. COX: I think that's a wonderful experience. I notice on the short bio you prepared that when you graduated and you mention your first assignment and what you were trained in, would you like to tell us a little bit about that?

MR. MURPHY: At that time, it was early in 1942, there were six of us that were named to go up to Spokane, Washington, to get training in the B-17, and I had been in a pursuit school, as it was called at Luke Field, a fighter school, I was very unhappy about the way they selected as it was just a total randomness. All of us whose last name started with "M" and mine happened to be Murphy, and six others with last names beginning with "M" were chosen very selectively by the initial. When I got there, very fortunately, a captain, who had just come in from United Airlines on to active duty, had an assignment given to him that said I want polished pilots in two and one-half months, and it's going to be up to you. As the captain told us, "It's going to be up to you as to whether you're gonna be sitting in the left seat as the pilot, the right seat as the co-pilot, or if you want to go as a navigator." Ordinarily, most pilots would not go in as a navigator and so they would have to leave. Anyway, I was, again, very fortunate that after two and one-half months I was given a left seat as a pilot. Then we were on our way to Midway. This was in May of 1942. And so I was a young Second Lieutenant, but I had quite a little experience in the B-17. I had had about 300 hundred hours flying time which was more than most people had at that time in the B-17. So I was very fortunate that way, and then secondly, the instructor that we had had, the Captain, insisted that we become excellent at instrument flying, and that really saved my life and many other peoples lives. The way he handled it, we were under the hood all of the time, doing instrument flying while we were flying, and that was a major part of the selection of who was going to be a pilot and who was going to be the co-pilot. So it was just a very very fortunate thing that I had met this Captain as the instructor, and that probably saved my life a number of times in the terrible weather that we had to fly over in the Pacific when I was in combat over there.

MR. COX: When you left you had had your initial training there in and around in the B-17 in Washington State. And did you go from there directly to the Pacific theater?

MR. MURPHY: Yes.

MR. COX: How did you get there?

MR. MURPHY: We flew a B-17 over there. At that time, a real event had happened. The United States had broken the Japanese code, and I think it is well known how that happened. None of us knew that at the time, of course. All we knew was we were going to Hawaii, and we didn't even know that until we got to San Francisco. We picked up our airplanes that we had flown in, we had actually flown the airplanes in from Spokane. So we flew the same airplanes that they had in Spokane. They were fairly new airplanes, the B-17E, and so we then flew over to Hawaii and landed there and were assigned to an outlying airdrome still on Oahu in Hawaii. We flew reconnaissance out of there trying to pick up the Japanese fleet that was coming into Midway. We

did see a part of this Japanese fleet. I think we were flying at about 23-24,000 feet and we had anti-aircraft on our wings. This was the first time I had ever seen anti-aircraft as I'd never had anything fired at me in anger before. So that was a very interesting part. We didn't do any active bombing at all, our mission was purely reconnaissance, and that was what the Air Corps was doing in support of the Navy and the Marines in the Midway battle.

MR. COX: Was the anti-aircraft fire that you saw, were you able to identify what was causing that, where it was coming from?

MR. MURPHY: Oh, yes, yes, we could see the source. I think there was one battle ship that was trained on us, and we immediately moved out of the way, I can assure you we got away from that, but I think it was a battleship that was firing at us. We had seen three or four ships on the water down there. My crew had spotted them first and then I did the very violent turn out of the way and to get out of the anti-aircraft fire, of course, and did get out of the field of fire, but I saw for the first time what it looked like.

MR. COX: This was not friendly fire then?

MR. MURPHY: We knew it wasn't.

MR. COX: Okay. So that was a Japanese battleship that spotted you, too. After that engagement did you continue to stay in the Pacific area or did you....

MR. MURPHY: No, at the end of the Midway battle we were sent back to the States without our airplanes but with my crew. I'd had a co-pilot that got sick and so I had to get a co-pilot when I got back to the United States. I met eleven other crews that had just come in from Panama and this is when I got a First Lieutenant co-pilot assigned to the crew. The rest of the crew had all been with me in Midway. We had actually flown together, you know, quite a number of hours of flight time. But then when we were in San Francisco, I did flip a coin with three other crews that came back, and I was the winner of the coin flipping and so command said "We need one crew to go to CBI and one crew to Europe, and one crew to North Africa, and one crew back to the Pacific." I said, "Well, I want the Pacific" because I knew at that time, well I thought I knew, we'd be able to stay there for a month, maybe, or three weeks in San Francisco. Well, that didn't work. Three days later we were on our way to Hawaii with the new organization that I had just met, and that was the makings of the 63rd Bomb Squad of the 43rd Bomb Group. The people that I met comprised the 63rd Bomb Squad, and I became the twelfth member of that particular squadron. So then we flew over together all twelve airplanes. We had picked up new B-17F's just out of the Boeing manufacturing plant, in fact, and picked 'em up in Oakland. These were the new B-17F which was much faster than the B-17E.

MR. COX: Did that particular model have in addition to those types of performance factors, added any additional armament like different types of turrets or improvements?

MR. MURPHY: They had improved both the bottom turret and the turret over it was the flight engineers turret. The top turret had been improved greatly. There were now able to go 360 degrees to give 'em fire capability with cutoffs at certain ways if you're in formation and then a lot of very

nice little things that they did that made protecting yourself much easier and working to kill your enemy.

MR. COX: That is a good answer there because I kinda remembered they had done something like that but I didn't know why. I'd never been around them. So after you picked up the aircraft and got your crews together, you shipped shortly thereafter? Would you tell us about how you went to your new assignment and what it was from that point?

MR. MURPHY: There was a series of stops really. The first stop being Hawaii, and each stop we stayed, believe me, a minimum amount of time, just enough to get rest and eat a meal. Our hops were from Hawaii to three different islands, Christmas Island, and then on to New Zealand, and then to Brisbane, Australia. That's where we landed first, Brisbane, Australia. All twelve airplanes were together flying formation except once in a while somebody would get out of formation and we'd have to kinda slow down and circle and wait for them to get back with us. But the twelve of us that started out got into Brisbane almost within thirty minutes of each other. That was our methodology of getting over there. Then five of us were assigned to Townsville to the 19th Bomb Group on a temporary basis, and the five of us were running reconnaissance out of Townsville up to Port Moresby and then given instructions as to where we were to do our reconnaissance and what we would take photographs of and we would fly as high as we possibly could because there they were well protected with Zero fighters to come up and get us if they could. We, the B-17F's, could get up to 32,000 feet and believe me we got up to 32,000 feet because every time we would get over Rabaul or some other major airport in the Solomons, Northern Solomons, the Jap fighters would start out and we'd see them coming and we would head for home after we had taken our pictures. I had five missions and so did the other four crews and then we did that for about three weeks only. This was in July of 1942 and Major Benn was appointed the Squadron Commander of the 63rd Squadron and he had come over with Gen. Kenney and Gen. Kenney had just taken over the 5th Air Force. Gen. Kenney had been sent over from the United States as commander of the 5th Air Force. That really began to turn around the kind of war that the B-17s had been fighting versus the kind of war that we began to fight. That's this thing that we did initially (that Major Benn and Gen. Kenney were primarily involved in), and Major Benn was the one that made it work, called Skip Bombing. That's where I started skip bombing and eight of us volunteered to do that, and we got our crews to volunteer to come with us on skip bombing missions. If they hadn't, I'd have gotten some other crew members because I was gonna do it.

MR. COX: Had other aircraft been used for skip bombing previous to this?

MR. MURPHY: Never. Never done before.

MR. COX: Okay. Till then....

MR. MURPHY: Then we had to practice and then we had to learn how to make sure that we knew how to skip bomb.

MR. COX: What was the factor that the B-17 would contribute best to this particular mission that they were after?

MR. MURPHY: Well, number one, the B-17 wasn't the ideal airplane for skip bombing because it was so big, but we had the range to get to the kind of places and that was the single reason the B-17 was selected, was the range. Then in doing skip bombing, we had a ship outside of Port Moresby that we'd practice on every time we'd go up. We couldn't live up there in New Guinea at the time, but we would practice on this ship and drop initially hundred pound bombs and test at what altitude was the best. And we found the lower you went the more problem you had with controlling the bomb itself. If you were down at 50 feet that thing could bounce right back up at you almost and did to some of the people. We found 200 feet was an ideal way if you were at 250 miles and hour. That was the two measures that you had to do knowing that we were gonna go in on a ship and fly over the ship directly toward the ship, drop our bombs, letting them glide on the water the way you would throwing a rock on the water. They would hit the side of the ship and we had (and this was the key to the whole thing) a 4 to 5 second delay fuse on that bomb whether it was a 500 pound bomb or 1,000 pound bomb. We then would drop the bombs, fly over the mast of the ship, and we'd be clear of the ship maybe a quarter of a mile, to a half mile clear of the ship by the time the bombs exploded. Then we would stay at that altitude to stay out of the searchlights and the anti-aircraft but never get over 200 feet until we were well out of the harbor, then we would start our climb back home and always, of course, try to find out what happened. We always had other aircraft that were there flying as decoys that did not want to skip bomb. So out of the eight of us in the 63rd Squadron that initiated it, while the others in the squadron and other squadrons would fly over Rabaul, for example, draw the searchlights and the anti-aircraft up to them at 6 or 8,000 feet, we'd go in very quietly at a 1,000 or 2,000 feet, find our target, go in on the target, drop our bombs, and continue on never over 200 feet until we were well clear of the islands and everything else.

MR. COX: So, really at that altitude you were pretty vulnerable then, too. So did you do any of this in daylight? I notice you mention the searchlights.

MR. MURPHY: No, had we done that in daylight, that B-17 was a big airplane at that time, the biggest, and they'd have shot us down. The anti-aircraft would have been able to catch us. There was just no way we could go in at daylight. Now what we did is look at when the moon was going to come up that morning, and we'd be there when that moon started to come up, and we knew what the weather was going to be. We would know the time the moon was going to start up on the horizon, and so we'd be sitting there looking for airplanes. We could pick up a ship and set it into the view with the horizon as the background. When we got a good look at a ship, then with that in mind, I'd make a decision. We usually flew with four 1,000-pound bombs or eight 500-pound bombs, unless we were going on a longer mission and needed more fuel, I'd make the decision. On the first mission of skip bombing that I was on, I saw the biggest transport I'd ever seen before or since there in the Rabaul harbor. I didn't know the size, but it turned out to be a 15,000 ton-ship. I dropped four 1,000-pound bombs, that was what I had as my load, at 200 feet. We had a little cross in the bombardier's window and when that little cross in the window appeared at the waterline that's when the bombardier toppled the four bombs out, and they would skip across the water and that's exactly what happened. All four of them hit that 15,000-ton transport. There was a big explosion and just within two or three minutes it was almost totally submerged. What a thrill that was. My first one.

MR. COX: So you caught him pretty well loaded then.

MR. MURPHY: Totally by surprise. The key to the whole thing was surprise because the anti-aircraft didn't see us, couldn't see us, the searchlights couldn't pick us up, and by the time we were almost out of the harbor that's when the explosions started. So we were gone and they didn't know what had happened. It was, I think, the finest thing that ever happened in the way of the military and performance from an airplane. The thing that happened was that it so shook the Japanese that they didn't really ever overcome this threat we had for them called skip bombing. They never overcame it because they began hiding in places they would not have otherwise. They were moving at night when they should have been moving during the day because we couldn't bomb at low altitude during the day. If they did move during the day then they were so much more vulnerable. In everything they did in trying to restore supplies or fuels or troops into any one of their islands that they had taken earlier, they had to worry about skip bombing. They didn't know when we were coming or how to stop us. It proved very effective.

MR. COX: When the bomb actually skipped did it only touch the water one time in your distance you were working with?

MR. MURPHY: Oh, no, no, no, it would get on to the water and at that velocity of 250 miles an hour and it would probably skip 8 or 10 times on the way into the target. By that time, you see, we were over the ship at the same time the bomb hit the ship. That gave us four to five seconds to get beyond the ship, and that's when the explosion happened.

MR. COX: The four to five seconds was a critical part of the delayed fuse.

MR. MURPHY: So critical. Yep, had it gone off early, say it went off in two seconds, then the bomb would have exploded in two seconds and would not have hit the ship at all. Had it gone off late, the bomb would have hit the boat but sunk too far down. You wanted it down a little bit but maybe below the water line and that's about it. And so that's what did it, the four to five second delay fuse. None of our pilots that I know of was ever blown up by skip bombs. Now a few of them didn't do it properly and the bomb would go off in the right or to the left but hitched on properly by.

MR. COX: How many of these skip bombing missions did you fly on and then how many ships did your group or yourself manage to sink this way?

MR. MURPHY: Well, I flew 56 missions total, and of the 56 missions 34 of them were skip bombings and that was at night and at different places. Rabaul Harbor was big, Wewak had a big harbor, New Ireland Kaviang had a big harbor, Northern Solomons had two harbors, so we would go in whenever we had good reconnaissance on where the ships were. We'd get reconnaissance pictures back on one day, and if the moon was gonna be right we would go in at night, or we went in at very early dawn if the moon wasn't gonna be right. We knew where we were going and we had a pretty good idea of where the ships were. If they were moving, we had a way to (it's like shooting a duck) if they were moving you would get your nose around so that it was leading the ship as you would shoot a duck. It was one of those things, that if you did right, you couldn't miss. And most of us did it right. Now back to your other question, I did sink, or was credited with sinking, 9 Japanese ships totally the year that I was over there.

MR. COX: Very successful, I would say.

MR. MURPHY: Very successful.

MR. COX: You may have told me, but to clarify it, where were you flying out of to perform these missions and approximately how many hours were involved before you got to your target?

MR. MURPHY: We were flying out of a base in Port Moresby, just out of Port Moresby, in New Guinea called Seven Mile. We lived there once. I think it was we'd been over there about six weeks and the Japanese were almost ready to come over the mountain and by that time then Gen. Kenney was in charge and we also had all the supports from MacArthur. They moved the Japanese back off to 30 or 35 miles of the other side of the northern New Guinea so they had them in a hold place, at least, until we (the Allies) could get more armament and more small airplane guns into them and B-25s and B-26s and so on. When we first flew out of there we could not stay there because they (the Japanese) were getting close and they also had a lot of equipment and aircraft that could give us quite a hard time because we didn't have airplanes that could protect us. None of our missions, that I ever flew over there, except the Midway Battle, did I ever had fighter protection. Not one, and that was out of the 56 missions. I never had fighter protection except on the Bismarck Sea battle, and that's when we had P-38 and P-51 escorts.

MR. COX: So your navigation entered into this pretty critically?

MR. MURPHY: Oh, my, yes, yes. The weather was really a factor. I would say, nine times out of ten you had to fly through a lot of storms to get you to your target whether it was to Wewak in northern Australia or to Rabaul or any one of them in the Solomons. The weather was always so bad, and we learned a good thing then, too; stay low, stay as close to the water as you can, and that includes close enough to whisk draw from the violent violent storms because if you stayed about 2,000 feet you are fairly safe as you would not catch violent upturn or down draft. That was also a key to living over there. Many people were killed over there because of the storms. In fact as I recall, one time in November of 42 I had been out three nights in a row, and we were flying into the Solomons I did sink three Japanese ships. One, one night and two the next night and had been through the rough weather in both directions. I came back in and our group commander, General Ramey, said "I want you to come over with me. I got an old classmate that's the head of the 90th Bomb Group and I want you to brief him on the weather and how they should fly the weather. They're going to Rabaul. I want you to tell him how to do that from a weather standpoint." So I did. I told them how to fly and when to get down as quickly as they can and off the water, to make sure they're out of the hills, of course, and the mountains, and stay there at 2,000 feet and not try to fly to 6, 8, 10 or 12 thousand because of flying condition at those heights in the roughest of storms. Long story short, 12 of them took off the following day on the 14th of November, (I had flown the 11th, 12th, and 13th) and none of them ever made their target. Two of them ended up back in Australia, near Darwin in fact. They were that far off of their course. Three of them were never heard from again including the group commander and three or four of them landed in New Guinea itself, a couple of em' on the northern shore and the rest of 'em on the southern shore. So every one of those airplanes never made it to a target, and that's because they got into the weather and didn't know how to fly the weather.

MR. COX: Training, very important.

MR. MURPHY: Oh, yes, yes, very important.

MR. COX: And understanding the training.

MR. MURPHY: Right.

MR. COX: Yes, because as you had mentioned much earlier, your earlier commander had given you all of that training in navigation and flying by instruments. During this time that you were skip bombing in those islands there was probably some other significant operations by other groups that this training contributed to their success of their missions.

MR. MURPHY: Well, in fact, what had happened in November, and this is a good example, General MacArthur had made an agreement with Adm. Nimitz because Nimitz was the chief in that part of the Pacific that did not include the Northern Solomons, so that was MacArthur's territory along with Rabaul and New Britain and New Guinea, that if the Japanese were moving down into the Guadalcanal area out of Rabaul that's when he would interfere with their movement and try to hit whatever ships he and all of the forces under his command could. That's why the skip bombing again became so important. We had good reconnaissance of where these ships were in Tonelei Harbor in the Solomons and we knew almost where to go except the weather was so bad. We did, though, very fortunately, in each instance break out at a fairly low altitude, maybe 2,000 feet or 3,000 feet, giving us time, and also the weather was much different there within the Solomons than it had been that we had previously flown through. So we had weather in our support which made it so that we could see the ships. We had a moon that we could work with or early dawn and in these instances it was early dawn. We would go into the harbor and totally with the 43rd Bomb Group. I think the Japanese lost a number of ships that they were trying to move back into Guadalcanal or down into Guadalcanal from our planes that were coming in and bombing as we had. Our squadron was not the only one by that time. In later November, a couple of the other squadrons were also doing some skip bombing. They, too, were sinking or hurting Japanese shipping, and so that was part of what we were able to do by flying in and having an adverse impact on the Japanese troop and supply movement and it was quite an impact, too. When you have six of us that sank four ships the first night, and four of us the next night that sank three ships, that's seven Japanese ships that were carrying heavy loads of troops. We never did try to hit a destroyer or a light cruiser, but always hit transports or cargo carrying ships and that was pretty tough on them. They didn't know when we were coming and again that surprise was just killing.

MR. COX: About this time and you mentioned that Guadalcanal was being resupplied or trying to be resupplied by the Japanese. Was it about this time that the Bismarck Sea Battle was taking place?

MR. MURPHY: No, that was later.

MR. COX: Okay.

MR. MURPHY: We had, as I had mentioned, other squadrons doing skip bombing, and it was proving so effective that General Kenney made the decision then to start retro-fitting his B-25's, B-26's, A-20's, and the Australian Beaufords. These were all two engine airplanes with limited range, and that was the reason they had not been skip bombing. And so he started, on every airplane that he had that would be able to do skip bombing, to modify them, to set 'em up with more guns, and to

provide more protection to the pilots, to also give them cannon capability (installing cannons in the nose) going into a skip bombing mission and expecting to go in in daylight. You see, he was setting them up to go in in daylight. That took three months about. Beginning in December, they were practicing and they were asking a lot of questions, of course. We were able to answer the questions because we had done an awful lot of them (skip bombing) by then. That became quite a break for the commanders including Gen. MacArthur because for the first time when the Japanese came in, they had an armada of airplanes if they (the Japanese) got within their range that could hit them at very low altitude. That's what the Bismarck Sea battle turned out to be, a total demonstration of what you can do with skip bombing. We hit them with B-17's in the daylight but we were bombing, not skip bombing, because we were too much of a target. But I did go in, and I sank one which was on the first day. Ed Scott hit one. He was the squadron commander and he hit three ships, that is two others off his wing, and then I hit one and blew it in half. I dropped a thousand pound bomb from a thousand feet, and we couldn't miss from a thousand feet. Of course the destroyers that were sitting there were all firing at me and I couldn't get back into the clouds soon enough. I did see, and my crew saw, the ships break in half right below us. There was a destroyer on the right side of our plane that I didn't see but my co-pilot saw it and he just about fainted. His face turned white (he had freckles) and he was just white faced. He was trying to tell me those folks were down there I didn't listen to him because I was looking at that transport straight ahead and that's what we were bombing. But we bombed at a thousand feet. We did not skip bomb. We had a number of my other missions that were not skip bombing but we had very little time to set up to bomb because I only gave the bombardier twenty seconds max, get this thing set up and drop. That's the only type of run I ever gave him only 20 seconds to drop that bomb. This way you weren't the target for the anti-aircraft that you would have been had you come in on a minute's or 45 second run which a lot of people did. Our max was 20 seconds, but that is a different technique, a different tactic we used for daytime bombing and so that was what we had used there. Scotty and Sogaard also used the 20-second max. time. Swede is mentioned all the time when I talk skip bombing and buddy system because Swede Sogaard was it. Anyway Swede got one, also Scotty and I, on the first day, got three Japanese ships that were in this Bismarck Sea convoy. Then by that time the next day a number of B-17s were out looking and finding and doing some bombing and hurting them too. Later that afternoon then they'd come in close enough to the shores that the B-26s and 25s and all the rest of them could come in and hit them. The B-25's, for example, they went in on the destroyers. They got a lot more hits from both B-17s and then in the afternoon, the big arm mass of two-engine aircraft was able to skip bomb. They then moved in and every ship that was in that convoy was sunk. And that's the way the Bismarck Sea battle went. It really was a turnaround point, a total turnaround point, I think, and so does everybody else that ever knew what was going on. That's when Japanese lost their ability to advance and from then on they were on defense in this total area, not all over the world by any means, but in that area of the Southwest Pacific, they had lost it. It was because of the Bismarck Sea battle. That's my thinking and it has been said many times by even MacArthur .

MR. COX: Yeh, the fact that you were army in the area you were operating and that area was under General MacArthur these operations were pretty much army. Was there any coordinated naval attack or did the navy have much in the way of ships in that general area to contribute?

MR. MURPHY: No, they did not. They were, for example, in Guadalcanal and further south, you see. In the Solomons is where their responsibility picked up but in the Australian area, in New Guinea, in all of the islands around there in the northern part, that was under MacArthur.

MR. COX: There was enough base of operations to support the army air force bombers as opposed to some of the more outlying areas.

MR. MURPHY: Yeh, they moved much of the capability into New Guinea, and then moved it to the northern part of New Guinea after the Bismarck Sea battle where they could set up housing and everything else after they annihilated the Japanese on Lae and Salamaua.

MR. COX: This happened in the early part of 1943.

MR. MURPHY: It happened the first day in March in 1943, and it was over by the 4th day in March.

MR. COX: When you started out in flying these B-17s, you were a cadet and you were a second Lieutenant then a 1st Lieutenant. At what point in time did you receive any promotions or any awards and, if you did, who actually gave you these awards?

MR. MURPHY: In November of '42. I had 21 or 22 missions by that time, and had been fairly successful, very successful, in fact, in skip bombing and in daylight bombing and the entire squadron had been and I was promoted to 1st Lt. in November of '42. I'd had a 1st Lt. co-pilot ever since I'd started. I had a 1st Lt. co-pilot that went over with me but then I had to get rid of him because he had kinda panicked over Rabaul Harbor one night, and then he did it another night. I just laid the law down to my boss, Gen. Benn. The General said, "Well, we'll just send him home, we're not going to mess with this." And so they got him out of there and gave me another 1st Lt. But I was still a 2nd Lt. Then in November I got my 1st Lt. bar and then in March I got my Captaincy. I became Captain in March, so I had gone from a 2nd Lt. when I went over there to coming home as a Captain.

MR. COX: At the end of this time, you came back to the US, was there any ceremony to recognize what you had accomplished on these missions?

MR. MURPHY: Yes, very much so. I, of course, was totally shocked. My group commander was Col. Ramey. Roger Ramey, and Gen. Kenney came in and was giving some medals out to some of the people in the squadron, and I turned to Ramey and said "That's a bunch of bull shit." Ramey said, "What do you mean, Jim? What's the matter?" and I said "My crew didn't get anything and look what we have done." So he said, "Well, we're going to have to do something about that. I thought you had the Silver Star, and I thought your crew was given the Silver Star." These are kinda the words that he used. Well, anyway, nothing more was said and so about two months later, actually, I was coming home without my crew. They had all gone home, and I was still there helping indoctrinate some of the other crews in flying skip bombing missions. Gen. Ramey called and said that Gen. Kenney wanted to see me in Brisbane on my way home so I caught a flight down to Brisbane and went into Gen. Kenney's office. Of course, I had known Gen. Kenney almost since he got over and I got over. In fact, Gen. Kenney wrote a book and I'm mentioned in the book in a few places. So he knew me well, and I knew him much better later. I walked into his office and he had a ham sandwich. I was treated like the king, almost, in his office and then all at once I looked up and here was Gen. MacArthur coming through a side door. Gen. MacArthur said, "Well, George, is he here?" and then he looked at me and he said "Well, I guess he is." So then he came over and Kenney pulled a Silver Star out and MacArthur pinned it on and it all probably took 30 seconds to

happen, and in 35 seconds he was on his way after saying some nice things about, not just me, but the total operation.

MR. COX: And were there other decorations also awarded to you at various times, and if so, can you describe them?

MR. MURPHY: Yeh, well we had a couple of tough missions and we had two distinguished flying crosses awarded. These were skip bombing missions. A total of five air medals, five clusters and six air medals were awarded. There in the Pacific area they did not give medals, believe me, for somebody just being there for five months or by being there for six months. Why people in some areas were getting medals for having done nothing except time. The ones we received were all for some specific instant where we either damaged a ship or we had bombed under certain conditions. That was the way medals were given there which I think was fine.

MR. COX: This may be an appropriate time to tell us about the book I know you have written. Would you like to give us the title of that and what it basically covers?

MR. MURPHY: Sure. It's called SKIP BOMBING, and as you know it covers the time period from the time I got over there to first to Hawaii and then all the time that I was there in New Guinea until I got back to the States. It was almost a year of time period that was written about, and it includes the whole story of skip bombing. It includes the many things that we did to survive, if you will, in New Guinea, and the terrible weather we had and the bad food we had and the fun we had. It was pretty hard to find fun in that kind of a situation, but we did and a lot of poker, and we even had a couple of rests down in Sydney when our squadron commander, Bill Down, knew we were really tired out. My friend, Sogard, and I were picked to be the first two to go down to Sydney with our crews. So we did have fun, too, and I describe all those things. Just living there and existing there, that's what the book is all about, and, then of course, the whole theme of it is this thing of creating the skip bombing and how effective it was. Very few people knew about skip bombing or even today know about it.

MR. COX: I believe you indicated that at the end of WWII you left the service. What did you do when you left the service? I think you had another career that may have started about that time.

MR. MURPHY: Yeh, what I did in 1945, I got out of the air corps as it was at the end of the war, and I went back to school. I needed a year and a half to get my degree because I had to work at the same time. I had married in 1943, and we had two girls at that time, by 1945, or 1947. Anyway I worked. After I finished I went to work for Frigidaire people and I also of my own volition went to Hill Field in Ogden, Utah. It was in Salt Lake City where I had finished my education, and so I was flying out of Hill Field in the Air Force Reserve. I was a squadron commander up there, and then about 1948, I think it was, Gen. Kenney wrote me a letter saying he'd like to have me come back in and he was writing a book and he was in the middle of getting his book finished. He was the head of the Strategic Air Command by that time. So he asked me to come back in and I said I would if he got me a regular commission. Which he said there's no problem, I'll get that. I then came back on active duty as a Captain which was the same grade I had when I got out of the service. This was in 1949. From 1949 I then stayed in, and in 1960, I was given an opportunity to get a graduate degree at George Washington University with the Air Force. There were 16 of us that this was awarded to and I had wanted to get into outer space aviation for some long time. I needed something more exciting than flying an airplane, so my wife was certainly agreeable to do that although she was

hesitant. She didn't want to leave Salt Lake City, and she didn't want to have me get in space exploration. Other than that she was just marvelous, and she would support me 100 percent. So with that in mind, I had this year and all 16 of us with a lot of competition got our Masters degrees at George Washington. Then the pre-assignment was to either space command or the ballistic missiles. So I was assigned to ballistic missiles by choice. I took that because there was a lot of activity going on the Atlas, the Titan, and the Minute Man. Then I had been there about 3, 3 1/2 years in 1964. In 1965 I had enough time to retire from the Air Force so there wasn't any reason to stay. I didn't want to stay any longer. The word had spread that I was in ballistic missiles and I knew quite a little bit about pulling together the big missile, and so word spread I was gonna retire and Professor Werner von Braun asked me to come down and talk to him. Werner was probably the creator, if you will, of at least all of the theory that ever took to get man to the moon. He was just a wonderful gentleman and became a good friend. Everhard Reese was his deputy and he was the technical creator and von Braun was also very technical. Arthur Rudolph was my boss, and I was his number two man, and so it was that Rudolph and I were able to get the first flight off of the Saturn V rocket. The Saturn V, of course, was the launch vehicle that got the man to the moon. So this was a career that was just almost as exciting as doing skip bombing and that's how I happened to go with NASA.

MR. COX: Where was this particular work accomplished that you indicated was with Dr. von Braun?

MR. MURPHY: In Huntsville, Alabama.

MR. COX: And the name of that?

MR. MURPHY: Marshall Space Flight Center, which was named after Gen. George C. Marshall. I flew a T-33 in there for the interview with Dr. von Braun. He loved to fly. He wasn't the best pilot that ever walked on two feet, but he just loved to fly. I came in and the weather was terrible, and I violated the ceiling just a little bit the second time around and landed and came over in my flying suit to be introduced for the first time to von Braun when they got me up to his office. He had been watching for me but, of course, he couldn't see. He had a view from his office that he could see the runway, but it was socked in, and he only got the word that I was on the ground. Anyway, all he wanted to do was talk about my flying, you know, and the weather and I said "Well, do you want to talk anything about this job?" and his Deputy Everhart said "We know all about you." I think they had made up their mind before I got there. They had 200 applications for that job, and I was so lucky. I just walked in and then they took me over there to Dr. Rudolph who was waiting for me to interview me, too. He and I hit it off, and I went back to San Bernardino where I was with Ballistic Missiles at the time. Three days later a wire came in and my boss, who was a one star, came to my office and said, "Who do you know?" And I said "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, I have a message here that says you are to report to Huntsville, Alabama, in civilian clothes in ten days. Now what do you know about that?" I said, "Well, I think you probably know a little bit about it too " because," I said "I've been down there, as you know, and I was interviewed by von Braun and I am sure somebody must have listened to von Braun and said I am supposed to go to Huntsville." And so that's the way it happened. So then I was on my way to Huntsville and that was my new career.

MR. COX: That's a wonderful story and you mentioned the Saturn V and landing of the man on the moon. Was there some other operations that continued from that point in the development of the space program?

MR. MURPHY: Oh, yes, very much so. In fact, von Braun started this organization called Program Development because he was totally concerned about running out of an ability to keep people and to progress in the way of space activities and so Marshall Space Flight Center was well known for building an engine for propulsion for big structures but they were not known for other things such as astronomy and such as payloads. He started this organization and he named a man that was head of one of the laboratories, a very brilliant person, Dr. Bill Lucas, to head this program. Bill came to me and said, "Would you be my deputy in this new program that von Braun was starting?" And he gave us the choice of 250 people and, of course, Bill had been there with them for years and he had selection process that if he asked for them he can get them for his organization. What it was was a small number of critical experienced people in engineering, in physics, in astronomy, in almost anything that is done in either getting to space or in space. And so this was the organization that I became the deputy in, and then about a year later I became the director of the place. And I headed that a little bit over ten years. In that job we created such things as the x-ray telescope, the Hubble space telescope, the sky lab program, the space lab program, you name it, everything that was really flying into space for a number of years. In fact, the two telescope programs have only been flying now six or eight or ten years. But we created them there and we competed against people or centers like Goddard who were well known for their optical capability, for Johnson Space Flight Center. We competed against that for a part of the space shuttle program and for all that time this organization would build the whole program initially, sell it to Congress, and then it would become a program and we'd work on new ideas. We did that for ten or twelve years and it is just most satisfactory.

MR. COX: Would you describe that as the research and primary development of these programs?

MR. MURPHY: Absolutely! I had the pick of the crop of people that were able to do that, and, of course, it does take a leader to channel them wherever and whatever. I was very fortunate, too, because I was able to get the money when I needed it and prove to my boss and prove to the bosses in Washington how effective this would be. And so the big boss and we were all in manned space flight. The man that was heading this manned space flight would often come down and say, "What do you have new, Jim? What are you working on?" I'd tell 'em and give him a good briefing, and he'd say, "Well come on up when you're ready." So that was the way that we really turned the Marshall Space Flight Center into a broad, a very broad, capability for work in space. And even today they're very broad. They're working in trying to reduce the cost of payloads and every flight they're taking a number of payloads up which are, again, proving to be extremely valuable to the whole country. Things that they are doing in space are often applicable to the ground work. That was another wonderful twenty years that I spent with them.

MR. COX: After being quite successful and being involved in so many of these other programs and when you left there after twenty years, was there some type of recognition for these accomplishments? And if so, what were they and by whom?

MR. MURPHY: Well, I think I had from NASA little awards that they gave out and at that point and time I had received about all the awards you could get, except, then about two years before I

reached that, President Jimmy Carter had initiated a thing called Senior Executive Service. Well NASA, of course, was one of those that was chosen to have Senior Executive people. But they are very stingy with the number that they gave out. In Marshall there were five people and I was one of them and it set you up as a SES, as they called it, it set you at the same military grade as 3-Star General initially. Then in certain jobs you were given an upgrade within the SES to where you had the equivalent pay of a 4-Star. So for a number of years and as to the rest of the time that I was there on active duty I was getting paid as a 4-Star which was pretty good.

MR. COX: I'll have to start calling you General instead of Colonel.

MR. MURPHY: Not hardly. But anyway that's the way it worked out and I was very very pleased to have that.

MR. COX: And then you retired from NASA in 1982. Then I have indications that you started another business.

MR. MURPHY: I started my own company.

MR. COX: Okay.

MR. MURPHY: When people heard that I was leaving, there were a number of companies that tried to get me to go to work for them, including Boeing. I had known a number of Boeing people very well in the Saturn V program, and all the other industry people who working space, too, and so I told all the friends that asked me to come to work for them no, I'm going to work for myself. The only employee I'm going to have is my wife, Mary Jane. I said 'I've had all I want of having people work for me and I can handle a job all alone, and she can help me a great deal.' Which, of course, put her in a position of saying well, at least she was drawing some pay, too. So this made her just happy as could be because she had a lot of spending money. So that was good. But anyway I started the thing. The one big thing I did in my business; there was a man in Wichita who was the president of a military airplane company for Boeing that asked if I'd come over. Boeing had left the Apollo program and so had a number of other companies and they had left Huntsville. This had not left a good feeling with a lot of people because just overnight they pulled people out of there and then and that hurt the town. And long story short, he had asked me to draw out for him how Boeing could get back into Huntsville, and how Boeing could win the space station. This was the ultimate thing that he was looking to do. So I outlined that for him, and did, I would say, 50 percent of my work was with Boeing, but I was traveling to Seattle a lot and Lou later became executive vice president for Boeing. So he was calling the shots for the Boeing people and I was feeding him the shots to call. It proved to be very very successful and then my wife, Mary Jane, became ill with cancer and so I just stopped everything. And for two and a half years I was nurse and doctor, 24 hours a day, and it was a tough two and a half years. And she died in 1990 with cancer. It had spread terribly, and so I then started to write this book because my three girls, three daughters, said, "Daddy, you've gotta write this thing. Mother would never forgive us if we didn't get you to write that and this'll keep you busy for awhile." And so that's what I did.

MR. COX: Okay. Now you did tell me something about your family and I was gonna ask you that. As I add this up there's about sixty years of very very important, very interesting, careers,

maybe four careers following your army service because you were probably about twenty years old, or nineteen, when you went in there. But to kinda summarize it, especially your activities in the military in the Pacific, was there some point in time there that you had a low-morale point, and if so, could describe it or wish to describe it. Could you do that for us?

MR. MURPHY: It wasn't morale, it wasn't low morale, it was when you lose so many friends. My squadron commander, Bill Benn was killed in flight. One of my best friends, who was in fact the top skip bombing man, Ken McCullar, he checked me out when I first came with them in San Francisco, and couldn't believe I was a 2nd Lt. and could fly that airplane in the left seat. So he took me for a ride and pulled two engines on me on takeoff and then I got the airplane back around and landed safely and he was laughing and he thought well, I thought I had you surely because you're fifty feet in the air and I pulled two engines on you. We became great friends and he was really one of those people that should've been able to live because he was just able to do anything that anybody would really desire to do. Of course, I was competitive with him which he loved because I was skip bombing and he was skip bombing. When he was killed, he actually had credit for ten and I had credit for nine Japanese ships so you see it was that kind of friendship. And then so many others that I played poker with, and every time we'd have any time off, I'd play poker with them and I even go swimming with them and it becomes a very very close life when you're living in tents and you're eating terrible food and all you really kinda have is soup once in awhile and you have so much empathy between all of you. And you would do anything to protect them and they would do anything to protect you. So that, to me, was the hardest part that I had was living through the number of people that I have lost. I still cry today when I hear Taps.

MR. COX: A little change of pace and I appreciate your comments very much. I understand what you're speaking of. I haven't been there but I understand that. What was the high point in all of this experience, I mean, when you really felt elated, that you'd really done a good job.

MR. MURPHY: I guess one thing that I really felt so good about, which was pretty bad, when we lost our first and only crew by being shot down in the Bismarck Sea Battle. The young pilot, fine young guy I'd played poker with a few times but he was shot down on the second day of the battle. The thing that happened is that he couldn't get out of the airplane nor could his co-pilot, but seven of 'em bailed out, and then the seven of them were strafed all the way down to the water. I had been out but my airplane had to get back into service and I had talked to the crew chief, and they can do anything, I mean they could do things, get things back in. They said they'd have it ready about three or four the next morning, and I talked to the squadron commander, who was Ed Scott at the time, and I said, "Scotty I need two guys to fly on the wing with me because we've gotta a bunch of Japanese out there on the water in barges and everything else and I'd like to go out and see 'em." So Scotty, who had just come back from a mission said, "I wish I could go with you." He said, "I can't but you take 'em and go on out." We went out, went all over the hill and found the area where I thought they would be, and sure enough there were six barges just loaded with people and they were being protected by Zeroes. So we were fighting the Zeroes and strafing the barges, and the barges were trying to avoid us and a couple of 'em crashed as they were trying to avoid us and the people all over the place, and we did sink three of the barges ourselves, that is, our three airplanes. We were dropping 500-lb. bombs on them, too. Not many of them, as we only had two 500-lb. bombs apiece. But I would say if one percent of them reached shore, that would have been about all that would have reached shore and there were lots and lots of people. To me, I was the most satisfied person you've ever seen. I had done what I wanted to do. I know it was the worst thing

people could do in some instances, but I'd repaid a debt and that's what I wanted to do. And so did the other two pilots, and so did the other crews. That to me was the most satisfactory thing that ever happened to me in combat.

MR. COX: Now in your, I'll refer to it as civilian life, although you were working for NASA, there obviously was a high point of really an accomplishment there maybe that you really feel was a wonderful accomplishment.

MR. MURPHY: I think really when I took or was given this job of Director of Program Development, the door was open for me to do anything I wanted, to create anything I wanted, and I had the capability within that organization or, if not, I could go anywhere in the center and call on people that I wanted to get the expertise to develop these things. That's what I did for ten or twelve years. We kept building the center, we kept building the capability, and today its the strongest center in NASA, not because I started it, but the people had the spirit and the know-how and the understanding of what they wanted to do in the way of finding new things to do. And curing things, for example, and by that I mean things that we helped create are being used here in this country; medicines and a number of things are being used that people hardly even know about but have been doing that for years. To me, that is the most satisfactory thing that could have happened to me.

MR. COX: We know now, I think, the way you operate as a scientist, and now I know scientists really can't quit their work, but what do you do with your free time? Do you have some hobbies or do you follow any sports of any particular kind?

MR. MURPHY: Oh, yeh, I play golf. I'm a lousy golfer, but I play golf. I enjoy it very much.

MR. COX: And you live where now?

MR. MURPHY: In Huntsville, Alabama.

MR. COX: Huntsville, Alabama.

MR. MURPHY: I've been living there ever since I went with von Braun in '65. In 1992 I met a young lady that was a neighbor of a very good friend of Mary Jane's and mine, and she called me one night and said, "Jim, I'm gonna have dinner tomorrow night and have my neighbor in" and she said, "But I'm not trying to make a match." She was Italian and she still had a lot of her accent. She said, "Tom (her husband) and I want to have you over, and we're not trying to make a match." Well, I went to dinner with her and we had a good time. She was a free-lance writer in addition to teaching. She had lost her husband about the same time that my wife died, and so she did make a match. Mickie and I were married about eight years ago and she's here with me. Just a lot of fun and we have a good time.

MR. COX: Thank you for taking time from your family and on behalf of the Museum of the Pacific War, thank you, again. And, as an individual, I'd like to thank you for all the work and accomplishments and sacrifices you've made for many of us.

MR. MURPHY: Thank you so much.

MR. COX: We appreciate that very much.

MR. MURPHY: I really appreciate your time and glad to talk about it.

MR. COX: And I think this will be a wonderful presentation for future archivists. Thank you very much, sir.

MR. MURPHY: Is there a way to send me a copy of this?

MR. COX: We certainly will.

Transcribed by Eunice Gary, December, 2000.