

Ray Brashear Oral History Interview

BRUCE PETTY: Today is Thursday, the 6th of February, 1998.

I'm in Sunnyvale, California. I'm interviewing Ray Brashear, former B-29 pilot, flying into Saipan. The interviewer is Bruce Petty. Sir, if you could tell me when you were born, and where you were born?

RAY BRASHEAR: Well, I was born in Long Beach, California on November 4th, 1919, which makes me 78 years old. I lived at 826 [Seretis?] with my parents, of course. I grew up there and built model airplanes, and I joined the first CPT program for College Pilot Training.

BP: What does CPT mean?

RB: College Pilot Training. (laughter)

RB: Unfortunately, they took the first class of CPT pilots and took a ride into the Army Air Corps. So for good or bad, I went into Randolph Field and Basic Flying without going through the Army primary. There were three, four of us in one room, and the other three kids were washed out. I was the last one in the room. I had to do all the housework, cleaning, polishing hardware and so forth. From Randolph -

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BP: Now, are you saying this is while you were in college?

RB: The College Pilot Training was while I was in junior college.

BP: Okay, and where were you going to junior college?

RB: Long Beach Junior College out in Lakewood Village. Later, Douglas, my brother, [went there?]. From Randolph, I went fortunately to Kelly Field, and graduated there as a (inaudible) Second Lieutenant.

BP: (inaudible), now, where's Randolph Field?

RB: Randolph and Kelly are both at San Antonio.

BP: San Antonio, that's --

RB: Texas. That was the -- what do you call it -- West Point of the air, Randolph Field. They had a lot of publicity, the looks of the place.

BP: What year was this?

RB: Nineteen forty and forty-one.

BP: Oh, so before Pearl Harbor, then.

RB: Oh, yeah. My first assignment was out here at Moffett Field, when the Air Corps had it. I was transferred there as a Second Lieutenant flight instructor. This was a beautiful country in those days, nothing but apricots and cherries and so forth; there was no industry at all. Sunday, December 1st, 1941, I was transferred to Merced Army Flying Field as an instructor. Of course, the

following Sunday, the war started, December 7th. And I had just bought quite a few clothes in Palo Alto to wear over there, and of course when the war started, we could wear nothing but uniforms.

BP: Civilian clothes, you had bought?

RB: Civilian clothes, yeah.

BP: What kind of planes were you flying in those days?

RB: Those BT-13s, basic trainers, Vultee Vibrators. I was there three years; went from flight instructor to squadron commander to director of flying, and finally director of training for the whole base. About that time, the B29 program had started, and they were looking for experienced pilots. So they looked at the training command and found that most of the instructors were well-qualified. So I ended up in the B-29 program. It was running quite late. First I went to Sebring, Florida, and checked out B-17s.

BP: Now what year was this? Do you know what month?

RB: Forty-three. The 15th (inaudible) was still in Salina, Kansas, plus three other bases. Trying to check out in B-29s and get the airplanes combat-ready. So they were actually late leaving for India. So we sat in Clovis, New Mexico about three months before we could go to Salina. When we finally got to Salina -- I did, there's three other

bases, and I can't think of them offhand. We had very little training in B-29s. It was mostly B-17s, because there actually weren't any B-29s ready.

BP: Hmm. I'm going to stop this --

(break in audio)

BP: Looking good. I hate to get this and find out --

RB: Yeah.

BP: Go ahead.

RB: Is it going?

BP: Yeah. You didn't have B-29s yet?

RB: Well, they didn't have many 29s available. They had all kinds of engine problems. They would overheat, catch fire and so forth. They were modifying them, both at the factory and the bases. Smoky Hill was the name for Salina Air Base.

BP: Why did they call it Smoky Hill?

RB: That was the name of it.

BP: It's not because of the B-29s.

RB: No, nothing to do with that. Finally, in November -- well, I got -- early November, we got ready to go out to Saipan.

We weren't sure where we were going at first. The last minute, we found out we were going to Saipan.

BP: That's November, '44?

RB: Forty-four. After several weather delays, we did get off. It was at John Rodgers Field in Honolulu, spent a couple days there, because of weather. We went to Kwajalein, spent the night there. We finally found out we were in a war zone, because part of the magazines and newspapers and so forth were stripped out of the airplane. The ground crews that were there on Kwajalein, well, the next day we went on to Saipan.

BP: Now, you're saying the fact that the ground crew stripped your airplane of newspapers?

RB: Yeah. They didn't take any publications pertaining to the airplanes, but I guess it was newspapers, magazines were hard to get there. Of course my crew left everything in the airplane overnight.

BP: And they came in and too it? They were anxious for news? Is that --

RB: Yeah, that's exactly right.

RB: Well, we got to Saipan -- I think right on 10th of November. After a couple of days' briefing and so forth, we were getting ready for an air raid to Tokyo.

BP: After just a couple of days?

RB: Yeah.

BP: Now, were you the first B-29s to arrive there? Or people had arrived there --

RB: There was several that arrived before we did.

BP: How soon before, do you think?

RB: Let's see, Dauntless Dotty was the first one over there. I don't recall, probably late October.

BP: Late October?

RB: Mm-hmm.

BP: You were right then --

RB: Yeah, we were early. There were several aborted attempts to fly the first mission because of the weather. They had a weather airplane up over Tokyo, and it reported back that the weather was terrible. So after about three briefings, we finally got off on the 24th of November on our first raid, which was a total disaster. We didn't know what the jet stream was, it was overcast. Airplanes got scattered all over Japan. Of course, we came back to Saipan individually, except our group, the Corps 99th Bomb group;

they didn't think they could recover all airplanes at Saipan. So we went over to Guam. That was really a mistake, because the runways weren't ready, it didn't have any maintenance. My navigator almost got lost. But we used the line of position, we flew to that, and we made a left turn, and in about 10 minutes, Guam showed up. That first raid was zilch, it was nothing really -- we didn't do any damage.

BP: Did you even know where your bombs fell?

RB: Not really. We didn't know -- we knew Tokyo -- well, part of the problem was that these high winds, we used Mount Fuji as an IP, an initial point. When we got up altitude and tried to make a right turn to Tokyo, the winds blew us so hard, the bombardier -- the bombsite wouldn't reach out far enough to hit the target. We just literally dropped not visually, not with the bomb side, and just sort of by guess and by God. There were several airplanes, I think, that ditched on that first mission, going back to Saipan or Guam.

BP: You get this (inaudible)?

RB: Yeah. Of course the Japanese had Iwo, we couldn't go in there.

BP: Now were these men picked up by submarine, or what?

RB: Some were, some never were found. They didn't have much of a search and rescue system in those days. The submarines, they were based at different intervals. But the Japanese pretty much controlled that water at the time.

BP: Do you know if any of those who ditched were captured?

RB: No, I don't. I don't. Hmm. Well, that was the first mission I flew on. Then I flew almost every other mission for quite a while, until General LeMay started these -- oh, he came over from India, by the way.

BP: General LeMay did?

RB: Pardon?

BP: General LeMay?

RB: Yeah.

BP: Who was in command before he came over? I remember reading it --

RB: Possibly Hansell, General Hansell.

BP: General Hansell.

RB: Yeah. He was an advocate of eye-level bombing. Of course, the weather was so bad in Japan during the winter months, that it was very seldom we could ever see the ground.

BP: Did you get hit by -- I guess Japanese fighters couldn't get to that altitude.

RB: Oh, they were up there. Even on our first raid, there was a Japanese floatplane up there above us. He was a Zero with floats, I think they called him -- I've forgotten the name. After the war, we flew down to (inaudible) -- well, I'd better -- got off the subject.

BP: How about, though, when you used the -- there were Zeros up there, did you lose any B-29s to Zero fighters?

RB: I don't recall that there was -- not too much flak and quite a few fighters, but I honestly don't know how many we lost over the target. Because the B-29s were pretty well scattered, and the fighters had trouble intercepting them. But they were up higher than we were. This float plane sticks in my mind, because he was two or three thousand feet above us.

BP: Were you attacked personally by fighters?

RB: Not on that raid, no. General LeMay finally started these low-level incendiary raids. I flew four out of the five, the first raids. That was really scary, flying through those thermals. In fact, when I flew through one, I had the bomb doors open, of course. Coming back, we flew right -- flew through rain showers and so forth. When we got back to Saipan, we opened the bomb doors and the [leading?] engines were just covered with soot. Many times, you could

smell, literally, burning flesh. It was very distasteful, I guess you'd say. I had the most missions up to that point, so they decided they could send my crew back to Honolulu on a little rest leave. I'd have to look at my logs to know exact dates. But while we were there, they ran out of incendiary bombs in the Marianas, so all the transports that were available were flying incendiary bombs out to the Marianas, and we couldn't go back to Saipan, because we couldn't get any seats aboard the airplane. So we spent a whole month in Honolulu. Well, it wasn't fighting. But when we got back to Saipan, we found that the crews that stayed there had piled up more missions than I had, or my crew. So many of them got off with 30 missions, and rotated back to the States. Then they were getting short of crews, so I had to stay for 35 missions.

BP: Did you bring any of those crews back that had rotated home?

RB: No.

BP: Oh, never did that.

RB: No. Well, we flew a lot of night raids, incendiary and so forth. Small targets at rice-loading ports, and things like that. General LeMay told chief of staff that they were running out of targets. They kept building up more

and more B-29s out there, and could have a thousand-plane raid.

BP: By when did you have a thousand?

RB: I'd say August, September of -- I should have looked up a few details.

BP: That's all right. They'll be back.

RB: Well, I've got everything upstairs. Well, we were to be rotated back to the States. And a couple of days before that, President Truman announced that they had dropped one bomb that did more damage than we had done during the whole war. Of course everybody laughed that, they thought that was impossible. So we got on a (inaudible) seaplane and finally got back to Honolulu. On the way back, they announced that the second bomb had been dropped. So we got to Honolulu. The following day, Japan surrendered. You would have had to have been in Honolulu to see the celebrations. It was unbelievable. You want to keep going?

BP: Yeah. Now, you didn't go back to Saipan then, after that, because you were being rotated home?

RB: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

BP: That's correct. Okay, yeah, but now how about some of these other missions you flew? You say you had been attacked by fighters?

RB: Oh, yeah. I led the entire raid on Kobe on the 5th of June, 1945. I think there were about five hundred airplanes behind me. And Colonel Maurice J. Lee flew with me, because he had to make any command decisions, whether to go to the alternate target or whatever. But my bombardier just dropped them right smack on the [healing?] point.

BP: Your incendiary?

RB: Yeah. The incendiaries. We'd fairly lowered 15 thousand, I think. I made a right turn to get out over some water. I was just about to turn south heading, of course, back to Saipan, and suddenly the airplane pitched up violently. I had the copilot and myself shove the yoke completely forward, in full forward [trim tab?], cut the power back a little bit, and we just staggered along. Of course, the squadron behind me all separated, disappeared. About that time a CF Sea-Gunner on top of the airplane reported that the right leading edge on the horizontal stabilizer was blown wide open. And Colonel Lee went back to the Astrodome and looked back there. Of course, we were just

staggering in the air. He came back and said, "Well, Captain, I think it'll stay on," which wasn't very encouraging. And about that time, the airplane shook violently, and went nose down. We got everything (inaudible) back up. The yoke was back to normal. But the airplane was totally unstable. When it started down it would go down violently, when it started up it would go upright violently. It reminded of trying to balance a broom in the palm of your hand. What happened, the horizontal stabilizer and elevator ripped completely off, so we had the right stabilizer and elevator. I teeter-tottered all the way back to Saipan; that was a slow flight, about seven and a half, eight hours.

BP: Now, this was the result of an attack by a Japanese --

RB: Well, yeah, that was the whole point. Our gunners, the left and right gunners, reported there was a twin engine fighter several thousand feet below us. Normally, when they had airplanes [pacing?], they'd be off to one side and directing anti-aircraft fire. But this guy was two or three thousand feet below us. We thought it was rather stupid for him to be directly below us, in the line of anti-aircraft fire. But we found out later that it was a twin engine [mick?], and it was a pilot up front. Then way

in the back there was a gunner. What they'd done is, taken the gunner out, put a 220-millimeter cannon back there and pointed it almost straight up. The pilot had some sort of a ring site over his canopy, and he flew directly underneath the formation, kept shooting his cannons at us. Luckily, or unluckily, one had hit us. Many years after the war, I talked to Saburō Sakai when he was here. And he said, yeah, they call them Gekkos, these airplanes with the two cannons. He said, oh, they were quite successful. I guess I was one of these successes. He didn't fly them, but he was aware of them. We got back to Saipan mid-afternoon or late in the day, I guess. The airplane was so stable. Well, my copilot wanted to fly it for a while. I told him that I'd finally got in sync with the instability of the airplane, so I flew it all the way back. We'd got in the traffic pattern, I wasn't sure what would happen when the gear came down, or the flaps. So I flew a big, wide pattern. When I turned around from final approach, some fellow cut in front of me. He landed, and I landed pretty close behind him. And the tower kept yelling, "Expedite, expedite, which he did, and nothing happened. But when I got back to the hard [stand?], boom. After landing I kept the yoke all the way back. When the nose

wheel came down, I pushed the yoke forward, and it couldn't go. Come to find out, the tail, when I pulled the yoke all the way back, there was a piece of aluminum on the fairing got under the elevator, the little stub, and locked the thing in full-up position, which meant I would have had to have done loops all the way home.

BP: Good thing you didn't do it on the way home.

RB: Yeah. Well, everybody was out to meet our airplane, because the Colonel, the group commander, was aboard.

BP: Now, was that the only time that you were attacked by fighters?

RB: No, we got certain bullet holes in the airplane, but nothing catastrophic. They didn't really have any good night fighters to begin with. But later on, they had a system when the smoke column was coming up from the city. The searchlights would play on the upwind side of that. And when an airplane popped out of there, it would lock on to the B-29, and the fighters would move in on them. We had a lot of fighter attacks. Some of them were hit head on, which was pretty scary.

BP: Were your gunners very good at knocking --

RB: (laughs) We didn't really get many fighters who would shoot any down. One, I remember, I was leading whatever the

squadron was, and a fighter across, directly in front of us, he was 90 degrees to our path and he was going from right to left. I don't know what he was thinking of, but when he got directly in front of us, my CFC gunner, the one on top, took both turrets, both upper turrets and took a shot at this. I think it was a Jack. And the airplane flew straight ahead for a moment, and then suddenly just pitched straight over, like a model airplane hitting a brick wall. We figured that Lyle had hit the pilot, and he slumped forward and he shoved the stick pretty hard, and down he went. A few years ago, I started corresponding with a Japanese fellow in Southern California. He's a semi-historian. Through his research, he found out the name of this pilot that Lyle knocked down, [Watanabe?], or something like that.

BP: Watanabe. He was killed?

RB: Well, the airplane went straight down, you know. I assume that --

BP: Watanabe.

RB: Yeah, I've got a lot of records up there, if you ever want to go through them. I think each of my left and right gunners got a kill, I think the left gunner got a probable. It's pretty hard to tell. Looking at other airplanes and

shooting at one, you can't take 10 or 15 seconds to see what happened, the one you hit. You might die out of your way, or actually going down.

BP: Were there any B-29s around you, being hit pretty bad and going down?

RB: Yeah. There sure were. I didn't see them, because I was sitting in front of the airplane. Usually the squadron was behind me, so I didn't get to see them.

BP: You were a lead pilot, right?

RB: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

F1: (inaudible) sent this picture --

RB: Better shut this off.

(break in audio)

BP: I'm concerned, too, about being able to get back over the hill before the winds get too bad. Anyway, okay, so but you didn't actually see any, because all the B29s were behind you. You didn't see any that went down, then?

RB: Well, at the beginning I wasn't the lead crew, but I did see one of them go down.

BP: Mm-hmm?

RB: In fact, the anti-aircraft shell blew up right in the cockpit of the thing. A good friend of mine, Tom Wilkinson, was in the airplane. It blew the whole nose

off, right, even with the engines. Of course it went in a flat spin, disappeared.

BP: Nobody got out?

RB: No. It was spinning that bad, you couldn't move inside the airplane. Of course, Tom, and copilot and bombardier, they were blown all to bits. Most of the planes I saw go down were from photographs later on. But you were on mostly about Saipan, I assume?

BP: Well, I'm interested in all the Marianas. You flew out of Saipan. I have a set of questions that I could ask you --

RB: Sure. Mm-hmm.

BP: -- and then that might help you. Did you even know about the existence of Saipan and Marianas before you were given --

RB: No.

BP: Never even heard of it?

RB: Never heard of it.

BP: But you were aware of the battle for Saipan?

RB: Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm.

RB: A lot of that happened just a short time before we went over there. They said there was still ten thousand Japanese on the island; they pushed them up in the hills.

BP: Oh, yeah, there were probably some stragglers. So
December, 1945, Captain Ōba and his men surrendered.

RB: Mm-hmm.

BP: Then according to locals, there were still a couple of
stragglers that weren't captured until the early 1950s.

RB: Well, on Guam, I was in one of the reconnaissance air, and
we had, well, weathered WB-29s. We had emergency rations
and food in the back. A couple of months before I left,
latter part of '51, the food started disappearing. We
thought it was the Filipino houseboys that were going in
there. Come to find out, these two Japanese soldiers were
still on Guam, and had to sneak in at night and steal all
of the food out of the airplanes.

BP: Were they ever caught?

RB: No, they finally surrendered about two years later, after I
come back. I think about '55 or '56.

BP: Yeah. Okay, was there -- were you aware of fighting still
going on the second -- when you arrived?

RB: Yeah, they told us to -- you could grab a jeep anytime and
go back in the hills, but they said don't do that, because
there was sporadic fighting going on. I guess the Army and
Marines had left. The Army would go up there and try and
route these stragglers out.

BP: Now, were these black soldiers, then? Or was this --

RB: The black soldiers were in the Engineering Corps. They'd drive trucks and steam shovels, and things like that. It was -- we had Army troops that would go up there. They told us -- I don't know if it was true or not -- but they said these troops up in the hills were being resupplied by submarines. Whether that's true or not, I don't know.

BP: I kind of doubt that.

RB: Yeah. Well, we was flying.

BP: So were any of the Japanese trying to get down to where you were bivouacked?

RB: No. Huh-uh. They kept them pretty much up in the -- they had a parameter set up that kept them out.

BP: Then the soldiers (inaudible)?

RB: Yeah. Well, I don't know exactly how it was worked, but they kept them up in the -- what's the name of that --

BP: (inaudible)?

RB: Yeah.

BP: Did you have any contact with the local people during the time on --

RB: No, they were in -- you can take prison hands, but they were -- in fact, I've got some pictures of them.

BP: Did you ever see much of the rest of the island, other than the airfield while you were there?

RB: No. On a squadron navigator, a Navy friend of his that was a harbor pilot who -- whatever the harbor was down there -- he was living in a beached landing craft. He invited -- I had his name a moment ago -- but he invited -- him and a couple of his friends to have a meal with them, I guess it was Sunday. And I was so mad. When it was over, he -- his landing craft had a dining room, the Filipino houseboy served food on tablecloths, porcelain, silverware, just immaculate. We'd go back to our mess hall and eat C-rations for two and three months at a time.

BP: Really? C-rations, they even had a mess hall set up for you?

RB: Well, they did later on. But at the beginning, we had our mess kit, the line, they'd put the slop on it. I can't say it was that bad, actually, but it got tiresome after a while.

BP: Any problems with disease while you were there?

RB: Well, that's interesting. They had originally, the airplanes had -- I guess would be the forerunner of food warmers. They had 12 trays in this big aluminum thing, you'd plug it in, you'd get the food hot.

BP: On the airplane?

RB: On the airplane there. We'd get up to Japan, or wherever. But then they found out that crews were getting food poisoning. These things weren't cleaned properly. So they immediately got rid of those things. We had sandwiches and fruit, if there was any available. The worst sandwich I had on any of the missions was a dehydrated sweet potato sandwich. (laughs) They made a paste out of dehydrated sweet potatoes, slapped a little on two slices of bread, and that was it.

BP: That was your lunch?

RB: That was our lunch.

BP: Now how about things like (inaudible)?

RB: No, I don't think they had any of the -- they had several C-47s that was spraying the island with DDT all the time. So it was really healthy. I didn't -- the worst problem was getting coral cuts. That stuff really was infectious. Later on we got air mattresses and went down to the beach. We had to wear our GI shoes, because it was so rocky. Then once we got on our air mattress, we tied our shoes to that and floated around.

BP: Hmm. Now, I know the area between -- I had a lot of mechanical problems.

RB: Oh, yeah.

BP: Did you [miss?] very many planes on takeoff, or coming back landing?

RB: Well, the little training we did in Salina, they had engine problems out the years, they kept cutting the cowl flaps shorter, trying to keep the engines cooler. But on Saipan, they had what we called the [rural?]-ready engines, and they didn't give us really much trouble.

BP: Did you have a problem with the engines overheating inside the --

RB: No, not really. I had a really good flight engineer. He was an MIT graduate. He nursed those engines along beautifully. I think I had three aborts out of 20 -- no, it was 25 successful missions, plus three aborts. Two of those were oil leaks. I don't know, a gasket blew, or something like that. We dumped a lot of oil out on the way up to Japan. The third one, I don't recall exactly what happened. I could look it up in the logbook. We had -- and I don't know of anybody that really had much trouble with the engines over there.

BP: But none of them actually took off and then dropped into the sea, either the (inaudible) that you remember?

RB: Not that I remember.

BP: Do you remember any of them [cracking on the islands?]?
RB: A lot of -- there were a lot of accidents landing. Tires had been shot out during the mission. Or they had two engines out and couldn't control them properly after landing. But there's a lot of pictures of these things off the side of the runway.
BP: Did you ever get over to Camp Susupe at all, where they held the civilians? Did you ever get over there?
RB: No. Huh-uh. We didn't get around much.
BP: Do you know of any U.S. personnel being sent home for disciplinary reasons?
RB: No. I know of a couple of aircraft commanders that said they just couldn't take it, so they put them in some staff position that was beneath their dignity, I guess. But they didn't send any home that I know of.
BP: Now, were you involved in anything besides bombing? Were you involved in the laying of mines in the inland waterways?
RB: No, that was -- I think it was 513th.
BP: (inaudible)?
RB: Shimonoseki Straits, I think it was. No, we were strictly bombing.

BP: Now, you said you had dropped bombs on Rota. When I talked to you on the phone?

RB: Yeah, we had training missions. That was the next island north, wasn't it?

BP: It was an island between Guam and Tinian.

RB: Oh, yeah. No, if I said we bombed Rota, I'm not --

BP: I think Anatahan is the next island north.

RB: Yeah.

BP: And there was a plane that crashed up there too, I don't know if it was during the war or after the war.

RB: Hmm.

BP: Up on Anatahan, near a number of Japanese holdouts up there, so 1951. About 21 of them, finally surrendered in 19--

RB: Hmm. We bombed Pagan on one of our aborts. They had a -- the Japanese had a little fighter strip there. It was dirt.

BP: It's still there.

RB: It is?

BP: It's partially covered with lava, because there was a volcanic eruption there in the '80s.

RB: I'll be darned.

BP: Yeah, that's still there. Matter of fact, Guy Gabaldon used to fly his plane up there.

RB: Oh, yeah?

BP: Take tourists up there.

RB: Yeah. Well, we wiped that one out. Some of the Japanese fighters would raid Saipan, we figured that they were coming from Pagan, or landing back at Pagan.

BP: Do you remember any Japanese air raids against Saipan or (inaudible)?

RB: Oh, yeah. We sure did.

BP: How would you describe any of -- some of those?

RB: Well, I think the first one was two twin engine Betty's came in -- they'd only come in on moonlight nights. I guess they weren't very good at flying at night. But the first thing, I was in my quonset hut, and we had -- the windows were screw, kind of screwed like that, but covered with clear plastic. I heard the air raid siren go off, and I looked at this window, and I saw a lot of red flashes. I couldn't figure out what that was. Come to find out, one of these Betty's had dropped the bombs and flew right over the barracks area. And the tail gunner was just shooting back and forth. I don't think it hit anybody.

BP: Any planes destroyed? Anybody killed on the [these air raids]?

RB: The next air raid, yeah. They hit Cecil Scarbrough's airplane. They were loading bombs, getting ready for a mission, and it blew up. The bomb loaders, I guess you can call them, were in there and the airplane was on fire, and they didn't even know it. The hoists were making a lot of noise. Finally somebody ran into the bomb bay and said, "Your airplane's on fire!" It finally blew up. The concussion bent the rudder over on quite a few airplanes. A piece of rubber tank flew clear across the hard taxiway and landed on my airplane and melted quite a bit of the skin off it. I didn't go on that mission either.

BP: Did the bomb -- or did they get out in time?

RB: Yeah. They warned them, and they took off. There was another raid with, I think it was about 17 Zeros came in just about noon. Every noon they would blow the air raid siren just to make sure all the whistles worked. And the fighters came in just about noon. So when the air raid siren went off, everybody stopped and reset their watches, figuring it was noontime. And they had a field day. They shot up all kinds of airplanes. I think eventually all but

one of them was shot down. We had pretty good air defenses by then.

BP: You had anti-aircraft batteries around (inaudible)?

RB: Yeah, they had the big ones and the quad -- the four .50s, the power turret.

BP: What, four .50 caliber machine guns?

RB: Yeah. As I say, the Japanese had usually come in low-level on moonlight nights. They would come right down the runway, or off to one side or the other, dropping their bombs. Very quickly, anti-aircraft defenses got smart and they put a bunch of searchlights at the approach end of the runway. There was several of these 50-caliber quadmounts. And the minute the Jap showed up, why the searchlights hit him, about the same time the gunners got him. There were several -- in fact, I've got pictures of the Betty that was shot up and it skidded down the runway in bits and pieces. The Japanese finally gave up on that. They did send reconnaissance airplanes down at real high altitude. I think -- I didn't realize we had B-47s on the fighter's trip. But I guess they got two or three of these high-altitude reconnaissance airplanes.

BP: Do you know where these Japanese planes were coming? They were coming down from Iwo?

RB: They had to be Iwo, yeah.

BP: Now, you had the B-47s, was that the fighter's trip down on [Markham Point?]? Or were they right there on --

RB: No, they were at Markham Point. Then later on, I guess they got B-61s, these black widows. That was interesting, because they would put those a couple of hundred miles north of Saipan. They had, I think, three quadrants. One airplane in one quadrant would circle it, say, ten thousand feet. Another one at 20 thousand -- something like that. So they had six airplanes up there all the time. Saipan had pretty good early warning radar by that time, and they would kind of -- a bogie would come in, or they would (inaudible) one of these B-61s. Somebody in our squadron rigged up a radio, or the PA system, that we could tune in on the B-61's frequency. Every once in a while, the fellow would say, "Okay, we've got him. He's going down. Give me another one." We didn't have any air raid problems after the B-61s got up there.

BP: About what month?

RB: I would say April or May. Forty-five.

BP: I hear these Japanese planes that were shot down, one of them slid along the airplane.

RB: Yeah, actually two or three of them over a period of time.

BP: Any of the pilots survive?

RB: Oh, no. Airplanes were completely disintegrated. I've got pictures up there. Some day.

BP: Yeah, I'll probably come back once I think it's a little safer. I thought I was taking a chance coming over here today, but I managed to go.

RB: Well, you had your wind at your back, coming over.

BP: Yeah. I'm more concerned about rocks and trees coming down on the 17th. Were there any individuals in particular that stand out in your mind from those days? Or were there --

RB: Well, there was an older pilot, Pappy Haines. He was a real character. I guess one time, they had to go in -- that's when Iwo was taken. They had to try and get in there. The weather was so bad, he flew the airplane over the island and had everybody bail out. And he made another pass, as I recall, and bailed out. They said he came down through the clouds with a cigar in his mouth. He was very nonchalant about the whole thing. The other one I vaguely remember was Bob Morgan. He was the famous Suzie Q -- no, Memphis Belle pilot. He was out there. And I don't remember much about him. What I did was not too good --

BP: In what way, what do you mean?

RB: Well, he was -- I don't know if this would go or not, but he was leading, I guess, a squadron, and I guess in Europe, they could do evasive action fairly violently, back and forth. Well, at 25 or 30 thousand feet in a B-29, if you're on the outside of a turn, you can probably never catch up. Supposedly, he lost two or three airplanes because they got so far out of formation that they couldn't defend themselves. Now, that's hearsay. I'm not positive. But his name was mud around there for a long time.

BP: Had he lost the crews, too?

RB: No, I don't think so.

BP: But the planes, they made it back? You say they lost a lot of planes?

RB: Well, yeah. I think two or three of them were shot down, because he really lost them.

BP: Oh, but because of his turn? I'm not sure --

RB: Yeah. Well, evasive action, you go back and forth to confuse the gunners, the anti-aircraft gunners down below.

BP: Yeah.

RB: With a B-29, if you got too far behind in a turn, you just didn't have enough extra power to get back in formation.

BP: Oh, so his basic maneuvers just took him so far out of the formation, he couldn't get back. But him and his crews were picked up every time though, huh?

RB: Oh yeah, they came back.

BP: Oh, they made it back.

RB: Oh sure, yeah.

BP: Okay. Now, most of the planes that were there when the war was finally over, were most of the planes flown back to the United States? Because I understand that there were some still left on Tinian.

RB: Hmm.

BP: This fellow, I'm going to give you this, this fellow's done a number of documentaries.

RB: See, I left --

BP: Go ahead.

RB: -- I left before the war actually was over. I don't know. There was some project to fly the airplanes back, and I was hoping I could do that. But they shipped me home early.

BP: Did you ever have to use Iwo Jima for emergency --

RB: No.

BP: You never did.

RB: When our horizontal stabilizer was shot off, the elevator, we had to slow down quite a bit to keep the thing under

control. I asked Colonel Lee, he thought we ought to go into Iwo. We said, "Well, it's up to you."

BP: So it was open then? Iwo at that time?

RB: Yeah. Yeah, this was 5th of June, '45. I turned on their frequency, and God, it was terrible. People trying to get in the traffic pattern and land at Iwo. They had two engines out, or they had wounded aboard. As we pulled over at altitude, we could see this whole string of airplanes trying to get in, the traffic pattern. And I told the Colonel, "I think I'll just wrestle this thing all the way back to Saipan." He said, "It's up to you." So we flew it all the way back. I think we were smart, because they would have had to have gotten an elevator, the whole thing --

(break in audio)

BP: Something about the --

RB: Oh, the elevator, left and right, just one piece. And if they had to get a whole new one from Saipan, we would have been up there quite a few days, because they'd have to ship it up from Saipan to Iwo on a boat. I understand Iwo was not the place to be at that time.

BP: Why? They were still fighting?

RB: Well, it's a lousy place. There's sulfur fumes coming up, and I guess there were still quite a few dead bodies lying around. That wasn't their concern; they wanted to get the airplanes repaired and out of there. They didn't have many parking places for the airplanes. And I think, well, also the B-51s that were based there later on, they were escorting our 29s up there. That's funny, we were being escorted by P-51s, but I never saw one. I guess they went out ahead of us and cleaned up our path. But I never saw a P-51. But I guess they were thick up there. Poor guys, they lost, what, 20 of them one time. They got caught in pretty bad weather. And I don't know if it's a fact, but the -- I guess the P-51s had a big gun site that swung down over the instrument panel, and pretty much covered up the artificial horizon, which would make instrument flying pretty difficult. I don't know if that's gospel or not, but that's a rumor.

BP: So now, you stayed in the airport, then, afterwards?

RB: Well, I got out, like all the pilots, they were going to get a job with the airlines. The airlines were hiring, but they were hiring the transport types, you know, that had C-54 or C-47 experience. So I finally ended up in Los Banos, California, which is in the valley, and crop dusted for

almost three years. It was a good company, in fact, Lloyd Stearman was our engineer. He redesigned the Stearman aircraft for the big engine. And the duster, same, and that sort of thing. I think in September, 1948, I got a letter from the Air Force asking if I'd care to go back on active duty. Whoever the -- Mr. Johnson was in charge of all the military, and he was cutting everything way back. In fact, on Guam after the war, we'd go downtown and buy our own pencils, because he couldn't supply anything.

BP: Who is Mr. Johnson? Secretary of the Air Force?

RB: Secretary of Defense, I guess. But they were cutting everything way back. Of course, most of the troops wanted to get out, anyway.

BP: Yeah, back in '48.

RB: Right after the war, oh, October, November, December of '45.

BP: But you said you were in Guam in 1948, and you had to buy your own pencils.

RB: No, later on, on Guam. I got a letter in 1948 asking if I cared to go back. Which I wasn't making a fortune crop dusting, so I went back on active duty, and was assigned to a weather reconnaissance squadron on, I guess it was Mather Field, Sacramento. And I flew weather reconnaissance from

there, up and down the coast, up to Alaska and back. I guess it was October of '49. I was transferred to Guam as the operations officer for the 514th weather reconnaissance squadron. That was the best duty I ever had. That was wonderful. We had -- all the pilots had a letter from the chief of the Air Force saying that we didn't have to comply with any weather restrictions. We could take off or land, no matter what the weather was, because our primary job was flying towards Truk, Pohnpei and down to Kapingamarangi, then back near the equator and straight up to Guam. That's where typhoons were generated. Once a typhoon was located, why, then we flew two penetrations a day; one in the morning and one in the evening.

BP: Right through the typhoon?

RB: Oh yeah, right into the eye.

RB: But the thing I like, we had a mission and we just could do anything we wanted. I was operations officer, so we had a good time. But I didn't realize there were so many little islands out there. We flew by one I hardly think was on the map. But there was a big yacht, and a palatial home. I guess they raised copra or something like that.

BP: Do you remember which island group this was in?

RB: No, it was, oh, several hundred miles roughly east of Saipan.

BP: East of Saipan? Boy, what's east of Saipan?

RB: Yeah, well, east, maybe southeast.

BP: Southeast would be down towards the Marshalls. Huh. Okay.

RB: Well, I just tell the navigator where we're supposed to go, and he --

BP: Yeah. Now, this early morning, this was just for the islands, to let them know a typhoon was coming? Or was it for military reasons?

RB: Well, that was during the war. That early warning system.

BP: During the war? World War II? You said weather reconnaissance.

RB: Oh, yeah. Well, that was completely after war. Everything was shut down.

BP: Yeah. You said in 1948 when you went back to Guam, you were operations officer --

RB: Yeah, '49, October of '49.

BP: You were operations officer for a weather reconnaissance squadron.

RB: Mm-hmm.

BP: But you were looking for typhoons just as an early warning system for island groups in general? Or was it some --

RB: Yeah, shipping, everything. In fact, the Korean thing started the Navy really dependent us to tell them where the typhoons were, and bad weather. But the typhoons normally generate -- well, if you know where Kapingamarangi is?

BP: It's probably down the Marshalls?

RB: It's, oh --

BP: Near Kwajalein?

RB: Southeast quite a ways. And they would generate there and make a big, sweeping curve across the China coast, or the Philippines, or anything like that, and then peter out over Japan. That's where most of our just weather reconnaissance -- it was just boring. We'd fly and the weatherman would take observations; the wind and temperature and things like that. Then if anything looked suspicious, then we'd go out and (inaudible) more thoroughly. Usually a typhoon generated. Some were sturdy, and others petered out pretty fast.

BP: Now, how long did you do that?

RB: About two and a half years.

BP: Then you took a run to fly other planes?

RB: Well --

BP: You retired from the Air Force, you were saying.

RB: Yeah, well, I was transferred back to the States, eventually and got into a terrible job of radar bomb scoring. There were a bunch of radar sites all over the country in the sac, in their wisdom would fly over these places, and they had a signal that would indicate when they'd drop the bombs --

BP: I'm just going to turn this off here, because the --
(break in audio)

BP: You said you were in this college private training program, and you said that was not supported by the Air Force or the Army?

RB: The government, that's all I know.

BP: It was supported? Or was not supported?

RB: Oh, it was.

BP: Okay, it was supported by the government.

RB: Absolutely. But I don't know if the Air Corps had their finger in it or not.

BP: Okay, but you say they actually got money to build airfields and hangars --

RB: Well, that was the large -- that was the government program. When the CPT thing was just strictly college students, you could sign up for chemistry or calculus or whatever, you could sign up for flying.

BP: And that was primarily what you did most of the time you were in college, was take a flying course?

RB: Well, that was the last year I took it, yeah.

BP: Okay, the year before, your first year in college you --

RB: No, that wasn't even available then.

BP: But then you didn't have to pay anything, in other words, the government --

RB: No, the government paid for the whole thing. I think they were frantically trying to get more pilots.

BP: Okay, because they knew something was coming, I guess.

RB: Mm-hmm.

BP: Then you stated here when you joined that. It was 1939, I think? Forty?

RB: Yeah. Latter part of '39. No, latter part of '40.

BP: Well, how would you describe your training in the CPT? Was it mostly classroom? Or was it a combination of classroom --

RB: A little classroom, but just flying. The fixed based operators, or FBOs, it was something new to them, too. They had to submit reports and things like that. But basically, I think we had about three or four evenings of classroom. The rest would go out either after school or on

a weekend. They had a schedule to fly. That was about the most we did, in addition to going to junior college.

BP: So you had other classes, like History and Math, and stuff like that?

RB: Oh, yeah. It was just one period on your schedule. But usually it was set up on a weekend or late in the afternoon. I enjoyed it. I thought it was great.

BP: Was it a very popular class to take?

RB: Yes. It was filled up quite rapidly. Somebody gave me the word on it before they actually opened it up. I got my name on the head of the list.

BP: Did a lot of people wash out?

RB: Not of the CPT program, because the operators would be cutting their own throat if they cancelled the students.

BP: So they made sure --

RB: They made sure everybody got through. Right. Then I went to the advanced during the summer of 1940.

BP: The advance class was still a CPT?

RB: Yes. Mm-hmm. It was in Gardena Valley.

BP: That's still taught by civilian (inaudible)?

RB: Yes. Uh-huh.

BP: Did you ever graduate from college? Or did you just stay -

-

RB: No. I had a chance to get in the Air Corps, so I dropped everything and got in the Air Corps.

BP: And so you were saying that the Army primary, that would be for people who had no previous training whatsoever?

RB: Right. The Army primary was all the students that were in the military. They signed up for four years, or whatever. They marched the class -- a strictly military operation. The Air Force finished the airplanes and paid these contractors so much an hour to teach the students.

BP: Oh, even in the Army Air Corps?

RB: Oh, yeah.

BP: They paid -- so they're in contract --

RB: It was civilian contractors. I think there was one in -- golly, where were they? I think there was a couple of them in Phoenix, one in Glendale, California. They were scattered throughout the United States, and they were strictly a military operation. There was no fooling around.

BP: Hmm. Hmm. Okay. So even though -- so CPT -- your College Pilot Training program was basically the same as an Army primary program?

RB: The flying training was about the same, yes.

BP: But even in the Army they had civilian instructors, they didn't have Army?

RB: They had civilian instructors, but they had Army check pilots. A student got so many hours and then he had to go up for a check flight. Quite a few of them are washed out there by the Air Corps check pilots.

BP: Now, this was a nationwide college program, you say?

RB: Mm-hmm.

BP: Then you said when you had a chance to go into the Air Force, that was 1940?

RB: Forty. Mm-hmm.

BP: You went to Randolph Field?

RB: Right.

BP: You were out there how long?

RB: Three months. Mm-hmm. I think just about Christmas we graduated. Or didn't graduate, but we were transferred to Kelly for the advanced course.

BP: And you were at Kelly for how long?

RB: About three months.

BP: And you flew PT-13s --

RB: Oh no, they were AT-6s and BC-1s. MT-6s.

BP: Are these all biplanes?

RB: Oh no, they were 600 horsepower low-wing, retractable gear, constant speed propellers, and a lot of radio equipment.

BP: Comparable to what? A T-47?

RB: I'd say comparable to a P-40.

BP: P-40, okay. That's right, P-47s came later.

RB: Yeah.

BP: How about a little bit more information about your time at Moffett? You were there at Moffett Field?

RB: Yes, right out here.

BP: How long were you there?

RB: Let's see, I got there latter part of March, and then was transferred to Merced 1st of December. And I was a flight instructor, BT-13s.

BP: BT or PT?

RB: Basic trainers. That was a low-wing, all-metal, didn't have a retractable gear, but it had a two-position propeller and quite a bit of radio equipment. It was quite an advance from the little PT-13s or 17s.

BP: Oh okay, so this is a mono-wing?

RB: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

BP: Okay, and you were there from March of '40?

RB: Forty-one.

BP: Forty-one until December 1st of --

RB: Forty-one.

BP: Did you have any sense, though, that the United States was getting ready for war? You were just more interested in flying?

RB: I was. We should have had a clue, because there was some British pilot came over and gave a lecture on his combat experience in Spitfires, I guess it was. And that got our attention, because the war was clear in Europe, and we had no idea we would get involved in it. Of course the people higher up knew about it.

BP: That just wasn't part of your thinking, then, huh?

RB: It sure wasn't, no.

BP: You were just thinking about flying.

RB: Flying. The weekends we'd go to San Francisco, or I joined a riding club, but Stanford, I could go up there and ride a horse every once in a while on weekends. But we had -- oh, it was a country club, really, around here in those days. It was small towns, a lot of orchards.

BP: So you were part of the -- when you got to Saipan, you were part of the 58th bomb wing?

RB: No, no, that was India.

BP: That was in India.

RB: Yeah. Seventy-third bomb wing.

BP: Okay, let me go back there. I didn't read my whole thing. Fifty-eighth bomb wing, those were the first B-29s, and they went to India.

RB: Right. Mm-hmm.

BP: Not to bomb, but to fly supplies over the hump?

RB: Yeah, to their forward base in India.

BP: So they had B-29s in China?

RB: Right.

BP: And then they had other B-29s in India that were flying supplies over.

RB: And C-46s and so forth, flying bombs and fuel. I think it took four or five trips over the hump to get enough fuel to fly one airplane to China -- or Japan.

BP: Now, how long did that operation last?

RB: I don't honestly know. If you ever talk to Harry [Chinan?], you'll --

BP: Because he did that?

RB: Yeah. He was in the 58th.

BP: And LeMay was in charge of that?

RB: In India. Right. Or, China, whatever.

BP: Now you didn't mention too much about the people in your crew. You had the same crew for most of the time you were in Saipan?

BP: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

BP: Your copilot and navigator?

RB: Well, my copilot was Dick Hart.

BP: H --

RB: H-A-R-T, yeah. He died about a year ago. My flight engineer was Bud Parsons. He was an MIT graduate.

Fortunately, Dick Hart had gone through the flight engineer school, and he complained so loudly that they put him back into flying B-29s. He was -- I had an excellent crew.

BP: He complained about what?

RB: Well, they graduated his pilots, but then the Air Corps saw the wisdom of putting him in a flight engineer school. So they went through that, and they all complained that they weren't going to be able to fly anymore. So they finally put him back on flying status. Dick Hart was one of the fortunate ones that got back on flying. He was qualified as the flight engineer as well as a copilot which helped us considerably on a few occasions. Let's see, my navigator was Ed Bartenstein.

BP: How do you spell that?

RB: B-A-R-T-E-N-S-T-E-I-N. Edwin. The radio operator, Ian Stewart.

BP: Ian Stewart.

RB: Yeah, I-A-N Stewart. He was the original hippie. He was from San Francisco. It was hot out there, so he would cut the bottom of his shirts off, so it was sort of a bolero type thing. In Saipan you could do almost anything, wear any uniform. Radar operator was Charlie Alder, A-L-D-E-R, a nice fellow. The CFC gunner, Lyle Darling. The left gunner was Bob Wagner; the right gunner was Bob Wiggins. That was something to handle, Wagner and Wiggins. And the tail gunner was Ted Douglas. He was an old Army Troop, he'd flown a tour in the Caribbean, submarine hunting. I think I covered all 11 of them. Let's see, pilot, copilot -- oh, bombardier was Alfonso J. Piaquadio.

BP: Piaquadio?

RB: Yeah.

BP: How do you spell that?

RB: P-I-A-Q-U-A-D-I-O. Alfonso.

BP: Is that Italian, or something?

RB: Oh, yeah. He was strictly from Brooklyn. Well, we had -- I think I said on this machine earlier that we had the most missions for our crew, so they sent us to Hawaii, including Alfonso J. Piaquadio. And he claimed he had some malady, so they didn't send him back to Saipan with us. So I picked up a bombardier that was -- he was a survivor of the

ditching earlier. Hmm. He went to Alaska after the war and died of a heart attack about three years ago.

BP: Piaquadio, I take it he didn't like being a bombardier, is that --

RB: He didn't like flying combat at all, and being shot at. He was petrified. And he developed some malady that they decided to keep him in Hawaii.

BP: He just was petrified of combat, huh?

RB: Yeah.

BP: How about the other crew members?

RB: Well, they didn't like it, but I had a good crew. They stood and fought.

BP: Any of them ever wounded?

RB: No. Oh, wait a minute. When we got into these incendiary raids, they left three gunners home and only put one in the tail gun. And on one mission, the turbulence was so bad that Wiggins broke his ankle in tail gun position, he was shaking so badly he cracked his ankle. Of course, that was enough for a purple heart. But it wasn't bullet holes or anything like that. Betty?

(break in audio)

BP: You can only think of a few of them.

RB: Yeah.

BP: Well, we can get back to that later.

RB: Yeah.

BP: When you were flying your B-29s initially between Hawaii and Kwajalein, did you lose any?

RB: I don't think they'd lost any at all. There were some that were delayed because of engine problems, you know, maybe in Hawaii or something. They all got out there.

BP: Now, you had these briefings in Saipan before the first commission against Japan.

RB: Mm-hmm. Three times. And they scrubbed each mission.

BP: Now how would you describe the briefings? Just give me a --

RB: Well, they were quite elaborate. It was in a huge butler hut with a stage and a map and everything. Well, the group commander stood up and gave a little spiel, I'll never forget it. He said, "Men, this is it." (laughter) But they had the weather people, the navigators, the bombardier, what to expect over the target. I guess it lasted about an hour, and then everybody synchronized their watches. And then we went back to our quonset huts and waited for a call to either eat early breakfast, or whatever, and then to out in the airplane. They had it very well organized; each airplane would start their engine

at a different time and taxi at a different time. So that went quite smoothly. The briefing was, oh, about 50 percent hot air, I think. They were trying to pump everybody up that we were going to get even with those S.O.B.s, and that sort of thing.

BP: Okay, once again --

F1: (inaudible)

RB: Sorry.

BP: Now what was it you said, your bomb wing was what, again? You were the 499th group.

RB: Right.

BP: The what wing?

RB: Seventy-third.

BP: Seventy-third. And your squadron was?

RB: Eight seventy-eight. I've got an organizational chart up there someplace.

BP: Well, I can get that in one of the books at home. I just want to make sure I have that far.

RB: Mm-hmm.

BP: When do you think the search and rescue efforts improved, between -- I know that, didn't you have B-29s that were sort of like -- would be at intervals too, to see if anybody needed help on the way back?

RB: Well, starting out they didn't really have anything organized. The Navy had a few submarines and destroyers sort of on our flight path. But later on, they had -- I think they called them "dumbos," they were B-29s that had a big boat underneath them, they could drop it. But normally, if they located a downed aircraft, they would let the Navy know. They would sneak up with the submarine. I think that was the way Reagan was picked up.

BP: George Bush.

RB: Bush, yeah. Was it Bush?

BP: Yeah, he was bombing the (inaudible).

RB: Yeah. I guess it was Bush.

BP: Do you know why General Hansell was replaced?

RB: Well, he was an advocate of high-level bombing. And he didn't change that idea whatsoever. And LeMay, General LeMay made quite a name for himself in Europe. He was a real tough individual. When the 58th went to Tinian, why, he was transferred there and took over because, well, he had other ideas how to do it. He went along with Hansell for quite a while. His theory. Then he decided on these low-level incendiary raids, because the weather was so bad over Japan, and we had to carry a lot more fuel in the Bombay tanks. We just weren't getting any bombs on the

targets. He instituted these low-level incendiary raids, which really, I think, ended the war.

BP: Yeah. What happened to General Hansell?

RB: I think he was sent back to the States as some senior consultant, or something. He was in the Pentagon, I guess. I wouldn't like to pin him down. I don't really know what happened. There are books on him.

BP: H-A-N-S-E-L?

RB: Yeah.

BP: Now, I'm curious, I'm just going to turn this off.

(break in audio)

RB: You want it on?

BP: It's on.

RB: Oh, okay. So what elevation, that first mission you flew on the 24th of November, that was, like, what elevation? Twenty-seven thousand feet, would you say?

RB: I think from about 30 to 32 thousand feet. You know, they were staggered. Each wing had their own altitude.

BP: Okay, now when was it you said you went to that rest in Hawaii after 25 missions?

RB: No, I don't think it was that many.

BP: Yeah?

RB: I could look it up in the [form 5?]'s.

BP: Okay, it's not that important. When do you think your first -- how many one thousand plane raids did you actually have? Were there very many of them?

RB: I couldn't hazard a guess on that, I don't --

BP: Was it late in the war, though?

RB: Yeah. As they built more air fields on Guam, Tinian, they could only put one on Saipan. But I was the latter part of the war, they were able to launch that many airplanes because there weren't enough air fields to begin with.

BP: Now the raid on Kobe, was that at 1,500 feet? Or 15,000?

RB: Thousand.

BP: Fifteen thousand.

RB: Yeah.

BP: Okay, because there wasn't -- I thought I read someplace that he was sending them in at 5000 feet.

RB: Those were night incendiary raids.

BP: Okay, raid on Kobe was the day?

RB: Yeah.

BP: Day incendiary raids. Okay.

RB: I can probably tell you on this picture.

BP: You returned several times to the CFC gun, what does CFC stand for?

RB: Central fire control. He sat on a barber chair, actually, and he was in a blister the back part of the airplane. He had a control system that would transfer turret -- or guns from whatever gunner needed it. He could take control of all of them if he wanted. Normally, he would allocate a lower left turret to the left gunner, and just switch them around, depending on where the attack was coming from.

BP: Okay, so the .50 calibers up front in a bubble on top, and another one on the bottom, right?

RB: Mm-hmm. Right.

BP: Were the people actually sitting in the bubble?

RB: Oh, no. They were -- that was the big feature of the B-29. They had removed turrets. You weren't sitting there with these guns going off in your ears.

BP: But you could be -- the guy in the CFC position from the back, he was fine to fire them from the --

RB: He could fire all of them, or he could transfer control of the turrets to whomever needed it.

BP: The [waist?] gunner?

RB: Left gunner, right gunner, bombardier.

BP: Now, you described one plane as a "nick," how did you spell that? N-I-C-K?

RB: Right. Mm-hmm.

BP: The Japanese had another name for it.

RB: They called them "Gekko."

BP: Oh, they called them Gekkos?

RB: Yeah.

BP: That was a nickname, though, or some other name?

RB: That was the Japanese name for it, I don't know a translation.

BP: And you said the B-29 program was running late? Was that because of all of the mechanical problems?

RB: Right. They had engine problems, all sorts of -- the thing went into production without any real testing.

BP: Did you ever see any mid-air collisions of B-29s? Because I heard they were so closely packed in at night, I heard there were some really close calls. Like when somebody -- especially when somebody was shot and he fell out of the formation.

RB: Mm-hmm.

BP: Did you have any encounters like that?

RB: I had one that really, when I thought about it later, it scared me to death. It was a night raid, and of course we didn't have any lights on at all. I could see a sort of a glow off to the left up ahead, and it kept getting a little brighter and a little brighter, and a little larger.

Finally it got close enough that I realized it was the outboard turbo of number four engine on an airplane right in front of me. Off to the left front. I think if I'd have crept up a little further, I would have flown into the rear end of his airplane. So I cut the throttles back just a tad, and let him move on ahead of me. That was -- then I thought about it later how close we were.

BP: Did you --

RB: A [turban?] glows dull red, and it kept getting closer and closer. And when it was close enough, I could identify what it was. That really panicked me.

BP: Now, you weren't lead pilot that time?

RB: No, those were all individual raids. They'd go in, the incendiary raids, they would go in individually.

BP: One plane at a time? I mean, you didn't fly in formation?

RB: Oh, no. It was, you had a target, and everybody went for that.

BP: Oh, I see. So you'd make flying -- would fly in formation up to a certain distance and then split up?

RB: No, at night we'd take off about dark, I think it was, from Saipan. And every airplane flew up individually. You get close to the coast of Japan, you'd turn your navigation lights off, and everybody, every man for himself would go

in. But they did stagger the altitudes. Each bomb group would have a different altitude. Then they're repeat those altitudes as another group came in.

BP: You didn't have to worry about somebody dropping the bombs on somebody below them?

RB: If everybody stayed in their right cruising altitude and speed, no, it shouldn't happen.

BP: I also read, too, in Charlie Phillips' book about --

RB: (laughs) Charlie Phillips.

BP: -- of Japanese planes dropping phosphorous bombs?

RB: Yeah. They did.

BP: Were they very active? Was that --

RB: I saw a couple of them, but some airplanes had flown through it, but it just singed the skin on the airplane a little bit. To my knowledge, it didn't knock any of them down.

BP: According to Charlie Phillips, there was one plane that did; it got hit on the wing with one.

RB: That could be. I didn't see anything like that. But you'd better take Phillips' book with a little grain of salt. He won the whole war, if you read his book.

END OF AUDIO FILE