

*Admiral Nimitz Historic Site
National Museum of the Pacific War*

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Richard (Dick) Bennett
(World War II - U.S. Army Air Corps - Pilot)
Date of Interview: November 15, 2001

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WW II - Army Air Corps - B-25/B-26/B-17/B-24 Pilot
(New Guinea)**

Today is November 15, 2001. My name is Floyd Cox and I'm a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War. I'm interviewing today Mr. Dick Bennett. We are located in the ballroom of the Nimitz Museum here in Fredericksburg, Texas. The interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Cox: Mr. Bennett, I want to thank you for taking the time to come in here and relate your experiences during World War II. I would like to start by asking some of the basic questions – Where you were born, when you were born, where you went to school, and then we will lead right on into your experiences during World War II.

Mr. Bennett: I was born in Lynn, Massachusetts on September 9, 1921, 80 glorious years ago.

Mr. Cox: Eighty glorious years ago! Where did you go to school?

Mr. Bennett: I grew up on Long Island and went to school there.

Mr. Cox: What were your folks names?

Mr. Bennett: Elmer and Mildred. Their name was Bennett too.

Mr. Cox: Thank you. What was your Dad's profession at the time?

Mr. Bennett: He was an architect.

Mr. Cox: So you went through school there, Did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, Lynnbrook High School.

Mr. Cox: What year was that?

Mr. Bennett: 1939.

Mr. Cox: So after you graduated from high school, did you go on to college, or did you get a job?

Mr. Bennett: No, because there was something going on called “The Great Depression.” Very few kids were going to college in those days, and the object of the game was to go out and try to find a job. I had friends who walked around New York City for a year or more looking for a job, but I was fortunate and I got one pretty quickly at a bank on Wall Street, making \$11.75 a week. That was considered pretty good. Out of that I paid my commutation on the Long Island Railroad, bought lunches, my clothes, and I think I gave my Mother \$2 a week for what in those days was called “board money” to help out with the family finances.

Mr. Cox: Did you work there up until Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Bennett: No, I worked there for a year, and decided that I would rather go to work for Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, which was right around the corner from the bank. I went over and interviewed them, and I was going to be able to start at \$16 a week, which was a fantastic increase in pay, plus you didn’t have to work on Saturdays, which you did at the bank in those days, so I went to work for Standard Oil as an office boy.

Mr. Cox: How old were you at this time?

Mr. Bennett: Eighteen, going on nineteen.

Mr. Cox: So you were 19 years old, working at Standard Oil when December 7, 1941, occurred.

Mr. Bennett: Closer to 20 years old by then.

Mr. Cox: Do you remember that particular day?

Mr. Bennett: Pretty well. It was a Sunday, and I think that we were listening to a football game on the radio when the word came out about Pearl Harbor being bombed.

Mr. Cox: As a young man, were you among the many thousands that immediately said, “I want to go in and help get this thing over?”

Mr. Bennett: I went to work the next day, on Monday, and I said to my boss, “I might be a little late coming back from lunch today.” He used to joke about that. He said, “Dick said he would be a little late coming back from lunch and he

was gone for five years.”

Mr. Cox: So you went down and...

Mr. Bennett: I went across the street where there was an Air Corps Recruiting Station. I enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

Mr. Cox: Did they accept you right away?

Mr. Bennett: No, you had to take a battery of tests and things like that. I think it is a testimony to the high school education you got in those days because you could pass most of the tests, which I did, and I got into the Army Air Corps.

Mr. Cox: You went in as an enlisted man, or did you go into officer training?

Mr. Bennett: I went in as an Aviation Cadet. That is where I started.

Mr. Cox: Tell me a little about your Aviation Cadet training. Where did you go, and exactly what did you do?

Mr. Bennett: Well, I think that within a matter of weeks... You need to realize that things were accelerated in those days because the Japanese people were running all over us in the Pacific, and they needed people fast. They told me to report to Pennsylvania Station in New York, which I did in a few days after passing the various tests that I had taken, and wound up in Montgomery, Alabama. That is where they shipped us to and we were there for about two months learning how to be soldiers. That is where you learned how to make your bed, march, take a rifle out covered with grease and cosmoline and clean it all up and then march. You learned the basics of military behavior for about two months before you did anything about flying.

Mr. Cox: So this was basically a basic training course?

Mr. Bennett: Yes.

Mr. Cox: Now, once you finished your basic training, you were already selected to go into the aviation flying part?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, you were sort of on a track. As long as you didn't fall off that track, you kept going.

Mr. Cox: How would you fall off?

Mr. Bennett: Well, for lack of a better word, if you “screwed up” in any fashion, or you didn’t measure up, you didn’t pass some of the tests you were given constantly, but we still had not gotten to any flying yet. After two months in basic training, they shipped us to Primary Flying School, and that was the first time that we were introduced to airplanes.

Mr. Cox: Where did you go and how did you go? Did you go by troop train?

Mr. Bennett: Oh yes, everything was by train in those days, and we didn’t go far. We went from Montgomery, Alabama, to Decatur, Alabama, which was a small town in northern Alabama. That was the Primary Flying School operated for the Air Corps by civilians, and it was a big, grass field. They had no runways or anything. It was about ten acres of grassy fields, and they had about a hundred planes there. They were PT-17’s, which was a Primary Trainer.

Mr. Cox: What did they look like? Was that a bi-wing.

Mr. Bennett: It was a biplane.

Mr. Cox: With a fabric cover?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, and that was the first time in my life I had ever been in an airplane. That was quite an exciting adventure.

Mr. Cox: Did you have your ground training at the same time?

Mr. Bennett: Yes. A half a day was spent flying. You started off with the instructor. The other half of the day was ground school. Then the next day it would reverse; you would fly in the morning. You kept reversing from morning to afternoon, afternoon to morning.

Mr. Cox: So, in this primary school, you just learned the basics of flying?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, you were there about two months. The object was to solo. You went up with an instructor until you could take it up by yourself. That averaged from 8-10 hours for a person to solo for the first time.

Mr. Cox: Now during this school, would they “wash out” some? In other words, some guys just couldn’t make it.

Mr. Bennett: Many. For the most part they washed out because of flying deficiencies.

They would bring a plane in to land and crack it up. Things like that. That is primarily why they washed out. Some washed out because they couldn't pass the various tests that you were constantly given.

Mr. Cox: Did you make any specific friends during your first flying school?

Mr. Bennett: Made lots of friends.

Mr. Cox: Did a lot of them stay with you?

Mr. Bennett: No, that was one of the problems with my entire military career. I made a tremendous amount of friends, but you rarely stayed with them for long.

Mr. Cox: After you finished Primary School, then what happened. Where did you go, and what did you do?

Mr. Bennett: After Primary School you go to what they called "Basic School." That is a little bigger airplane, little more powerful engine, and that was a BT-13, which is a single wing, low wing airplane. It was a more powerful airplane. Essentially you did the same thing – you learned how to fly that plane and do increasingly complicated maneuvers with it, and your ground school work became a little more advanced. You constantly hoped that you wouldn't do something that would get you washed out. Once you did something wrong, you weren't going to fly any more.

Mr. Cox: Are you saying that they would not give you a second chance?

Mr. Bennett: Not that I am aware of.

Mr. Cox: With that type of equipment I don't imagine that they could. After you finished the second phase of your flying school, how did it progress from there?

Mr. Bennett: Then you go to Advanced Flying School. Very logical - Primary, Basic, and then Advanced. Each one of these covers about a two month period. Each time the flying gets a little more complicated, the ground school gets a little more complicated, and if you have done everything right, you graduate after about 7-8 months.

Mr. Cox: Now that was 7-8 months in Advanced School?

Mr. Bennett: No, total.

Mr. Cox: So you are saying you start out with a raw recruit, and then in seven months he would be flying our top military aircraft?

Mr. Bennett: That is correct.

Mr. Cox: Where was the school located for your advanced training?

Mr. Bennett: The Advanced was at Columbus, Mississippi.

Mr. Cox: What kind of planes did you fly in advanced training? Did you fly the fighter planes. Were you really into the hot ones?

Mr. Bennett: No, you don't get into any active military planes until after you have graduated and received your wings. Up until that time you are flying various training planes. Once you got to advanced, you were split up into groups as to whether you were going to be a fighter pilot, or a bomber pilot.

Mr. Cox: Did you have a choice?

Mr. Bennett: No, because everybody wants to be a fighter pilot. That goes without saying. We were split up and I always thought that they went by height. I thought the taller guys went to bomber school because they couldn't fit in the small fighter planes, but I don't think that was true either. The advanced training planes were twin engine. This was the first time that we had gotten into twin engine planes where you had to learn how to taxi and do different things with twin engines. So, we did that for a couple of months. Then, in September, almost on my birthday I guess, September '42, I graduated. They made you a 2nd Lieutenant when you graduated and they gave you a pair of silver wings and then they shipped you some place. I was shipped to Columbus, South Carolina, where they had a B-25 flying base.

Mr. Cox: Is the B-25 a four engine bomber?

Mr. Bennett: No, it's a twin engine bomber. It is the same bomber that is on display at the Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas. It's the bomber that General Jimmy Doolittle took off from an aircraft carrier to raid Tokyo in April 1942.

Mr. Cox: How long did you train flying the B-25?

Mr. Bennett: Until I read the entire manual and learned every part of the B-25 and took one flight in the B-25, and then they shipped me to Fort Meyers, Florida, where there was a B-26 Army Base. B-26 is a twin engine bomber that is a little heavier than the B-25. It is faster, and in pilot terminology, it is “hotter.” It takes off at a higher speed and lands at a higher speed than a B-25.

Mr. Cox: In your opinion as a pilot, which one was the most dangerous to fly?

Mr. Bennett: The B-26. It was a “hot” plane. In training in the B-26 a lot of pilots were trained in Florida around Tampa, and they used to have a saying about the B-26, which was “one a day in Tampa Bay.” They would start down the runway and never get off the end of the runway, so the plane would just go out into Tampa Bay. They also called the plane “The Flying Prostitute.” That was because it had no visible means of support, meaning it had very short wings.

Mr. Cox: So you went through your pilot training. I assume now that you were a pilot, not a co-pilot?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, I was a pilot, but when you go into any of the multiple engine airplanes, you start as the co-pilot. If you are in a fighter pilot where there is only one single seat, obviously you go in as the pilot, but when you go into a multiple engine airplane you start as the co-pilot and eventually you become the first pilot in that airplane.

Mr. Cox: What is the determining factor? Hours in the air?

Mr. Bennett: No, the beginning determining factor is that there are going to be two people in this airplane, so the one in the left seat, which is the pilot’s seat, is going to be the one who is the most experienced and has the longer time, so you don’t come right out of flying school and say, “I’ll take charge of this plane.”

Mr. Cox: So you finished your B-26 pilot training, and where did you go from there?

Mr. Bennett: Well, I haven’t finished it yet.

Mr. Cox: OK.

Mr. Bennett: After I had a little experience in the B-26 in Florida, they sent a couple of squadrons of us to Eglin Field, Florida, which was near a Navy Base. The reason for going there, it was a very hush-hush, secret mission, is that they wanted to do the same thing with the B-26 that General Doolittle had done with the B-25. The B-25 had proved so successful psychologically with the American people, that they could raid Tokyo, they figured “Let’s take a plane like the B-26 and we will train a couple of squadrons to take off aircraft carriers, only instead of bombing cities like Tokyo, we will take them out on aircraft carriers and then the next time we have a battle, such as the Battle of the Coral Sea, or some of these big battles, which were just the two navies fighting each other, if we had B-26's and armed them with torpedoes, then our planes could take off and fly to where the Japanese aircraft carriers and ships were and we could sink them with torpedoes before their planes were within range of our aircraft carriers.” It was wonderful theory, but unlike Jimmy Doolittle, who was going to take off from an aircraft carrier and land in China after dropping his bombs on Tokyo, we were going to take off from an aircraft carrier and bomb other aircraft carriers out in the middle of the pacific, and it was never quite explained to us where we would land when we got finished. Since we were all about 19 or 20 years old, we didn’t have the audacity to ask where we were supposed to land. They figured we would make out some way or other.

Mr. Cox: So did they scrap this idea, or did you go through the training, and what did they do with you?

Mr. Bennett: We went through the training, and they put us on a special troop train. It was a glorious troop train; two Pullman cars and they shipped us from Florida to San Francisco. We had completed the training and we were to go to San Francisco and embark as soon as we could for the South Pacific where we would go out and sink the whole Japanese Navy. (Laughter) Don’t chuckle. That was the idea, and we got to San Francisco about two

days before Christmas of '42. We weren't going to fly our own planes because the B-26 could not fly from San Francisco to the South Pacific. So we were going to be ferried over there in converted B-24's, which had nothing inside – just a shell of an airplane, and they would fly our crews over in those where we would meet up with the U.S. Navy, or somebody. The day after Christmas of '42 we took off about midnight. They always liked to fly at night because the weather was more favorable for flying from San Francisco to Honolulu, Hawaii, and we took off and were allowed to bring about a hundred pounds of luggage with us. That didn't include much. This airplane was nothing more than a steel shell, or aluminum shell – no insulation or anything in it. To try to make the maximum use of the fuel, they went up as high as they could, which was about 20,000 feet or more, and we froze for hours. They just had aluminum bucket seats, and we were freezing. We didn't have any warm clothing of any kind. There was no heat back there, and we flew all night long freezing like the devil. We figured we would soon be in Hawaii, and we could see dawn approaching as the light was getting a little brighter all the time. The plane had little portholes in it. You could look out and see the water. All night long we couldn't see anything because it was dark. As dawn approached, looking out the window, and off in the distance you could see the shape of a big bridge. I thought that was odd because I didn't know there was a big bridge like that in Hawaii. As we got closer, we could see it was the Golden Gate Bridge! The plane had flown all night long and we were back where we started from!

Mr. Cox: How many guys were back there with you?

Mr. Bennett: I guess there were twenty, at the most.

Mr. Cox: All brand new pilots, going to the Pacific to go to war.

Mr. Bennett: Pilots, bombardiers, engineers, gunners, the whole crew. They shipped us over as crews. I said twenty, perhaps there were thirty. Anyway, the plane had consumed half of its gasoline, its fuel. The navigator took some

star shots and decided that they hadn't gone half way to Hawaii yet because they had tremendous headwinds. At that time of year the headwinds are very strong and we weren't half way there yet, but our fuel was over half gone, so they had no alternative but to turn around and go back to San Francisco.

Mr. Cox: What do they call that point when you half to make a decision?

Mr. Bennett: There must be a good word for it. "The Point of No Return" probably.

Mr. Cox: So, you turned around and you went back to San Francisco?

Mr. Bennett: You could also say "The Drop Dead Point" I guess. We didn't even know the plane had turned around during the night. The first thing we saw was the Golden Gate Bridge and we were landing there. They told us that the headwinds were going to continue for another week or so, so you fellows can do whatever you want. We had found that San Francisco was a very nice town to spend some time in, so we went back to the St. Francis Hotel and enjoyed ourselves.

Mr. Cox: And then they put you on another plane?

Mr. Bennett: Then they told us to come back again. We went back and this time we made it to Hawaii. We got to Hawaii and that was to be a refueling stop. I think that we might have spent the night there, and then left the next morning for Canton Island, which is south of Hawaii. Canton Island is nothing more than a coral atoll – no trees, no grass, no nothing, just white coral. We landed there and that was New Year's Eve. I remember that well. It was New Year's Eve that we spent the night at Canton Island and they had a few tents that they called the Officers' Club. They had the luxury of having some Schnapps there, so they shared with us on New Year's Eve. I think we were all in bed by about 9:30. The Schnapps didn't go far. We took off the next morning for Fiji. There was nothing remarkable about Fiji except when we approached Fiji for landing I found where the whole U.S. Navy was. We circled some of Fiji and there is a huge harbor there. I think there must have been five or more battleships,

maybe an aircraft carrier, lots of destroyers, all kinds of Navy ships there. I don't know what they were doing there. We spent one night in Fiji. In those days travel was slow. Today you get on a plane in San Francisco and you wind up in New Zealand or Sidney. At this point we are now out to 3-4 days and we are only at Fiji. From there we flew to New Caledonia and refueled, and from there to Brisbane, Australia.

Mr. Cox: What did you do in Brisbane? Once you got to Brisbane did you go into your own Squadron...?

Mr. Bennett: We were going to hook up with whoever was going to tell us what we do with all of this wonderful training we had had taking off of aircraft carriers so we could go out and sink the Japanese Navy. The Colonel came out from the airfield in Brisbane and said something like, "What are you guys doing here?" We showed him our Secret orders and he said that he didn't know anything about that. He told us that they didn't have any more B-26's over here. We thought that was exciting – that is what we had been trained in. He said that all of the B-26's were moving on to North Africa. He told us that we were needed up in New Guinea because they had been flying up in New Guinea ever since MacArthur left the Philippines, and the few pilots that were up in New Guinea were getting their tails shot off, so they needed replacements. So here we had all of these fantastically trained crews in how to take off of aircraft carriers with Army bombers, and they sent us up to New Guinea where they put us into B-17's, The Flying Fortress.

Mr. Cox: What you are saying is that you had a B-26 crew, all the way from gunners to the pilots and bombardier, they sent you there and put you in B-17's without any four engine training?

Mr. Bennett: Correct.

Mr. Cox: So you went from a two engine plane to a four engine plane without any training?

Mr. Bennett: Correct.

Mr. Cox: The whole crew?

Mr. Bennett: Oh yeah! Well, they split up the crews. What they did is they had these few crews up there that had been there since MacArthur and the people evacuated the Philippines, and they were really the only thing that was keeping the Japanese from going down and invading Australia practically. Not the only thing, but one of the primary deterrents. These guys were really getting shot up bad and the B-17's they had were getting full of holes. They had been patched up so many times that we called it "patches on patches." Every time you went out on a mission you would get holes in the wings, or the tail, or something else, and they would put a patch on it and when you came back from the next mission there would be a hole through the patch they put on a few days before.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this Dick, how was your morale at this time? Here you are pumped up to fly a B-26 off of a carrier, hit the enemy, etc. All of a sudden they are telling you that you are on a B-17 crew and you haven't had any training, but we were going to put you in a B-17 to go against the enemy. How did you feel, morale-wise? Were you kind of let down, or were you still pumped up?

Mr. Bennett: We were let down when we saw New Guinea. I don't think the fact that we weren't going to be taking off of aircraft carriers bothered us too much. In my opinion, it would have been pure suicide if we had completed the mission that we had been trained for. I don't think I would be here today if they had gone ahead with that mission.

Mr. Cox: Well, they put you in B-17's. Did they give you any training whatsoever? Did you fly a couple of missions with experienced people, or did they just stick you in and send you out?

Mr. Bennett: The B-17 is quite different from B-25's and B-26's. You just don't go in and start flying it, so they broke up all of our crews and we became what might be called "replacement parts" for the other crews, many of whom had been killed, in the hospital, had malaria, or gone home, etc. Wherever they

needed a warm body, that is where we were put. Each time we flew, we flew with somebody different. Unlike Europe, the people who flew in Europe trained together in the United States, for the most part. They went over there and flew missions together for the most part. If they got shot down, they went down together, and if they came home, they all came home together. They kept in touch. We didn't have any of that. Every time we flew it was with a different group. I say every time, after a while you get so that you know those people and there is a familiarity that builds up. For the most part, it was different people each time. I became a co-pilot on a B-17 and I got my training flying missions. It was quite a fascinating experience really.

Mr. Cox: You spoke of missions – what kind of missions were you going on?

Mr. Bennett: Our primary missions were the Japanese bases on the north coast of New Guinea. We were at Port Moresby, New Guinea, which is on the south coast. North of us, running down the center of New Guinea, are the Owen Stanley Mountains, which run up to 16,000-18,000 feet. We would take off from the south coast of New Guinea, fly over the mountains, and then on the north coast of New Guinea were Japanese airfields. They had places like Lae, Wewak, Medang – a whole string of Japanese airfields. Then, you had a lot of Pacific Ocean north of New Guinea, and then an island north of that was New Britain Island. On New Britain Island was Rabaul, which was the primary Japanese Naval Base in that part of the Pacific. Rabaul was a huge harbor that probably on an average day had a hundred Japanese ships in it of different kinds – merchant ships and naval ships. The whole South Pacific Navy was headquartered there. Rabaul was really our primary target. They had three airdromes around the harbor. The harbor was created by a volcano and it had these tall mountains all around ringing it. Because it was so far over the water to get there, we had no fighter cover at all. Also, we had very few airplanes. We received no replacement airplanes because Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill decided

that the war had to be won in Europe first.

Mr. Cox: Bring us back to New Guinea and you are flying B-17's. You were talking about the mission over some of the islands. What altitude were you flying these missions? Was this high altitude bombing?

Mr. Bennett: Well, when we took off to go to the Japanese targets on the other side of the island, usually there were always thunder clouds, storm clouds, over the mountains. So you had to fly 18,000 to make sure you got over the mountains because they were all "socked" in. If it was daytime and the clouds weren't too heavy, you could go over the mountains at about 14,000 feet because you could thread your way through the mountain passes. Anyway, we flew over the mountains, and then when we got on the other side we went down to below 10,000 feet. The reason is, if you go above 10,000 feet you have to put on oxygen, and with that there were rubber masks that you put on your face, and breathing was very uncomfortable. So we always flew below 10,000 when we could, so we wouldn't have to put on oxygen masks. Most of our missions were at nighttime. We hardly ever had fighter cover except close to New Guinea. As soon as we left New Guinea and headed out across the Pacific to some of these outlying islands, there were no fighter planes. First of all, there weren't many of them, and they didn't fly that far.

Mr. Cox: Did you go out, and like over Europe, a hundred planes at a time, or did you go out 12, or maybe more. How did you go out?

Mr. Bennett: Toward the end of the year I was there we would have massive raids of 12 planes at a time, which was laughable compared to Europe. In the early days though we had mostly single plane missions. That is why they were mostly at night. We would fly over the places, such as Rabaul, and when you arrived it would be pitch-black but they could hear you coming. We were never quite sure how good their radar was at that time, but they knew we were coming and the place was totally black until you got close to the harbor, which you could see if there was any kind of moonlight at all

because the mountains with water around them are distinguishable. As soon as you got within range of the harbor, all the search lights in the world would come on. It would look like a Hollywood premier. There you were, one plane up there at about 10,000 feet, and all these search lights would come on converging on the one plane, and it would light up the whole cockpit of the airplane. It would be like daylight with all these search lights coming up from all directions. You felt that they couldn't miss you. Our object was to keep them awake. We couldn't do an awful lot of damage. Because of the distance involved, half the bomb-bay was filled with gasoline tanks. At the most we would only carry four 500 pound bombs. That was considered "nothing."

Mr. Cox: Two thousand pounds of bombs.

Mr. Bennett: Close to that. Or, you could carry ten or fifteen 100 pound bombs, whatever arrangement you wanted.

Mr. Cox: Let me ask you this – You are flying at night, how do you see your target?

Mr. Bennett: Well, as I said before, if you had any kind of moonlight at all, and weren't flying in total clouds, you could discern the shorelines and you knew where the docks were. Rabaul was a big harbor and it had docks and warehouses. You knew approximately where ammunition dumps and fuel dumps were in the jungle. All of these islands are total jungle except for the parts that have been cleared for runways, and a few little towns. We would fly across the harbor and we would get about to where we thought we could hit something. The bombardier in the front would release one bomb. You would fly out to sea for 10-15 minutes, or whatever pleased you, and you might drop from 10,000 feet down to 7,000 feet and you would come in front a different direction and fly across the harbor again. Then you would drop another bomb. You might do this three or four times, if you were crazy. Most of the time you tried to just make two passes across the harbor. That was to get everybody awake, excited. We only had one plane load of nine people who were keeping them awake. There were

probably 2,000 people down below that we were keeping awake.

Mr. Cox: So what you are saying, the way I'm understanding it, you were the "American Washing Machine Charlie." What I have reference to for the benefit of the reader is that over Guadalcanal the Japanese would send over one bomber at night just to keep the people awake. Did they ever do that to you on New Guinea?

Mr. Bennett: Occasionally, yes.

Mr. Cox: How was the anti-aircraft fire? Did you sustain much damage to your plane on these missions?

Mr. Bennett: Oh yes, you never came back without some damage to your plane. The anti-aircraft fire was awesome, very intensive, very heavy, and an awful lot of planes got shot down over Rabaul. It wasn't a "piece of cake." It wasn't uncommon to get an engine shot out. If you were really unlucky you might get two engines shot out. Of course if you were totally unlucky, you got shot down over Rabaul. We often came back from there and the hard part of it was that if you got an engine shot out, chances are that wasn't the only damage to the airplane because the same anti-aircraft fire that knocked out an engine probably also knocked out part of the rudder, or part of the other controls. So flying back those long distances across the ocean, and there was only one place to go and that was Port Moresby because the Japanese held everything else. There was only one place for us to go so a lot of our flights were very "iffy" "chancy" "scarey" - coming back with a plane that didn't fly too well.

Mr. Cox: You mentioning this, led me to think of two questions. Number one - did you ever lose any of your crew members? Were any of them ever injured? And, number two - did you lose any personal friends on any of their missions?

Mr. Bennett: On the flights that I was on, I never lost a crewmember. Only once was one wounded. The co-pilot sitting next to me was injured when an anti-aircraft shell went off right in front of the windshield and knocked the

windshield out. It hit him in the chest. The wind coming in – you know you are flying along at a fairly good speed with no windshield there. Here the guy has a wound in his chest, it is bleeding, etc., and the wind coming in on him. He went into shock. I got the Flight Engineer, the man who mans the top turret on a B-17, grabbed him down. He took the co-pilot out of his seat and laid him on the floor. We didn't know what to do because we weren't exactly medical experts at 21 years of age. We gave him the #1 remedy, which was give him a shot of morphine. We had first aid kits on the planes. One of the things that they had in there were morphine injectors. I guess that put him to sleep for a while until we got back. He did recover. You know, on that subject, about the morphine, it wasn't until later in the war that they started treating that with a little more security. In the early days every plane had a couple of first-aid kits in the front and in the back, and they were filled with morphine capsules. Nobody ever thought of using them for other than serious wounds, but that was before it became a hobby.

Mr. Cox: Did you lose any personal friends on missions?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, lots of them.

Mr. Cox: On the same run, over Rabaul, or different missions?

Mr. Bennett: All over. Different targets in that area.

Mr. Cox: Your crew – did you have the same crew all of the time you were flying?

Mr. Bennett: Hardly ever. As I might have explained earlier, whoever was available to fly. Like you were going to have a mission tomorrow night and some of the guys are down in Australia on “rest and relaxation” type leave, a couple are in the hospital, couple have malaria, so whoever was healthy that day became the crew.

Mr. Cox: That is interesting because, as you mentioned, in Europe they usually stayed with the same crew through rotation.

Mr. Bennett: Exactly.

Mr. Cox: Did you have the same type of rotation in the Pacific as they did in Europe

with so many missions qualifying you to get home?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, it was essentially the same, only it went by hours. We had to have 300 hours of combat, which roughly translated to 50 missions. Different missions were different number of hours.

(General talk and questions from the audience regarding food, living conditions, etc.)

Mr. Bennett: I think the biggest thing we missed, or thought was pretty bad, was the food. Clothes are clothes, bombs are bombs, but food is another world.

Mr. Cox: What did you have for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners?

Mr. Bennett: I don't know that we celebrated those days particularly from a food standpoint. I was fortunate in that I left the States two days after Christmas, and got back just before Christmas of '43.

(Continuation of Interview)

Mr. Cox: Today is January 29, 2004. I'm fortunate enough to be here with Dick again and we are going to conclude the interview that we started some time ago. As I recall, Dick we discussed you being in New Guinea, and if you want to take it from there.

Mr. Bennett: Well, I pretty well covered the period in 1943 when we were flying the B-17's and how we would get shot up on a lot of missions. I don't know that I got into the part about how in the Fall of 1943 they decided to take the B-17's out of service because they were getting so shot up that they were not air worthy any longer, so they grounded all of the B-17's and the Air Transport Command people flew in B-24's from the States and we were told to go down to the runway and pick out a B-24, and there would be an instruction manual on the seat for the pilot, one for the navigator, one for the bombardier, etc. So much for the heavy training that our boys got.

Mr. Cox: So what you are saying is you had no flight check-out on the B-24; they just handed you the manual and says here is your plane, here is your manual, you guys just take off.

Mr. Bennett: Exactly, exactly.

Mr. Cox: Did you have much practice once you guys got your plane and your

manuals, did you have many practice flights?

Mr. Bennett: Well, we spent about a half a day just taxiing the B-24 around the runway to get familiar with the handling of it. It taxis quite differently than a B-17, and then we spent about a half a day the next day taking off and landing to familiarize ourselves with the way the plane would take off. The B-24 landed quite differently than a B-17. You might say that we trained ourselves for about a total of three days, and then we started flying missions.

Mr. Cox: So that is what you would call on-the-job-training then?

Mr. Bennett: Yes.

Mr. Cox: I just happened to think of another question regarding that – On your gunners, your crewmen, were they the same fellows that were on the B-17's, or did a new bunch come in?

Mr. Bennett: As I explained earlier, every time we flew a mission, we had different personnel on the plane. We didn't have the same crew, the same exact people each time we flew, so it was a mix of whoever was available and could fly that day.

Mr. Cox: That applies to the B-17's & B-24's? Are you saying that one day you might have one fellow for a navigator, and the next day a different one?

Mr. Bennett: Definitely.

Mr. Cox: My goodness.

Mr. Bennett: Yes, it was quite an experience. Talking about a navigator, some days you would get the old, experienced navigators who didn't need charts or anything else. They could tell just by looking out at the coastline where they were around islands, and every once in a while you would get a new navigator and was on his first or second mission. It was real "hairy" flying with them because they were more lost than the pilots were. They learned though.

Mr. Cox: Well, you finished your practice sessions on the B-24.

Now you are starting your bombing missions. Is that correct?

Mr. Bennett: Yes.

Mr. Cox: Was your bomb load greater on a B-24?

Mr. Bennett: Theoretically, technically, and on paper the B-24 had a few advantages over the B-17. They could fly at slightly higher altitude, which was beneficial sometimes. They could carry a little heavier bomb load, and had a little more airspeed than the B-17. So, on paper it was a better airplane, but in flying that was not so. There is an old argument, which is the better airplane, the B-24 or the B-17. Those who flew only the B-24 loved it because it brought them home, for those that came home. So they could see nothing wrong with it. The few of us that had the chance to fly both the B-17 and the B-24 far preferred the B-17.

Mr. Cox: Once you started your missions, can you describe some of them that you had in the B-24?

Mr. Bennett: They were very similar to what I had described earlier in the B-17. They were raids against the Japanese Naval Base at Rabaul, which was the primary naval base in the South Pacific.

Mr. Cox: That was heavily defended too, wasn't it?

Mr. Bennett: Oh tremendously defended.

Mr. Cox: Were there a lot of enemy fighters...

Mr. Bennett: Fighters and tremendous anti-aircraft fire. We suffered the same type of damage we did in the B-17. We got engines shot out, damage to controls of the airplane, and in some cases the planes were shot down.

Mr. Cox: What altitude would you go on your B-24?

Mr. Bennett: Same as the B-17. We tried to bomb under 10,000 feet because we didn't have to use oxygen if we were under 10,000 feet, however, that applies more to the nighttime raids. At the very end of my term in New Guinea we started to get into daytime raids over Rabaul, and for those we would fly

about 20,000 feet.

Mr. Cox: On these raids, especially over Rabaul, as we discussed it was heavily defended by anti-aircraft and fighters. Do you recall any particular instance where you had one or more fighters coming right after your plane?

Mr. Bennett: Oh yes.

Mr. Cox: Did you take fire?

Mr. Bennett: We didn't have that many planes in the air. You didn't have hundreds of planes in the air. You could say, "Did any of the fighters come near your plane?" Even in our heaviest period when we got the new B-24's from 12 to 20 planes in a formation is what we would have. When the Zeroes started coming in we were all closely grouped together.

Mr. Cox: Did any of your gunners shoot down any planes?

Mr. Bennett: I don't recall specifically. I think that they claimed two or three times that they had shot one down. When you have many planes shooting at a Zero coming in, you know – who is the one that hit them? It is a little egotistical to say "Oh, I shot two or three down." You "contributed" to shooting them down.

Mr. Cox: When you are on these raids, and you have anti-aircraft fire coming from below, Japanese Zeroes coming from above, did you give any thought to be scared, or are you concentrating so much on your job of making the mission complete that you don't even worry about it?

Mr. Bennett: The answer is "both." I think it is only human to be a little scared when the plane start bouncing around from the anti-aircraft fire and you see an engine go out, etc. You are a little scared I would say, and you are also concentrating so darn much on keeping the plane flying that it overcomes some of the fear.

Mr. Cox: In any of the raids that you made, did you lose any friends that were in other bombers?

Mr. Bennett: Many. That is just the way it goes. Yes, we lost some. You see, the squadrons were fairly small groups and so we knew most of the people.

That's the way it was. Yes, we lost some. In fact, you said "did you lose many of your friends?" Anybody who went down was one of your friends you might say.

Mr. Cox: Sure. So after you finished your tour of duty in New Guinea, how did you get back to the States?

Mr. Bennett: First of all, you had to get the required number of 300 combat flying hours to go back. Once you got that in, you had to wait for a flight down to Australia so you get a plane back to the States. Eventually, at the end of 1943, we were flown to Australia – I was along with a few others. We sat around waiting for a plane that might be going back to the States. In those days there weren't many planes going in that direction. It wasn't like commercial services. You just waited. One day in Brisbane, Australia, where we were waiting, the Colonel called me in and said, "Would you like to fly a B-17 back to the States." I said, "Sure, I would be happy to." He said that they had one in the hangar that was being repaired. It was one of the old B-17's taken out of New Guinea that had been pretty well banged up, and they were repairing it and wanted to ship it back to the States because the "Powers that Be" in the Air Corps (I guess), or the Government, wanted a plane from the South Pacific, a B-17, that would be like the South Pacific version of the Memphis Belle. The Memphis Belle was a B-17 that had come back from Europe and got all of this publicity about all of the flights over Europe and everything, and there wasn't any comparable plane that had come back from the Pacific, so he asked me if I would like to fly that plane back. I said, "Sure." I wasn't that anxious just to fly it, but I wanted to get home as fast as I could, and that seemed like a good way to do it. I rounded up a crew of about five or six guys who wanted to do this too, and we waited another day while they proceeded to make the final repairs on this B-17, and then they finally said it was ready to go. Our route back to the States was going to be the same as we had flown over – we would hit

various islands on the way back to the States. The first island out of Brisbane that we were to hit on the way back to the States was New Caledonia. Well, we took off from Brisbane, we got an hour or so out over the Pacific, headed for New Caledonia. The navigator started complaining about the compass not being accurate. He didn't think the compass was right at all. They also had a radio compass on these planes. He said that wasn't working at all, all we had was a magnetic compass that he said wasn't working too well, so we really sweated out whether we were going to hit this island out there in the middle of nowhere. The plane didn't fly too well. As I said, it was a heavily repaired airplane. We finally got to New Caledonia by some sheer luck. After we had landed and gone somewhere to freshen up, the Safety Officer of the New Caledonia airport looked me up and said that I couldn't take the plane any further. I said, "Why not?" He said, "It just isn't airworthy. It is not safe to fly and I'm surprised that they ever let you take off from Australia with this airplane. I'm not going to risk having you fly this back across the remainder of the islands to get back to the States." So, we sat in New Caledonia for several days waiting for a ride. We got a ride and we got back to the States without any further incidents, but I never heard any more about this "great" airplane that was going to come back and be displayed all around the country. It is probably somewhere in the jungle down there in New Caledonia. I finally wound up in San Francisco, and from there got a couple of weeks leave. As I recall, I took a commercial flight from San Francisco to New York where I had a couple of weeks at home. Then, after that, I was to report to Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Air Corps had a redistribution station for people coming from overseas and they sent them to Atlantic City and put you up in a posh hotel where you went through a whole battery of physical exams and psychiatric exams. They wanted to make sure that you had not lost your marbles while you were overseas. Then they said, "What would you like to do now that you are back in the States? Nothing is too good for

our boys that served overseas.” I think it was just a figure of speech to make you feel good, but you had a choice. I don’t think you had much of a choice on what you were going to do. I said, “I’ll do anything the Air Corps wants me to, but I don’t want to fly the B-24 any more.” They assigned me to an instructor school in B-17's where I was to go and become an instructor, however, while I was still in Atlantic City, some Air Corps Officer tapped me on the shoulder one day. I was with my navigator, the one who had started to fly back to the States with me in the old B-17, and he said, “Are you fellows going to be a round here for a while?” I said, “Well, I guess we are going to be here another week or so.” He said, “How would you like to go on a War Bond Tour?” We said, “Sure.” He said, “Next Monday report up to this hotel in New York City, and from there you will be taken on a War Bond tour. You will go to theaters, etc., and talk about your experiences in the war.” So we did that.

Mr. Cox: How did you like doing that?

Mr. Bennett: It was great.

Mr. Cox: Please describe how they did a War Bond drive. You would go to a theater and they would turn the lights on and you fellows would get on the stage...

Mr. Bennett: We all met in New York City at this hotel. The next morning we got on a train and went up to Albany, New York, the capital of New York State, and that night there was a dinner function for the New York State Newspaper Association. I had the pleasure of sitting next to Thomas E. Dewey. He was the Governor of New York at that time. He sat next to me and asked all kinds of questions about the war. Incidentally, it was a few years later that he ran for President of the United States. He thought for sure he was elected, except Truman beat him out. Each night we would go to a theater in a different city. It would be publicized in the local newspapers that there was going to be a War Bond rally at the theater during the intermission of the movie, and my navigator and I represented the Air Corps. They had a guy from the Navy, a Marine, and a Coastguard man. They tried to get

fellows from different branches of the services and each one would get up and talk, without any notes, and there were no suggestions as to what we would talk about. We would just get up and talk.

Mr. Cox: What did you talk about, your experiences?

Mr. Bennett: Yes. Each of the servicemen would talk about where he had served and what some of his experiences were, what it was like to either get shot down somewhere, or in the case of the Navy guy, his boat got shot out from under him and he wound up in a lifeboat for quite a while. So, each one talked about his experiences, and then they would ask people to make pledges for War Bonds. The next day we might go during the day to a defense plant, in one case it was a place making airplane engines, whatever they were making. Every factory in New York State had a lot of manufacturing. We would go to all of these defense plants and often times we would speak during the lunch hour in the factory cafeteria. It was very interesting. That lasted about a week and a half or two.

Mr. Cox: Were you fellows well received by the public?

Mr. Bennett: Oh yes.

Mr. Cox: They were quite patriotic?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, yes indeed, because this was still early in the war and there weren't too many returning veterans coming back yet. We were an oddity. Yes, we were very well received.

Mr. Cox: You said that it was a very good experience for you?

Mr. Bennett: Oh Yes, in one of the theaters we were going to speak at one night I had the pleasure of sitting with Janet McDonald. You may remember she was a film star, singer, Nelson Eddy & Janet McDonald, the sweethearts of the silver screen. They had a lot of the Hollywood stars who, in addition to the soldiers were on the war bond tour.

Mr. Cox: On your war bond tour, did you just go back east, or did you travel?

Mr. Bennett: It was throughout New York State. They had other groups in other states. Then, when that got over with, I was sent to Columbus, Ohio, where they

had a B-17 instructor school. They had fellows there that were back from the Pacific, and also pilots coming back from Europe and North Africa whose term was up. The reason for sending them to instructor school was so they could unlearn all of the bad habits they had picked up flying in combat. Flying in combat is one thing, but you don't want to teach young kids, just learning to fly these bombers, some of the things that you did while you were flying in combat.

Mr. Cox: Can you think of anything specifically that you would do as a combat flyer that was verboten?

Mr. Bennett: No, not that dramatically, but they just wanted to take the rusty edges off of us and have us do it the way the book said each of the procedures should be done. In combat you take a lot of shortcuts that I can't innumerate really, so we had to learn how to do it by the book. Then I was shipped to Tampa, Florida, to a B-17 school to teach and instruct.

Mr. Cox: So you are down there in Tampa teaching B-17's. What were the age of the pilots at this point in the war that you were training?

Mr. Bennett: They were real young kids. They were about 20 or 21, and I think I was about 23, so you see they weren't as mature as I was – Ha! I didn't really enjoy being an instructor too much. I had done enough flying and I realized that airplanes were heavier than air. When you are teaching young kids just out of Cadet school, sometimes you would rather be doing something else. I managed to get sent to some other training schools. I went to the Air Corps Intelligence School over in Orlando and spent a couple of months there. Then I came back and I was teaching off and on in an Air Corps Intelligence Ground School. I was still doing flying too, but I didn't do any more flying than I had to. Then I got myself sent to a Bombing Radar School. Radar was a fairly new thing and they were starting to apply it to bombing from airplanes. I went to that school for a while with the idea in mind that I would learn everything there was to know about radar bombing and then I would go back to Tampa, Florida, and teach

it to the people there. Before I could ever start teaching one of these courses I got sent off to another school. The next one was to an Air Corps Instrument Flying School in Bryan, Texas. I took that for a couple of months and became an expert on instrument flying. We would fly around over the east coast without ever looking at the ground – just fly on instruments all the time.

Mr. Cox: Did they have your windows covered?

Mr. Bennett: Yes.

Mr. Cox: Did you take off and land...?

Mr. Bennett: Yes. However, you had an instructor sitting next to you. He could see. When you were learning these things, the student was under a hood, and you couldn't see out at all, but it would be foolhardy not to have someone sitting in the plane who could see out.

Mr. Cox: So the student would look strictly at instruments?

Mr. Bennett: Yes, do everything on instruments. You would get “punchy” after about two or three hours flying around under this black hood just looking at an instrument panel. I didn't care too much for that. Finally, after a while there, I was told to go to Alamogordo, New Mexico, and become a B-29 instructor because the B-29 was just becoming very, very important in the Pacific, and they wanted to turn out more aircrews in B-29. I had never seen a B-29 and I didn't know anything about it, so I felt like I was going to go out and be like the “blind leading the blind.”

Mr. Cox: That was my next question. They sent you out there to be an instructor, however, you had never had any instruction on flying a B-29?

Mr. Bennett: I had never seen a B-29.

Mr. Cox: They were quite different, instrument-wise, etc., weren't they?

Mr. Bennett: Well, it was like a very large B-17, but much, much larger and quite different, yes very different. So, I would have had to have done an awful lot of training myself to fly a B-29 before I could train somebody else. One of the interesting things on going to Alamogordo, I had my own car at this

point and I drove from Florida to New Mexico to go to Alamogordo, which was about a five day trip in those days over the roads that they had. Incidentally, the national speed limit at that time was 35 miles per hour, so from Florida to New Mexico at 35 miles an hour was a long, slow trip. Of course you didn't want to go much faster than 35 miles an hour over a lot of the roads that were so bad. When I arrived in New Mexico it was in the middle of the summer, and it was hot and dusty. I went to the Officers' Club to get a cold lemonade or something, and a fellow sitting at the bar next to me said, "Did you just get in?" I said, "Yes, I just arrived about an hour ago." He said, "You weren't here last night then?" I said, "No." He said, "You should have been here because an ammunition dump blew up out in the desert several miles from here. It rattled all of the windows all over the place." I was sorry that I had missed that, but interestingly it was about two months later that Harry Truman announced that they had dropped the A Bomb on Hiroshima, and it became known that the first testing of this A Bomb was in Alamogordo, New Mexico, the day before I arrived. The cover story for the explosion everyone had heard was that an ammunition dump had blown up out in the desert. That was the cover story for the test firing of the A Bomb. So, I was there for a couple of months, and after the A Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima it was quite apparent that the war was going to wind down very soon. I got sent back to New Jersey to be released from the Air Corps. This would have been at the end of '45. That is when I exited the Air Corps.

Mr. Cox: Do you remember your discharge date?

Mr. Bennett: No.

Mr. Cox: You just remember that you got out in '45.

Mr. Bennett: I would guess that it was probably around the first of December.

Mr. Cox: What did you do after your got out of the Air Corps?

Mr. Bennett: Before I had gone into the Air Corps I was working for Standard Oil of New Jersey. Being a very responsible company, they had promised all of the

people who had left to go into the military that they could have their old jobs back when the war was over, so I went back there and took up my career with them.

Mr. Cox: And you retired from them?

Mr. Bennett: I stayed there for about 42 years and spent my career in the Advertising Department. Forty-two glorious years in advertising.

Mr. Cox: Is there anything else you would like to add before we conclude our interview?

Mr. Bennett: I will think of something in about ten minutes, but not right now.

Mr. Cox: Thank you very much Dick.

Tape #1070

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