

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

*Center for Pacific War Studies*

*Fredericksburg, Texas*

Interview with

**Mr. Ken Marks**

(World War II - U.S. Army Air Force B-24 Flight Engineer)

(China-Burma-India)

Date of Interview: April 2, 2005

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(World War II - US Army Air Force/B-24 Flight Engineer)  
(China-Burma-India – CBI)**

This is Eddie Graham and today is April 2, 2005. I am interviewing Mr. Ken Marks at the Crown Plaza Hotel, in Dallas, Texas. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Center for War Studies, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

**Mr. Graham:** OK, let's start off Mr. Marks – please tell us when and where were you born.

**Mr. Marks:** I was born May 30, 1922, in New York City.

**Mr. Graham:** What were the names of your parents?

**Mr. Marks:** My Father's name was Mortimer Marks and my Mother's name was Isabel.

**Mr. Graham:** Where did you go to school?

**Mr. Marks:** I went to school on Long Island, New York in Saint Albans.

**Mr. Graham:** Where were you and what were you doing on December 7, 1941?

**Mr. Marks:** On December 7, 1941, I had been in the service for three days. I was at Fort Dix, New Jersey, getting shots when I heard about Pearl Harbor.

**Mr. Graham:** Please tell us about how you ended up getting into the U.S. Army Air Corps?

**Mr. Marks:** Initially, myself and two of my buddies went out to join the Canadian Air Force. This was at the end of 1940. Every time you rode a subway in New York you saw all of these signs about joining the Canadian Air Force and help fight for democracy. We went, but unfortunately I was the only one that passed the physical. I brought the paper work home for my Father to sign and he would have nothing to do with it. He said, "No, no, no!" It took me until

December '41 and he finally agreed to let me go into the U.S. Army Air Corps so I went down and joined the Air Corps. They put me in right away, and as I say, I was over at Fort Dix, New Jersey, I didn't have a uniform yet. I had gotten a physical and some shots.

**Mr. Graham:**

Where did you take your basic training?

**Mr. Marks:**

I never took basic training. The war started and I believe it was about the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> of December, anyway a couple of days after the Pearl Harbor attack, they grabbed a bunch of us together and they said, "Things are in a hurry now and you people are going to Aircraft Mechanics' School."

**Mr. Graham:**

Where was that?

**Mr. Marks:**

That was at Sheppard Field, Wichita Falls, Texas. The school was supposed to be for a year. We were going to take a condensed course, and we did for five months. We never received basic training – any of us. We took the course and it was pretty interesting. We had to study most of the nights. I never ever got a pass except I had two brothers in the service at that time and they were both being shipped out. My Mother, who had never been out of the city of New York, took a train to California and saw them as one was loading on the ship and one was leaving in a day or two, and then on the way home she stopped at Wichita Falls and just went in to see the CO. Some how or other she got in and they gave me a pass for two days to spend with my Mom, which I did. Then she went on home. That was the only pass I had in five months. When they said it was a concentrated course, they meant it. About a week before we graduated they asked if any of us would be interested in volunteering to go to Gunnery School. If so, we could then train to be Flight Engineers and Gunners and be on flying pay. That sounded pretty good to me. I don't know how many of us volunteered, but a few of us did. It just so happened that it was

myself and two of my buddies. We graduated school, got on a train, went to Harlingen, Texas, went to Gunnery School which was a five-week course. In fact, the two guys that I went through Gunnery School with we all ended up in the CBI and neither of those two survived. We graduated at the end of June. This is still in 1942 and I was sent to Boise, Idaho where they put me on a crew. There I was Assistant Flight Engineer on an B-17 and I still hadn't flown in a bomber.

**Mr. Graham:** Were you forming your crew at Boise?

**Mr. Marks:** This is where our crew was formed. We all got together. At that time there were four 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants, four Staff Sergeants and Private Kenneth Marks. They didn't think too much of me. In a few months I was promoted to SSgt.

**Mr. Graham:** How long were you there forming your crew?

**Mr. Marks:** We stayed there for 30 days. We formed it and took our first flying training to really learn about the airplane (B-17) because I found out I wasn't the only one on the crew that had never been in a B-17. We flew B-17's; we lost a number of crews crashing into the mountains around Boise, and I always remember General Arnold coming up from Idaho to talk to us. He said that we needed the airplanes, we need the crews. He said you have to have one man, either the pilot, the co-pilot, or the Engineer to look at the mountains because they are not going to move. I guess that saved some of us. We were there for 30 days. That was our first phase of training and then we went to Alamogordo, New Mexico and there we took our second phase of training. I am sure we were being trained for operations in Africa because we were out in the desert. As we took our second phase of training we were getting pretty good at it by then and getting used to one another. There was a lot of flying. After finishing our training at Alamogordo we were sent

to Topeka, Kansas, where we took our third phase of training and we were really concentrating on bombing and gunnery training. All of a sudden we were really working at combat. We worked at that pretty hard. At the end of that 30 days we were shipped to Fort Worth, Texas. We didn't know what we were doing there, but when we got there we found out. We weren't going overseas in a B-17; we were going in a B-24. We trained in a B-24 for one week and then we were sent to Smyrna, Tennessee, to pick up an airplane and go overseas. We went to Smyrna and I wasn't the only confused one. In the first place, there was no base. There was an airstrip, but no base. We were put up at the Andrew Jackson Hotel. At that time it was a pretty nice hotel. I had never stayed in a hotel, but our pilot was supposed to be our commander and we did have a commander for all 15 crews of us. Airplanes started coming in two or three at a time and the pilots picked numbers. As I recall, we were about the seventh or eighth crew to go – something like that.

**Mr. Graham:**

Were these all new planes from the factory?

**Mr. Marks:**

These were brand new airplanes – brand new B-24's. Most of the crew members, including myself as Assistant Engineer, had only one week of training in a B-24, but we were going overseas in one. They did give us tech orders and all the way overseas we read them trying to learn about the aircraft. With us it didn't work too good because we had a problem. When our plane came in we were sent to Palm Beach, Florida. All they did there was issue us clothing, etc. They sent us down to 36<sup>th</sup> Street Airfield in Miami, Florida. From there we left on Christmas morning 1942 from the States. We didn't know where we were going. We were supposed to fly a certain course for an hour and then open up our orders. Our orders were to go to the 7<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group in India. We were all set to go to England.

**Mr. Graham:** What route did you take to get to India after leaving Florida?

**Mr. Marks:** We went to Puerto Rico, down through South America. We landed in Brazil on our third morning out. Everything was fine, but when we took off from there the next day we lost hydraulic pressure, and all electrical systems went out, everything seemed to go wrong with that airplane. We all assisted in various jobs and we got around and made an emergency landing, but we only had one wheel on the runway and the other one hit a big pile of sand. The aircraft spun out and it was badly damaged. They were going to repair our airplane and get us going, but unfortunately other airplanes were coming in and having trouble and they kept using our airplane to cannibalize it for parts. I think we were there about three weeks and they sent us to Belem, Brazil and we hitchhiked over to India.

**Mr. Graham:** Hitchhiked?

**Mr. Marks:** That is basically what we called it. We were just going down to Base Operations trying to get an airplane ride and they finally got a C-54 that took us pretty much all the way. It took us to Karachi, India. There we got our own airplane again. We were back in a B-24 and we reported to Pandaveswar, India, where the 7<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group was. I think it took us about seven weeks to get there. I can't say that I really didn't enjoy it because a few of the crew members took a ride up the Amazon River and we had a ball. It wasn't planned that way.

**Mr. Graham:** I'm curious. You left Palm Beach, Florida, and you didn't open your orders until you were in the air? How did you make arrangements to know that you were to land at this other base.

**Mr. Marks:** Our navigator – we were instructed where to go, what course to take and then to open the orders. We were all in on that interview.

**Mr. Graham:** But after you got in the air you didn't know where you were going.

**Mr. Marks:** Well, they had us going on the right course.

**Mr. Graham:** True, but the base you were going into were expecting you?

**Mr. Marks:** Yes. There were a lot of them there.

**Mr. Graham:** OK. You got over there and you got your own airplane...

**Mr. Marks:** And we reported to Pandaveswar. We were assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, the 7<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, and as I said, one of our guys got sick. Our co-pilot was taken and put on another crew since they needed a co-pilot. I think we were there about four days when they grabbed me and said I was flying with so-and-so. I flew my first mission with a crew that I had never known, didn't know any of them, and they didn't know me. I asked what happened to their engineer and was told that he had gotten shot, so I was the replacement. I didn't tell them that I knew very little about that airplane. At any rate, I completed the first mission and I ended up flying six missions with that crew.

**Mr. Graham:** What kind of missions did you fly?

**Mr. Marks:** We were bombing Japanese targets in Burma. I think that out of that first six there was one that we went on a sea hunt looking for Japanese shipping. If you found them and were successful you received credit for a combat mission. If you didn't find them it was an administrative mission. After the sixth mission we were all transferred over to the 492<sup>nd</sup>, which was a new squadron that was just being formed. From there on I pretty well flew with my regular crew, less the co-pilot since he stayed with the 9<sup>th</sup> Bomb Sq. He was with a crew and they liked him. He flew about ten missions and then I think on the tenth or eleventh mission he was killed. We were assigned a pilot, our pilot, Lt Bill Adams, flew one mission that we completed, but on the second mission he aborted and went back. We took off, but we never completed the mission. He

turned around, landed the airplane, and he never flew again.

**Mr. Graham:** Why did you abort?

**Mr. Marks:** He was scared. Just too much. He couldn't take it. I never saw him or heard of him after that.

**Mr. Graham:** Did he have to drop his bombs before he landed?

**Mr. Marks:** No, we landed with a full load. We were still over friendly territory.

**Mr. Graham:** I just heard somewhere one time that it wasn't safe to try to land with those bombs because...

**Mr. Marks:** I know, but the rest of the crew didn't even know what was happening. We went around and all of a sudden he set us down and he quit flying. I don't know what happened to him. Probably was promoted to Colonel or something. Then we were a crew without a pilot or a co-pilot. We were just flying with any pilot or co-pilot that would come along. We flew a lot of missions with a pilot named Joe Crownover, our first pilot. He had about 30 missions as a co-pilot. He joined us and the co-pilots were just no particular guy. We were sort of a make-up crew. We flew a lot of missions that way and I was over there for a little less than two years and completed 59 combat missions. We were originally told that the length of our tour was to be 25 missions. That is what they had told us in the States too because I had put in for pilot training. I was selected as we were getting ready to go overseas. I went in and talked to my Commanding Officer about it and he asked me what I wanted to do. I told him that I really didn't know what to do. I thought that I had an obligation to the crew that I had been training with. He said that I should go overseas and complete my missions and he would put on my records that I should be given priority for cadet training. He said that I should be back in about six months. So that is what I agreed to, but it didn't work that way. I didn't get



back for two years, and at the end of the two years I went in and tried again. They said then that all of the pilot training schools were full. I never did get to go to cadets.

**Mr. Graham:** Let me ask you something about co-pilots. Normally can they work themselves into being the pilot?

**Mr. Marks:** Normally yes. Usually about half way through the missions, or depending on how many pilots were lost they would check out as first pilot. That is what happened to us later on after Joe Crownover went home. We just switched. We were flying with a lot of pilots. I checked out and became a First Engineer. At that point I was flying mostly with brand new crews. I think I flew with our regular crew about 35 of the 59 missions. That is a rough estimate. The rest of them I was just flying. I was taking new crews and by then I was the old hand. I was flying with them to get them trained for one or two missions and then their regular First Engineer would take over.

**Mr. Graham:** Fifty-nine missions is a lot. You didn't fly them all in one particular area. Where all did you fly?

**Mr. Marks:** It was all over. We flew all over Burma. We had some targets in China. We went down to Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal to bomb Japanese shipping at Port Blair. Even the Japanese were surprised because no one had ever flown that far on a bombing mission.

**Mr. Graham:** Were you in on the bombing of the Bridge at the River Kwai?

**Mr. Marks:** No. We had bombed a lot of bridges. There were a lot of bridges over the river Kwai and we had bombed some of them, but that particular bridge I wouldn't know whether we bombed it or not. A lot of times you would bomb the bridge and they were wooden bridges, and they had forced labor and could rebuild within a week or so. We also went down as far as Bangkok. I think Andaman

Islands was our longest mission and as I recall it lasted about 14 hours and 40 minutes.

**Mr. Graham:** What about the Japanese fighter planes. Did you ever encounter them?

**Mr. Marks:** I would say that about 60% of our targets we encountered fighter aircraft. Almost every time we were hit by anti-aircraft fire.

**Mr. Graham:** Did you shoot any planes down yourself?

**Mr. Marks:** I wouldn't know. I think I did, but when you are reporting an airplane and you have a squadron of six or seven airplanes in the air and we were all shooting at it, you know the squadron receives credit for the plane. I know a lot of people claimed them. Most of us didn't because who knows who shot it down. All we wanted to do was get the plane out of there.

**Mr. Graham:** You didn't care who shot him; just get him shot down. Do you recall any particular bombing missions?

**Mr. Marks:** I would say all of our missions over the city of Rangoon. Rangoon was probably one of the toughest targets that we hit. The anti-aircraft was accurate, there were bunches of the Japanese Zeroes, but the ones in particular were from November 27<sup>th</sup> to December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943. We flew four missions, all against the same targets. They were all in the Rangoon area. Our squadron was concentrating on the Ensein Oil Refinery. They knew we were coming. Tokyo Rose got on the radio and told us that they knew we were coming and said, "We've got plenty of guys up there to meet you."

**Mr. Graham:** Unfortunately she was right.

**Mr. Marks:** They brought them in especially for that raid. We never saw that many airplanes. We took a beating, but we got our target. We went in there and I never did understand because we never changed the altitude or the time we hit them. They could set their

watches by us. We would always go in at 20,000 feet at noon. The fighters – you could see that they would meet you. First you would see the scouts up there just flying alongside you out of range. Then, all of a sudden, they would be coming in at you, and then as you made your turn in toward the target onto the initial point (IP) they all got out of there. They didn't go through the anti-aircraft. We went through the anti-aircraft. Fighters were waiting for those of us that got thru it and they particularly picked on the guys that had been hurt by the anti-aircraft. I must have been the only person in our squadron that went on all four of those missions. That I remember very well.

**Mr. Graham:** Do you remember what your percentage or rate of loss was?

**Mr. Marks:** On those raids, on the last one on December 1<sup>st</sup>, I was lucky enough to be on the only airplane that got back from our squadron. They sent out six of us that day. One crew went down in the Bay of Bengali, and they got them back. One crew landed somewhere on the beach, but we were the only crew that came back to our squadron.

**Mr. Graham:** The crews that had to bail out, did most of them come back or did they get captured?

**Mr. Marks:** On the ones that bailed out into the Bay of Bengali, five of them were picked up. I don't know whether they were flying a D model airplane or the H model airplane. On the H model you had to have one extra man. I assume they were like I was – on the D model and they did pick up five of them. I believe the one on the beach had three men killed.

**Mr. Graham:** I understand the Japanese didn't treat pilots or aircrews very well.

**Mr. Marks:** I learned how they treated them so badly later on in life when coming to these CBI meetings. My wife and I were having breakfast at the hotel one morning before the meeting and a guy was

looking for a place to sit and I told him to join us. We were staring at one another and all of a sudden he said to me, "I think your name is Ken Marks." I said, "Yes." He was in the same squadron with me for a while. I should say he trained in the squadron with me. When we got into combat he was in one of the other squadrons, the 436<sup>th</sup> that used the same runway as we did. We had two runways for the group and the 436<sup>th</sup> and 492<sup>nd</sup> used the one runway, and the 9<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group and the 493<sup>rd</sup> used the other one. We got to talking and we spent a lot of time together, but we hadn't seen each other for 20 or 30 years by that time. He had been shot down on the December 1<sup>st</sup> mission. He told me he got shot down and he bailed out. He was reported missing in action. If anyone saw any parachutes we tried to keep track of them if we could, but we couldn't really do that. Especially not when you are trying to watch somebody else trying to shoot at you. He said when he bailed out his chute opened right at tree top level. I believe his story was that four of his crew members made it. He said the pilot did make it, and in 1945 – I had already returned to the States – when they knew that the war was over the Japanese was preparing to evacuate their prisoner of war camps. I guess the British and Americans were both closing in on the base, and he said his pilot was taken out and shot. He said, "I don't know why. We all knew something was going on and all of a sudden they took him out and shot him. The next day the base was deserted by the Japanese and the Brits arrived." I just recently heard that he passed away. He did say the treatment was pretty bad all the way around. He did say that on raids when he was still in the camp, they put their POW camps pretty close to the main targets. He said he could see us bombing, but we never dropped a bomb on the camp. That made you feel good.

**Mr. Graham:** Let's see — you had 59 missions.

**Mr. Marks:** Yes, I had 59 missions, 479 combat hours.

**Mr. Graham:** What date did you finally get released to come back?

**Mr. Marks:** That was a strange story. Let me tell you – when you were asking me about particular missions, after these four missions we rested up and I remember that on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December we were selected out and loaded up with mines and we went down and low-leveled the mouth of the river at Rangoon. That was really hairy because we did it at about 100 feet. We were used to 20,000 feet. At 100 feet everybody was shooting at us and we were told that if we were getting hit we should shoot back; if we weren't being hit, don't because all you will do is give them a target. We were going in just about at dawn to make our bomb run. That was a scary mission. They were all scary, but that one you had the searchlights on you – you had everything on you and the first plane may have been a surprise, but every one after that was a big target.

**Mr. Graham:** Did you drop the mines in the river.

**Mr. Marks:** We dropped the mines in the water.

**Mr. Graham:** They didn't explode upon impact?

**Mr. Marks:** No. They would activate themselves. The water would activate them later on. They pretty well stopped all of the shipping into Rangoon, which was the main Japanese support for the Japanese Army in Burma.

**Mr. Graham:** Did these mines slowly go under water a little bit?

**Mr. Marks:** We didn't hang around to see. I assume they went right down in the water and then when they were activated they would find whatever ship was around. It was really a scary mission.

**Mr. Graham:** Is that the only time that you made that type of mission?

**Mr. Marks:** No, I made two more like it. That was the one I remembered. On that mission I was flying in the top turret and I

couldn't see anything because I couldn't see the ground, but I knew we were right next to it. Years later I had a nephew, very well educated guy, and he said, "Well, Uncle Kenny, let me ask you something." He said, "If you got scared." I said, "Yeah, I got scared like everybody else." He said, "Why did you continue flying?" I asked him, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, if you were scared and people shooting at you, why did you continue flying?" I said, "I didn't know I had an option." I happened to be one of five brothers that all served in World War II.

**Mr. Graham:** That is commendable.

**Mr. Marks:** We are still alive and doing well.

**Mr. Graham:** What branch of the service were the other brothers in?

**Mr. Marks:** My two younger brothers were in the Navy, and the two older brothers were in the Army (the ground Army). My oldest brother ended up in the Phillipines, the one younger than him – first, the two of them went to Hawaii. This was right after December 7<sup>th</sup>. The main reason was to defend the island, but he said they had no guns. To make it look like they had cannons, they were cutting down palm trees and putting them up acting like they cannons. That went on for a while and then they were both brought back to train troops. They had gone in when the National Guard was federalized. That was about 1939. They didn't get home until 1945. The other brother ended up with Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army through Europe. The two kid brothers – one was on the USS Santee, which was torpedoed but it wasn't sunk. I know he was in nine different battles. The other brother was on an LST and he was the only who never saw combat. When the war ended he was on an LST over in the Phillipines practicing for the landing in Japan.

**Mr. Graham:** OK, let go back. How did you finally get released?

**Mr. Marks:** I had 59 missions and we finally got some relief troops and I

was sent to Karachi supposedly to train Chinese gunners. I don't know why because I don't think they had any airplanes, but we were going to train Chinese gunners. I got diverted to Tezpur and I was flying gasoline over the Hump to Kunming to the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force. They were terrible missions. We were so overloaded that according to the books we couldn't take off, but we did. We took every gun off our aircraft. If we had shot a gun we would have blown ourselves up. We loaded all our bomb bays up with bomb bay tanks and 55 gallon drums in the waist windows, etc. We just carried every drop that we could.

**Mr. Graham:** You were a flying bomb.

**Mr. Marks:** That's right. If you saw a fighter you just had to hide because you had no way to protect yourself. We couldn't get over the mountains, so you were totally dependent upon your navigator to get you through the mountains.

**Mr. Graham:** Did you have to weave through the mountains then?

**Mr. Marks:** I don't know if it was really weaving. He was a pretty good navigator. Just about two years ago I was down in Florida and our ex-bombardier was living down there. After the war he got out of the service. I stayed in. I actually got out and then went back in. We were just talking about him. I said, "You know, I've always thought about Lt Spiegel (the navigator) and what a great navigator he was because wherever we had to go he got us there." I said, "I don't know how because I get lost going to a different town." He said, "Kenny, you would be surprised, I roomed with him and he drank half a bottle of vodka before every missions."

**Mr. Graham:** There's the secret.

**Mr. Marks:** I am glad that I didn't know it then. Anyway, I flew 16 round trips over the hump. Sixteen carrying gas and 16 back to get another load. Then I was sent back to Karachi because our

squadron had sent six airplanes over there and we lost three of them. The losses were not due to enemy action. We were over-taxing the airplanes. When I got back to Karachi I was given orders to return to the States. I met up with some of my regular crew that I started with – the gunners that I started with. We all met and were on the same orders and we all hitch-hiked home.

**Mr. Graham:** Where did you get discharged?

**Mr. Marks:** I got discharged at Mitchell Field, New York. I went back in '44 and I spent a few months doing nothing. Then I got on a B-29 crew, again as an Engineer, and I was training on a B-29 crew when they dropped the Atomic Bomb. The war was over and they sent me to Mitchell Field and out I went. I got out in October 1945. I was one of the young guys to get out.

**Mr. Graham:** It is obvious that you've had a lot of interesting moments, but of all the time you spent over there, are there any particular experiences or people that you still think about more than the others?

**Mr. Marks:** The people that I think about are my crew. I stayed in touch with the enlisted portion of the crew. There are only two of us left now and I won't see him until next week. I see him as often as I can. He was the first Engineer that I worked with. I was his Assistant. We've stayed pretty close. In fact, on the night that I was sworn in as National Commander of the CBIVA I had him sitting with two of my brothers and their wives that were there. His wife was telling my brother's wife, "I know you are all considered family, but I've known Kenny longer than you two have." Smittey and I used to double-date with her and my girl friend at the time.

**Mr. Graham:** I can't think of anything to ask you. Is there anything that you want to add.

**Mr. Marks:** No, that is about it. Me and my brothers all get along. We see one another very often. We are all healthy and happy and we



feel very lucky about it. I stayed out of the Army for about a year and then I enlisted and we back into the Air Corps. I went overseas to Korea and Guam. Anyway, I completed 20 years in the Air Corps. When I got out I joined an aircraft company and manufactured escape and survival equipment. I stayed with them for about 14 years, and then I went out on my own as a consultant. I was self-employed as a consultant until December '04. I said that I wasn't going to work any more. They didn't believe me, but I haven't been into the office since January 1<sup>st</sup> of 2005. I guess they believe it now.

**Mr. Graham:** On behalf of the Nimitz Museum, I want to thank you very much for sharing this with us. You have a very rich story to tell and it is going to add very profoundly to our library.

**Mr. Marks:** I'm glad that I could help. I stopped at the Library. I've been there. We were in San Antonio and going to drive home. I said that I wanted to stop by the Museum in Fredericksburg for a couple of hours, but we spent the rest of the day there. We loved every moment of it. It is one of the better museums.

**Mr. Graham:** Thank you.

**Note:** For my services during WW II, I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and four Air Medals. I am a charter member of the Distinguished Flying Cross Society.

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