

**The National Museum of the Pacific War
(Admiral Nimitz Museum)**

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview With

**John V. Hilliard, Jr.
Corporal, Air Force**

February 28, 2002

Interview With
Mr. John Van Hilliard, Jr.

Mr. Richard Misenhimer

My name is Richard Misenhimer and today is February 28, 2002. I am interviewing Mr. John Van Hilliard, Jr. at his home at 1309 Roosevelt in Alice, Texas. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Center for Pacific War Studies, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II. Van, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today. Let me ask you, where were you born?

Mr. Van Hilliard

Taft, Texas...south of Taft in the country.

Mr. Misenhimer

When were you born?

Mr. Hilliard

August 2nd, 1925.

Mr. Misenhimer

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Mr. Hilliard

I had a sister, who died at birth. That's all.

Mr. Misenhimer

What were your parents' names?

Mr. Hilliard

John Van Hilliard and Iva O'Neill Hilliard.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did your father do?

Mr. Hilliard

He was a farmer.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you go to school?

Mr. Hilliard

In Taft. I graduated in '43 from Taft High School.

Mr. Misenhimer

Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

Mr. Hilliard

Absolutely. I was in the Taft Band and we were playing a radio concert in Corpus there at a little public building at one of the parks. We were there and my mother and the rest of the family were at an aunt's, where they were listening to the radio program that we were playing. They broke into the radio program to announce that Pearl Harbor had happened. Of course, I learned about it just as soon as my mother came to pick me up.

Mr. Misenhimer

You grew up during the Depression. What memories do you have of that?

Mr. Hilliard

I had these memories. As far as we were concerned, we were blessed because we were farmers. We always had hogs and we'd kill a hog and families would group there. They'd butcher that hog in one day. They'd make sausage and take the hams and prepare them for smoking. Then the ladies would be cooking sausage and put them in glass jars and pouring grease over them, and then sealing them to preserve them. They would make soap - lye soap. Big old yellow bars of lye soap that they used for washing the clothes during the year. Then, there was a lot of grease and a lot of cracklings - a cracklings is a deep fried piece of skin. We had a garden always. Mother loved gardens and even till the day she died, if she had some rows of green beans, she thought she was really wealthy. She loved to work in the garden and harvest a garden. She could out pick anyone picking beans or peas. That's the way we ate. We had a big building, full of canned stuff. The women would come together and can corn, green beans, beets and make pickles. We just always seemed to have everything we needed. I remember, when we moved to town, we had a lot of people coming by hungry - coming just off the train. They'd come to the back door and my dad and mother would try to feed them. They believed in trying to feed people. I remember,

when we moved to town, some of the people lived in tents. Where there was a vacant lot, they'd put up a tent and hunt work. We had some friends like that. I remember, across the street from us, one of my cousins worked where they were handing out food. People would line up and go get government food. They were handing out sacks of food. Picture shows cost a dime a piece to get in. At the grocery store, you could get an apple or an orange for a nickel. Everyone who could work wanted to work, and lot a of people that didn't have work wanted to work. People didn't have much, but everybody seemed to be in the same shape, so really wasn't much of a social problem. The only ones that seemed to do better were the merchants. They seemed to live a little better, but the merchants were some of the best friends we had as a family.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you go into the service?

Mr. Hilliard

I went into the service in August, 1943 - right after I graduated. What happened to me was - I knew I would eventually be drafted, but I always had an interest in airplanes, even when I was a young man. I used to buy all these stories about World War I - dog fights and the air planes in those days. We had a friend, who was a crop duster. He would stop by the farm, when he was passing through the country, and give us a ride. So, I had ridden in air planes. This led me to think about becoming a pilot. It wasn't that easy. They had some pretty strong requirements. So, before I was 18 - before I got out of school - I decided to see if I could get into the U.S. Air Force for pilot training. I had a little money because I had some work in a machine shop. I worked there doing a man's job when I was 14. We used to work from 7:30 in the morning until 6 o'clock at night. We worked up to noon on Saturday. I began to check around. There were no recruiting people there. I found out you had to go to San Antonio to enlist as a pilot. So, I paid my own way; caught a bus up to San Antonio (I was a country boy in a big city for the 1st time by myself) and found the Robert E Lee Hotel. I went in there and I was going to go to the Army base the next day, so I had to spend the night. I asked for a room and they told me the didn't have any rooms, but the guy felt sorry for me I guess. He said, I've got the wedding suite up here and I'll discount it for you. It'd still be more than your room, but it would be pretty reasonable. So I paid it. I never had seen a room quite as good as that in my whole life. The next morning I went out to Fort Sam Houston and filled out my applications.

They gave me all the tests they had and a physical. I passed all of that, and I was accepted for pilot training. The girl in the office looked at me (I guess I was standing in the sun) and, even though I guess I was a strawberry blond, she put me down as a red head. They told me they would get in touch with me and tell me when to report. I went back and I had a friend who had waited over a year to report, I thought I'd probably be a year waiting to report. Strange thing. I got a notice to report one week after I was 18 and he went with me. Another fellow that I didn't know went with us. We were both volunteers which gave us a serial number starting with a 1 instead of a 3. I can still remember my serial number - 18233087. I guess I always will. My friend, Lamar Talley, and the other fellow was named Walker, he was a little older than we were, and I caught a bus. We went up to San Antonio to Fort Sam Houston. We went in there and they gave us our uniforms. We were in a barracks there, and right away they sent us to a base up there at Wichita Falls. When we got up there, they sent them to one barracks and me to another one, by myself. Never did get back with them. That was the last time I really saw them until after the war, but both of them lived through the war. We went through basic there. I remember Wichita Falls had the sand storms - red dirt. These things would hit and you'd be in the barracks. The next morning you could see your outline in the bed. Course you had your gas mask and had gas mask drills. What they'd do every once in a while, they'd throw some tear gas into the barracks. You'd have to jump up in the middle of the night and get your gas mask on and sleep the rest of the night with that on usually. We did a lot of marching and P.E. The P.E. we did in our underwear. You were supposed to sew you fly up, but I don't know anyone who ever did it. The buses would pass by with people on them all the time. They take you out there and you had fatigues - these green looking fatigues - and when you did P.E., the sand was so hot, you had to put your fatigues down to keep you hands from getting so hot on the sand. It was a hot, sandy, dusty country and we did a lot of physical training - a lot of runs. I don't know how far, but it was a lot farther than I wanted to run, but I never did drop out. They would have big parades in the afternoons. They'd stand you out there, all dressed up, at parade rest. What really got me was, I was in with the barracks that was nothing but Californians. That hot country really gave them a hard time. There were 3 of us Texans and 2 floors of Californians. I remember standing there at parade rest, and I could hear people's helmets hit the ground and roll - all around me - just one after another. They would drag them out and put them in the ambulance and away they'd go. Some you'd see again; some you wouldn't. They just couldn't

take the heat. We were marching all day, every day. It seemed like the last 10 or 15 minutes out of every hour we marched with our gas masks on. The first day I was there, they assigned me a barracks. I went in there and there were a couple of guys in there - I don't know why they were in there - It was a 2 floor wooden barracks with asbestos siding... a pretty nice barracks - some of the best I was in. There was a guy there from Tennessee and one from some where else. Only once the Civil War came up and before you know it, they were really going at it - a pretty good fight. We finally got them separated, but that was the first I saw of that. The Californians, we were in with, had 3 men who were body builders. They'd run around without their shirts or with t shirts on. They thought they were pretty strong. One day, they decided they were going to humiliate us Texans. We happened to be right close to the stair wells on the 2nd floor. One of the guys, West, and the other I don't remember his name. West came from West Texas. He was a pretty tough old boy. These Californians crowded around us and the 3 ring leaders said, We're going to throw you Texans down the stairs. I said, Uh, oh. Lord, here it comes. We 3 got ready, but before a move could be made, Old West grabbed one of these body builders and threw him down the stairs. He grabbed the 2nd one and threw him down the stairs. The 3rd one backed off and everyone else backed off. West stood at the top of the stairs and motioned the ones at the bottom of the stairs to come on. Come on up here and throw me down. They never came up. We had a lot of respect from then on. From there, part of the pilot training was 5 months of college and they sent a bus load of us. We got on that bus and started out. Before we went there, they had a Sergeant that had come back from the South Pacific and he had malaria we found out later. What he had done was he had applied for pilot training and he was in the regular army. They had moved him into the Air Force portion. He had already finished his tour in the South Pacific. I'm not sure where it was, but it must have been pretty heavy because his body was really used up. He was a sick man.

Mr. Misenhimer

Let me back up. When you were there at Wichita Falls, what was the food like?

Mr. Hilliard

I always liked the food pretty good. They had powdered eggs for breakfast ... a lot of times with potatoes mixed in with them. Boiled potatoes cut up and mixed in. Sometimes the eggs had a little green look to them, because they had been dehydrated, but they didn't do it as good as they do now. Most of the food was good. The thing I

couldn't stand was lamb chops. The Australians - as part of their lend/lease program for equipment - sent a lot of lamb. I could walk in the barracks and smell that lamb. It turned my stomach. I couldn't go it. People from up north that were used to lamb, it didn't bother them. What they do is say, just get the lamb chop and I'll take it. I'd double up on the potatoes if I could. They had cereal and milk also. Sometimes they had what we called doodoo on a shingle. It was hash and really, I liked it. It was one of the better meals you could get up there. It was really good food. I had no complaint. There was plenty of it. Didn't have much milk at that base. The base I went to in Wisconsin had plenty of milk, then because we had plenty of milk and no one else in the country had much milk, they cut us back.

Mr. Misenhimer

There at Wichita Falls, did you have any kind of weapons training?

Mr. Hilliard

Yeah. We shot a pistol and we shot a rifle and we shot submachine guns. I qualified for those things. I had the marksmanship medals. Not a whole lot.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long were you there?

Mr. Hilliard

Seems like about a month or 6 weeks. Not real long.

Mr. Misenhimer

You went from there to where?

Mr. Hilliard

I went from there to Henderson State College at Arkadelphia, Arkansas. When we got our orders to go there, this guy that had malaria, they gave him the travel orders, because he was a sergeant at the time. He opened it up when we got to the bus, ready to leave, and said, we're going to Arkadelphia, Arkansas. We said, you must be mistaken. Must be Philadelphia. There's no Arkadelphia. So we went to Arkadelphia, Arkansas and we drove up to Oachjta Baptist College. Everyone got off except 3 of us. I was a Baptist and was really sort of wishing I could go there, but they took us about ½ a mile to Henderson State Teachers College where we went to school. They were really

good. We had a nice rooming area. They had a building with a bath between every 2 rooms. It was really a wonderful situation. There was a foot ball field right close where we did our P.E. training every day. They had all the classes there. So, we went to class and took college courses there, all of which applied toward my college degree. They also gave us 10 hours of flying in Cubs. They had the Air Base out on the Oachita River. It was while I was there that I had my 1st crash. And only crash really. You had to make 2 turns on take off when you were still in the traffic pattern, about 400 feet high. I looked ahead and we heard a hammering noise. I didn't know what happened, but the instructor did. He grabbed the stick from me and dropped the nose to put it in glide position. He said, Hold on kid. I didn't understand him and I said, what did you say. He said, Hold on kid. He took and did what the rules say you never do. He tried to get back to the base. All we had ahead of us was big pine trees as far as I could see, except on the left was the Oachita River and it was partly frozen. It had ice in it. Later on, the instructor said, if we had gone straight a head. He got out of that plane and indicated with motions - knocking splinters of the plane off of his shoulders. And, it would have been death as sure as the world. He flipped it over and dived back toward the ground, trying to get back to base. I want you to know, the ground came up fast. I can still see that green ground coming and I just thought, this is it. He tried to pull it out. Because we were going with the wind, it didn't respond as fast. At the end of the runway, they had cut trees for a good ways in the take off area. It was a 20 foot road that they used out there for logging. We hit that road and rubbed a wheel pretty well. We bounced up, and I can still see it. He had the stick back in his stomach. Course it was my stomach too. I was looking ahead and I could see that plane nose - it would go 60 degrees to the left and then waller back 60 degrees to the right. I wouldn't have thought it could fly, but there was a rise right there with an updraft, and it was just floating up on that rise. I kept looking out and seeing all these stumps we were going over, thinking any minute a stump was going to hit our bottom and come in that plane. He just held it. He had his head down. He was praying. I know he was praying. I looked and the fence of the airport went by. It was about 600 feet from the 1st spot that we hit the 2nd time. We hit inside the airport in snow - rough snow. We hit side ways and just skidded. We never turned over. We never dipped a wing. And then it stopped. He still had his head down. I was so nervous I could hardly sit there. Finally, I said, Sir. Don't you think we ought to get out? He said, I guess we better. He dropped the side door. There's a bottom part and a top part that lifts. I got out, he didn't

ever get close to catching me, and I went for the ready room. I didn't see him for a long time. As I was walking over there, there was one of the instructors standing out there like he was frozen - just looking at what happened to us. I finally walked up to him and I realized my parachute was bumping the back of my legs. Until then, I'd never thought about that parachute. I never thought about jumping at all. I couldn't have, of course. We were too low. As I walked by this man, he said, Did you pray in short hand? I said, no, I didn't. I never thought about that. I thought I was going to die. I went on into the ready room and sat down and got myself a coke. I could hardly drink that coke. That bottle bumped my teeth. I was really shaking. Everyone was there and trying to ask what had happened. The instructor finally came and they took him out to make an investigation report. Then, he finally came back and said, Get your parachute and let's go. I said, where're we going. He said, we're going to fly. I noticed in my log book after I got my log book from the Air Force years later. It said we had this crash. He said, the student is a little nervous on the 2nd flight. Which was probably an understatement. The instructions say, don't ever turn back on the field. Many have tried and few have succeeded, but we succeeded. We didn't do it without hurting the air plane. But, they fixed it and it was used some more. College there was really good. We had good instructors. I made good grades. We didn't have much off time. There weren't many students at all in that college - all of them were girls which made it pretty nice, but I never did find any of them that I really liked.

Mr. Misenhimer

What kind of courses did you have there?

Mr. Hilliard

We had math courses and regular college courses, some science courses and physics.

Mr. Misenhimer

What rank did you have then?

Mr. Hilliard

I was an aviation student. You start out as a private. When you went into the training, you became an aviation student. Then, when you were finally reclassified in San Antonio, you were sure enough in the program, they made you an aviation cadet.

Mr. Misenhimer

As an aviation student, were you a Corporal or a private of what?

Mr. Hilliard

Aviation cadet was just below warrant officer.

Mr. Misenhimer

Still enlisted though?

Mr. Hilliard

No, it was considered an officer.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long were you at this college?

Mr. Hilliard

5 months.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you go from there?

Mr. Hilliard

We went from there to what they called SAC. It's there on the south side of San Antonio next to Brooks. This was for classification. They took you in there. They had a backlog of kids coming from colleges everywhere in this program. This is where you found out if you really were going to be trained for pilot or navigator or bombardier. So, they put you there on the south side of the road, Military Drive, and on the other side of the road is where they started the aviation cadet training. But, you were also classified then. You stayed there until your name came up to go over there. They ran you through tests - physical tests and psychological tests and mechanical tests and all kinds of intelligence tests. I never had any problem with the tests. I was always able to do things, since I was mechanically inclined. They also, in the physical, began to do something they hadn't done before. They had this box about 30 feet from you. They had 2 black pegs and you had to line them up until they were exactly together. I usually set the record in that. I got it to 2 millimeters. That was very unusual. I have great depth perception. Some people really had trouble. It was really tough training. They really shook you down.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long did that last?

Mr. Hilliard

I was over there a long time, because there was no room in the aviation cadet training. I was over there probably a month or better. While we were there, we didn't have anything to do, except go through these tests. So, they occupied our time with physical training. Air Force believed in running. They didn't believe in fighting. They didn't believe in hardly any other exercise. We had a captain, who was in charge of us, for P.E. We'd get up about 4:30 and eat about 6, get our barracks straight and about 7 this guy would get us out in our shorts and we'd start running. We'd run up to noon almost. We'd run and run and he'd run with us. Then, we'd run by the head quarters so they could see what he was doing. We always said he was bucking for major. He made it before we left. He was real eager and worked us hard. My knees bothered me, because we ran on that pavement for many, many miles. At the end of it, we had a big obstacle course out there. The last thing he did, after all that running, was to take you out there and you'd run that obstacle course. The last thing out there was about a 40 foot wall with ropes on it. You had to climb that. There was nothing easy about it, but we were in pretty good shape. Occasionally, they would take us out where there was a bluff and they'd run us up and down that hill. From the time I went in I hadn't been home or seen my parents. I didn't see my parents for 13 months.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you get passes to go downtown in San Antonio?

Mr. Hilliard

Not as an aviation student. I did as an aviation cadet. So, when finally our time came to go - they posted it out on a bulletin board what you got. I found out I made pilot training, which is what I wanted. They classified you and you didn't have any choice. They classified you as pilot, navigator or bombardier. The day came and they marched us across. They put us in a barracks. We went to school 9 days before we had a day off. Every 9th day, we had a day off. We studied such things as math, weather - identifying the clouds- morse code, engines - how to adjust the mixture on engines- all practical things. They taught us navigation. It was a really intense, concentrated school. Lot of people didn't make it. I was thankful to be able to make it. One thing I remember there. They had inspections. They were very strong on inspections because you were a cadet there and they made

that a real test. They would inspect and if your bed wasn't fixed so when they flipped a quarter on it and it didn't bounce high enough, they'd get you. Every piece of your equipment had to be in a certain spot. Not about neatness. It just had to be in that absolute spot. I did go to San Antonio on that 9th day, once or twice. We were there 10 weeks. We'd clean those barracks up. Those were some of the strongest inspections I've ever seen. We'd wash the floors with soap. Clothes had to be perfect. In the morning we were in school from 9 till noon. Then, in the afternoon, we did physical stuff. One of those days I got off, we went into San Antonio. We came back in the morning about 1 or 2. I had just gotten in bed and a sergeant shook my shoulder and said, you're on KP. Some of the people didn't show up so you're on emergency KP. I said, this is my day off. He said, it doesn't make any difference. 3 or 4 of us got our part ready for inspection. We put our stuff neat, but not in the exact place it was supposed to be. We thought, the army will understand. We got back and we looked and we had a bunch of demerits. They gave you demerits and after you got so many, you had to walk a tour on that 9th day off. We thought they treated us kind of bad. We 3 wrote a military letter of explanation that we thought would help and we all signed it. I got 3 more tours for writing that letter. The reason we got those tours was because the rules required that we write individual letters. I hardly saw San Antonio after that. They didn't make me walk tours. They gave me a little job here and there. I finished that and they sent me to Ballinger, Texas. That was a wonderful place to be. I have some kin folks out there and they'd take me out to eat on the weekends. I was there about 9 or 10 weeks. We got there and it was a civilian airport. We had civilian inspectors for the primary flight training. The planes we flew there were Fairchild PT 19's. They were constructed out of ply wood. It was a two person open cockpit with a head protector between the two seats, incase you turned over. It had an in line engine. That little old engine was a good engine. Well powered. It had flaps. It was a wonderful airplane to fly.

Mr. Misenhimer

Low wing?

Mr. Hilliard

Yes. It was faster than almost any other. It could out run a Steerman Bi-plane. It probably wouldn't acrobat quite as good, but I couldn't really tell the difference. You had to watch it, because you were responsible for the plane. So, before you ever flew, you had to go out and check it all around. You had to look under the very bottom where

the wings come together and in the center of the fuselage. You had to look to see if the last guy to fly it had dropped it too hard and cracked that ply wood. If you landed hard, you could do that. We flew there. It was like a country club. That was the first time I had any experience since we were cadets that we got paid and we had to pay our own room and board. On pay day, they'd give you all this money and you'd go to the next desk and pay the Harmon Airfield for the room and board we used there. They had 3 military test pilots there to test us. I was lucky enough to be flying. My instructor was the civilian supervisor of 7 or 8 other instructors. He flew with me until I soloed. Once I soloed, he turned me over to another pilot. He and I got along really well. The other instructor and I got along real well and we flew. We did acrobatics. We just flew. After we soloed, we'd just go check the plane out and do what ever the instructor told us to... practice on spins or loops or slow rolls or snap rolls.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you do any cross country flights?

Mr. Hilliard

No. Not out there. They'd send us to other auxiliary fields, but that was all.

Mr. Misenhimer

How many hours of flight time did you get?

Mr. Hilliard

I don't remember, but quite a few. While we were there we had some strange things happen. We had one of the young man in the upper class (we had 2 classes there) and I was in the lower class. There was a young man that flew over a town. Don't remember the name, but it was on the Concho River. This young man decided to fly that PT 19 under the bridge there. I've been there since then and seen that bridge and it was a pretty good challenge for that young man. He flew and got under it, but he didn't notice that there were telephone lines across on the other side. So, he came up into those lines and one of those wires cut the wing pretty good, and broke a piece off of his propellor and he had about 150 feet of wire hanging on it. He had a vibrating machine, but he flew it 7 miles back and landed. One of our class members was flying and the crankshaft on the engine came off and came through the block of that engine. It started smoking a lot. He told me, he saw that smoke and thought he was on

fire. He undid his seat belt and stood up in the seat. He didn't see any flames, so he thought it might be safe to stay with the airplane, so he did. He was close to 7 miles away. He just put it in a glide and came and fell right into the traffic pattern and landed right there...right where he ought to be, but he had a dead engine and couldn't get off the field. He was a problem to the other planes coming in. They couldn't understand why he didn't move. They finally went out there and got him.

Mr. Misenhimer

What happened to the fellow who went under the bridge?

Mr. Hilliard

They court martialled him. They made him pay the damage on the air plane, but they didn't bust him out. He was still paying for it when he left there.

Mr. Misenhimer

How about the telephone wire?

Mr. Hilliard

That might have been added into the cost.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your pay at that time?

Mr. Hilliard

I can't remember. An Aviation Cadet was rated between a Master Sergeant and a Warrant Officer. It was pretty good pay for that time. Seems like it was \$90, but I'm not sure. I had a lot of good experiences there. I had one plane, when I'd do a slow roll the seat belt would slip. The 1st time I did it, it scared me pretty good. I could feel that seat belt going. I went on over and tightened it back up and thought I'd try it again. I finally got to know that seat belt so well, it didn't bother me. I figured I was so high up, if something happened, my parachute would take care of me. Another time I got an airplane that would run hot. The only one I ever saw. When I got up there and noticed it was in the red area, I cut the throttle and glided it into the wind and the temperature would come down. Then, I'd hit the throttle and get my altitude up again to do what I was supposed to do, the temperature would come up again. So, I did a whole day of that, but I didn't come in because of it until I was ready to come in. We

didn't have any plane failures at all out there. Half way through there, they would give you a civilian supervisor who would give you a test. I flew with him. In the military, you had to fly with a test pilot and then with the civilian instructor. I didn't have any problem. One interesting thing, when I was landing with the Major, army test pilot, one of the tires went flat. I knew it. I could see it from the back. He couldn't see it, but he suspected something. He got up and leaned down and never said a word. But, we couldn't move. We had to wait for some one to come get us. I was so thankful to God that, even with that flat tire, I was able to keep the plane going just as straight.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were these wheels retractable?

Mr. Hilliard

No, they were fixed.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long were you there?

Mr. Hilliard

About 9 or 10 weeks.

Mr. Misenhimer

Do you know when you left there?

Mr. Hilliard

'44. I was in the class 44K. Every class had a number. I went from there to San Angelo to fly Vultee BT13's. The BT 13 looked a lot like the AT6, but it didn't have retractable wheels. It was a bigger plane, but it was under powered. It had a big radial engine on it. The 1st time we were there, they weren't ready for us at Goodfellow Field. So they gave us blankets and put us out right on the end of the runway. They were having night flying all night thereno way you could sleep. They'd come right by us, taxiing to their pads. I can still hear those old planes - pahoo pahooohoo.. Just as irregular as they could be. They really sounded rough. We got there and they were a little more up town. They had flight suits instead of fatigues. I got a little instructor who was a real small man and I think that caused some problems. That's where I busted out there. We still had a lot of class

instruction and flights. There you did cross country and night flying, but I never got to that. First thing they did, they got us in there and had an introduction to the airplane. They said, you may have heard a lot of bad things about this airplane, but it's not true. It's a wonderful airplane. The students called the airplane the Vultee Vulture. This air plane was under powered. They were telling about 3 of them taking off in a row and each one going into the ground, just after they got off. The air plane made a lot of noise. I had a hard time hearing the radio in it. It had a closed canopy over it, and when you did a stall, it rattles. They said, it has a tendency not to come out of spins. Let me tell you. I couldn't get it out of a spin. I got it into a spin and I could not get it out. I did everything just like they tell you, but I could not get it out. Just like the word of mouth is on the plane. The instructor said, let me have it. He tried and he couldn't get it out. He tried again and still couldn't get it out and we went and we went and we went. Finally, I think he put his foot on the stick and kicked it to the fire wall. It was enough to change the air on the elevator and then it came out. He told me if it does that again, you need to throw that stick plumb up against that fire wall. I didn't enjoy flying the air plane. Finally, one day I went out there and this little fellow who was my instructor, he wanted to be a fighter pilot. He used most of my time to do flying himself. I think we just had a personality conflict. I was just a kid. I went out there one day to fly with him and I got on the flight line and another guy showed up. He said, I'm going to fly with you today. I said, okay. This guy got in and he was a test pilot and he was testing me to wash me out. My instructor had not said one word. I flew that test and he said you are too good a pilot. I'm going to give you some more hours. So he did. I sort of lost my interest about then. Oh, we flew and all that. They wanted to eliminate me and I had to go before a board. I went before the board and the guy was reading off my record. He said, man, you've got such an excellent record. Your scholastics are good and everything we read about you is good here. Are you sure you want us to give you some more time? That would have moved me into the next class down. I said, No. I don't think so. They said, do you think you've had a fair chance? I said, yeah. I've had a fair chance. Actually I felt like - God wanted me out of there. I felt like I had, had my flying and done everything I wanted to do. Then, they shipped me int September of '44 to Madison, Wisconsin to an air base up there. When I busted out, they gave me a bunch of tests to see where they were going to send me. There were 3 of us there who had busted out and we all wanted radio operator, 'cause radio operators get to fly. We took the ability tests and they said, you've got it for sure and

I've got to pick one guy for another place. I thought I'd get to go for sure. And, lo and behold, I got a call to see this flight surgeon. I went down there and he said, get on these scales. He was going to measure my height. He said, can't you shrink and get a little lower. I tried and I couldn't do it. He said, you know the have a 6 foot limit and there's no way I could get you to 6 foot. He stopped me there. The only thing left for me was radio mechanic. So they sent me to Truax Field up there at Madison, Wisconsin. I went up there by myself and they had lost my records. After they got me up there, they gave me a furlough. So, 13 months after I went in, I got to go home.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did you travel from Texas to Wisconsin?

Mr. Hilliard

Oh, train. And, I had a Pullman. It was pretty good.

Mr. Misenhimer

What rank did you have then?

Mr. Hilliard

Private. I got up there and they lost my records and put me on fire watch. These barracks were supposed to have been built in Florida and they had 3 pot bellied coal stoves. Double lock doors. You know, air doors. Front and back. They had to have somebody walking around at night because of fire. They had 1 bathroom for every barracks. They never did have hot water. But, it didn't make any difference, because it was 20 below zero pretty quick. We'd take our shower in tap water without any heat, and our bodies would steam, just because it was so cold in the room. The worst morale I ever saw was at that base. People mixed up from everywhere, coming back there. I got the job of walking around at night. What I wanted to do is have the barracks warm when these guys came in, so I'd go in and fire these coal stoves. I didn't know much about it. I stuck that poker down there and it got hung in the metal grate and I could not get it out. That fire really began to burn. That old stove turned red to white, and finally, I had to get some water to pour in it. When I did, ashes went everywhere in that barracks. I graduated from there in the highest part of my class. Then I went down to Rantoul, Illinois to electronics training. I was radio and then electronics. I was impressed there, because it was a helicopter field. There weren't that many

helicopters in the world and it was real interesting, watching them hovering right above the runway.

Mr. Misenhimer

Let's back up. When you were in Wisconsin, you got a leave to go home. How long was that leave?

Mr. Hilliard

Oh, about 2 weeks. I traveled by train and they paid for it. At Rantoul, Illinois I took electronics, pretty heavy, serious stuff. They were good courses - well taught. It always gave me interest in electrical engineering. Then they shipped me to Boca Raton, Florida. The world's biggest bomber base. It was built in 3 parts and camouflaged. If you got drunk, you couldn't find your way home. They had south section, inner section, and north section. Random scattering of the barracks.

Mr. Misenhimer

You were now in radio repair?

Mr. Hilliard

No, not really. They put me in radio repair and I qualified but, they moved me to electronics. I qualified there and then they moved me to radar. Radar was brand new. They had stuff there like I've never seen. I never did get to work with it. I had just finished my class when the war ended. It was interesting there. I got to guard some of the top secret radar equipment they had there. They were testing it and some was on airplanes. I was isolated where they had these high tech secret stuff on 3 airplanes. I had to guard them. My special orders were to let no one on those planes. Nobody. I was under the airplane out there in the shadows and here comes a tractor, pulling a B 17. I knew when he came up there that he was going to come up here where it was prohibited. And, sure enough, here he came. He came right on down and got closer and closer and closer. There was a guy up in the cockpit - sort of standing up in it, and the guy in the tractor came right on in. I was sitting there with my little carbine. I got up and I challenged him, but the guy on the tractor didn't hear me. I hollered Halt. And then louder Halt. And again louder Halt. I was getting ready to shoot someone off that tractor. The guy up in the plane heard me and he begin to hit the aluminum on the side of that plane yelling - Stop. Stop. Stop. And the guy on the tractor stopped. He said, what's the problem? I said, you aren't allowed here. Just go back the way you came. He said, Are you

playing soldier. I said, you'll find out. Go on back. I'll drop you off that tractor before you know it, and he left. Also there, one of the places we guarded was the ammunition dump. They had lots of bombs all of them in dirt. Little sections between them so they wouldn't blow up each other. They had lights all around them. All around the bomb section was swamp. There was all kind of noise all night. They had some subversive people, the Germans, come in off submarines on the coast there. I never did feel good out there. The worst thing, I could receive calls on the one phone that had, but I couldn't call out. The nearest man to me was at the gasoline dump and he was about ½ a mile from me and at least another mile to the base. We were really stuck out in that swamp.

Mr. Misenhimer

Just one guard?

Mr. Hilliard

Just one. By myself. In the light with everything out around me in the dark. This was not a very good place to guard anything.

Mr. Misenhimer

This was before the war was over?

Mr. Hilliard

Oh, yeah. I never did guard the gasoline dump. We had one gate they call the 3 ½ that was on the highway. It had a bunch of black folks in that area and they didn't ever go through the regular gates. They went through this one so much that they put this gate in. It was a foot gate. I had to guard that one time and they had a bunch of civit cats around it. So you and the civit cats just looked at each other. They had one guy I guarded in the hospital there. The young man was supposed to have been subordinate while he was in the hospital to a nurse. He was going to get married. Then he began to, I think, fake mental problems. I guarded him This guy broke up his tray and everything on it and shoved it through the bottom of the door. The orderly went in there and he got over in the corner and there was a scuffle and a fuss. Finally, the orderly won, I think. This guy would think he was flying over Tokyo. "Pilot to navigator. Pilot to navigator." All the time. They came and told me, he's escaped. If he comes by here stop him. He finally got into Miami and called them and told them where he was. They brought him back. How he escaped is he went in the big room and some doctor had left his uniform in there. He got in the

uniform and walked out. That was supposed to be the world's biggest bomber base. They had B 17's and 24's everywhere. I was there when those 6 naval planes went down off Fort Lauderdale in the Bermuda Triangle. We sent planes up to look for them. It was in '45 just after the war was over. While I was there, that's where I met Jean on a street corner.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where were you when the war in Germany got over?

Mr. Hilliard

I was there at Boca Raton. They celebrated, but not so much as you think.

Mr. Misenhimer

How about when Japan surrendered?

Mr. Hilliard

Not so much either. It was sort of quiet. One reason, we were so spread out that there wasn't much contact from one end to the other.

Mr. Misenhimer

How about when Roosevelt died?

Mr. Hilliard

I remember when it happened, but nothing special.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you finally get out?

Mr. Hilliard

March of '46. My highest rank was Corporal.

Mr. Misenhimer

Do you remember any particular friends?

Mr. Hilliard

Yeah. Not too many when I was an Aviation Cadet, because everything was fluid. You were moving too much. I remember 2 roommates I had there at the college. One of them for sure was killed. During most of my radio

training, I was with guy named Wally Kosenski from Buffalo, New York. When I got out of there, I met another guy who was from Buffalo, also. Skip Colby. We just became friends and we've kept up. When the war ended I was at Boca Raton and they didn't know what to do. They began to have a point system for discharges. They didn't know what to do with me so they assigned me to the motor pool. I had been a welder, so they put me to welding. That was better than what I was doing before that, because I had been cutting grass with a shovel. I worked in that body shop and I got to weld some rings on some bombs, that were without powder in them, to send them back some place. I was welding under a gas tank and dropped my torch and burned myself, but I didn't go to sick bay.

I was discharged in San Antonio at Ft. Sam Houston where I was inducted.

Transcribed by:
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