

National Museum of the Pacific War

*Nimitz Education and Research Center
Fredericksburg, Texas*

*Interview with John Dehaven
U.S. Army Air Corps*

Interview with John Dehaven

This is Cork Morris and today is September 26, 2005. I am interviewing Mister John Dehaven at the Menger Hotel in San Antonio, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies archive for the National Museum of the Pacific War for the preservation of historical information related to this site. I appreciate you taking your time to talk with us. What I usually like to do is a little background, when you were born, where you were born and a little bit about your folks.

Mr. Dehaven: I was born in Findlay, Ohio in 1917. I think my mother; I was born in her home. We've always lived there. I went to school at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. Graduated in 1940 and then in 1941 I was drafted.

Mr. Morris: Before Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Dehaven: Oh yes. I went o Camp Walters (?), Texas. I was in the Infantry. But I had gone ahead down and made an application for taking a physical for the Army Air Corps. On Pearl Harbor day, I happened to be in Dallas that day and then when we got back to Camp Walters, (?) Texas, I got transferred into the training for the Air Corps, Army Air Corps. I think it was in January and then, originally, we went to, for flight training up in Saxton, (?) Missouri. We went through primary training there and then we went to secondary training at Randolph Field. Our final training we went to Foster (?) Field.

Mr. Morris: Where's that?

Mr. Dehaven: Foster Field? Mary? Mary? Where were we in.....(pause)

Mr. Morris: I think that was in the Detroit area.

Mr. Dehaven: I got my commission there in September of '42. Then I was.....an instructor there for a while, and then that's when, I think that was the year I went to Westover Field in Massachusetts. Instructed a little bit and, I don't know what the circumstances were, but something came up about Madam Chang Kai Shek came and talked to Roosevelt with the idea of starting a composite of American and Chinese....a Chinese-American composite wing. I guess I volunteered for that and went to Mitchell Field and, at that time, that was the original group. We were in the Third Fighter Group. From there we went to Karachi, India and trained with the Chinese fellows.

Mr. Morris: How did you get to Karachi? Boat?

- Mr. Dehaven:** By plane. We went to South America and across the Ascension Islands and then across, then by Africa and across Africa and across to India. Of course, that now, is Pakistan, Karachi is. Then we trained with the Chinese boys. We just had the other group commander and squadron commanders and flight and that was the entire compliment we had, as far as the Americans go. The Chinese came and they filled in the rest of the organization. They had a group commander and squadron commanders plus they had also had flight leaders, I think, and then also they had the rest of the compliment of the pilots. At that time, we went to, from China we went to Guilin...
- Mr. Morse:** You wouldn't know how to spell that would you?
- Mr. Dehaven:** I can't remember exactly. That's where we went on flights with them.
- Mr. Morse:** Where did the Chinese pilots get their training?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Some of them, the head fellows, trained on Russian planes, as I understand. The younger pilots, a number of them, trained here in the United States. They could speak some English. The head fellows didn't speak very good English.
- Mr. Morse:** Was communicating a problem?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Really, not too bad. The Chinese are certainly smart (?) people. Then we went from there.....when they decided to have a fifth fighter group. Another pilot, and myself, we went back to Karachi, India again to help train the Fifth Fighter Group. Then we went back to China with them. Finally ended up there in Chi kiang, (?) China. I think at Guilan, the Japanese were starting to come in there and so that's where I spent the rest of my time.
- Mr. Morris:** What, how far away were the Japanese from your base?
- Mr. Dehaven:** They weren't too close then. Boy, I forget some of the....we used to fly down towards, what's the island down south of....off of China?
- Mr. Morris:** Taiwan?
- Mr. Dehaven:** No. Didn't go to Taiwan. Hong Kong? Yeah. Then in '45 I got out of the service and (unintelligible) World War Two.
- Mr. Morris:** What did a mission consist of? What kind of targets were you going after?
- Mr. Dehaven:** It was more for air raids. We carried bombs and a couple ofThe old P-40s, they had a five hindered pound bomb underneath each wing. They had

a tank, five hundred gallon, underneath. Of course, I'll always remember, at Chi kiang, (?) they were still building runways there and where they made, maybe three, or four hundred, koolies pulling a roller and when the got finished they had built a real good runway.

Mr. Morris: All by hand? Shovels and.....

Mr. Dehaven: All by hand.

Mr. Morris: How long were these flights?

Mr. Dehaven: Oh, between three and four hours. I remember one night we were coming back from a mission and I got lost from the rest of the fellows, some way. So I, you know, you start going off one direction, you really get lost. I thought I was in the right vicinity and I shot off my machine gun over the town. Then they turned the lights off down there. Then, all of a sudden, I saw a light come on, must have been twenty, or thirty miles, away and I figured that was where I was suppose to go. I came back to Chi kiang and made a night landing. So at least, I stayed in the same area.

Mr. Morris: Did you do a lot of night flights, or was that unusual?

Mr. Dehaven: Not too much. There were some, but not too much.

Mr. Morris: What was really your primary mission? Blowing up the supply lines, the trains, the barges, or bridges?

Mr. Dehaven: Yeah. They were mostly bridges. Not too much of the trains.

Mr. Morris: Were you ever under threat of being overrun by the Japanese?

Mr. Dehaven: No. Not where we were. We really weren't.

Mr. Morris: I assume that the Japanese had planes to?

Mr. Dehaven: Oh yeah. They had the Zeros. We ran into them a few times. Not too many.

Mr. Morris: How 'd you do?

Mr. Dehaven: I think I had one hit on one. I didn't have any medals from that.

Mr. Morris: How was the P-40 compared to the Zero? Could it keep up?

Mr. Dehaven: The Zero was very maneuverable and were quite quick. The P-40 was a good stable.....it had a lot of torque to it. You had to use a lot of left rudder, like when you're climbing, or going down. It was good, stable little

airplane. We saw the P-51 went to England. Shortly after, not to long, after I left and came back to the United States they did, finally, get P-51s over there.

Mr. Morris: you came back after the war, right?

Mr. Dehaven: No. The war was still on when I came back. In fact, I was in, back in Texas, back in Victoria, Texas.

Mr. Morris: Were you still.....

Mr. Dehaven: I was still there when the war ended.

Mr. Morris: Were you still in the Air Force? Still flying?

Mr. Dehaven: Yes. It was more of a, they had different kind of planes that we flew.

Mr. Morris: Kind of like a test pilot?

Mr. Dehaven: Yeah.

Mr. Morris: Well, back in China, the difference between the (unintelligible) with the Fifth Fighter Group, what happened when.....after the war was winding down, how was the Chinese pilots, were they, like, taking over responsibility for the majority of missions; did it ever work out that way?

Mr. Dehaven: They, when I was there, they were just flying missions and a number of these fellows that came there, to the reunion, they were still there flying with the Chinese. So, consequently, there had become quite a good relationship with the Taiwanese, till the communist took over in '45. Chang Kai Shek and his wife and a lot of the Chinese boys, that's when they went to Taiwan. Then Taiwan developed. Of course for a number of years, they were more sophisticated, I think, in Taiwan, than China. Of course, that has all changed now.

Mr. Morris: Were all the Chinese pilots that you flew with, all Nationalists Chinese? No Communists Chinese?

Mr. Dehaven: No, they were Nationalists.

Mr. Morris: You guys ever, did the vast percentage in the Communist, ever fight side-by-side, or was it, like, mostly separate?.....

Mr. Dehaven: No. It was separate. In fact, in Taiwan, the pilots, they can't go to China. They talk about how China's gonna threaten Taiwan, and all that. I think that is a bunch of bologna. I don't think is ever gonna happen. The

Taiwanese, now, they would, basically, lots of the people from there are going to China. After all, they had brothers and sisters and families there. Of course, I think they made a lot of investments there. In fact, one of my original wingmen hadn't seen.....sixty years we had a reunion, let's see, I think it was here in San Antonio. He ended up, after World War Two, a number of the Chinese moved to the United States and he was in Los Angeles and head become very successful. He got to be in his early 80's now, but he got in the construction and he builds condominiums in Los Angeles. I guess that is why he wasn't here at this meeting. He was busy. I think he has become quite wealthy.

Mr. Morris: Were these Chinese fellows about the same age as you were?

Mr. Dehaven: More, or less. A little younger, maybe. But, actually, World War Two, even if you; you'd have to be up around eighty now. More than that. Because I'm eighty-eight. So I know he has been very successful here, because one of his children graduated from Harvard and one of them from Yale.

Mr. Morris: Back in China, when you were flying, did you guys all bunk together, (unintelligible) that sort of thing.

Mr. Dehaven: Pretty much, yeah.

Mr. Morris: What was the food like? The food any good?

Mr. Dehaven: It was all right. Of course we ate a lot of rice.

Mr. Morris: As I understand it, everything came over the Hump. I mean it.....

Mr. Dehaven: Right, it did. Of course, we flew across and landed when we flew across the....it was in the monsoon season and we had to wait till we got the little upper conditions for flying and we landed close to Kunming, which was across in China. That's where we did some training there and then, from there, we went to Guilan, on the east.

Mr. Morris: What did they have for quarters, tents, or actual wooden housing?

Mr. Dehaven: No, they had (unintelligible). Really, we were treated good and you'd, back in those days, even in the Chinese towns, the people were always nice and we had good relationships with them.

Mr. Morris: I assume it was a pretty pleasant space with, fairly far removed from any kind of city, or anything.

Mr. Dehaven: Not....it wasn't too far away.

- Mr. Morris:** How big a town was that?
- Mr. Dehaven:** I don't know. I imagine thirty, forty thousand, maybe. Pretty good size.
- Mr. Morris:** What was the weather like? What was the climate like up there?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Pretty decent. Pretty good.
- Mr. Morris:** Not like the jungle?
- Mr. Dehaven:** No, no. I guess our group was planning, who ever we got left, are going to Taiwan next year.
- Mr. Morris:** That should be a happy trip.
- Mr. Dehaven:** Some of the fellows, I've never gone, but some of our group has been there before. Of course there's the Chinese Aero, (?) a group of fellows here at this reunion.
- Mr. Morris:** I've been impressed by that. It seemed to be.....
- Mr. Dehaven:** I think they always had a good relationship regarding the Chinese-American contingent wing and so they always were very close to us. It was nice. Of course there were all considerably younger. Of course, our.....there's not too many of us left anymore, you know? How many people get to be eighty-eight? (laughs)
- Mr. Morris:** Good point. I'm not sure I have the patience for it. How about, was there, like a hospital, on the base?
- Mr. Dehaven:** You know, I don't really recall, really, about a.....We had a doctor from our group. A fellow named Kelly. (?) Another one named Forgraves. (?) They, kind of, who we went to. They were with our group there. I know Forgraves is dead. Kelly was a hell of a drinker. Of course, over there, that lightening.....Whew, I couldn't stand that. I think, Forgraves, I know he's dead. Back in my day, they called him, "Foreskin". (laughs)
- Mr. Morris:** While you were there, did you get any furloughs, or leaves or anything like that?
- Mr. Dehaven:** No,
- Mr. Morris:** No place to go. Did you get any kind of Red Cross packages, or every get to see movies or anything like that?

- Mr. Dehaven:** We rarely saw a movie. I think.....Lena Horn, she was an old singer. She's still living. She came with a group of folks from the USO and she sang for us.
- Mr. Morris:** So they had to fly them over the Hump also?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Oh, yeah. She had a wonderful voice. As far as I know, she is, possibly, still living.
- Mr. Morris:** I believe she still is.
- Mr. Dehaven:** She would have to be in her eighties.
- Mr. Morris:** Where did you get your actual flight orders? Like if you're at, somebody wanted a particular bridge blown up, did you guys, was your standing command there at the base, or did you get word from somewhere else?
- Mr. Dehaven:** I think we got it through the, on the base, where we were taking our flights to and from.
- Mr. Morris:** Did this base, this fighter group base, was that all fighters? There were no bombers on that base?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Yes. I think we had a few, at that time; they flew some B-25s, I think off from that base to.
- Mr. Morris:** Who was responsible for, like, the security around the base? You said that the Japanese weren't all that far away. So I assume that you had to have, what, the Chinese Army take care of that?
- Mr. Dehaven:** I think it was the Chinese, mostly that was.
- Mr. Morris:** Did the Japanese ever bomb the base?
- Mr. Dehaven:** We had a few times, not too many, where we were.
- Mr. Morris:** Very effective?
- Mr. Dehaven:** No. Not really.
- Mr. Morris:** Well, toward the end of your stay there, from your perspective in China there, would you, like making an effect on the Japanese? Were you making them, forcing them back?

- Mr. Dehaven:** Not very, we hadn't. In fact, when we were first over there, we had to get out of a couple of things. Like Guailin, where the, because the Japanese took that over.
- Mr. Morris:** Were you there when they did it?
- Mr. Dehaven:** No, I wasn't. I think I had gone back to Karachi, India to help train. That got delayed because a lot of the fellows that came by ship, though the Mediterranean, and the ship was sunk. So there was, they lost some of the fellows who were compliments that were going to come to the Fifth Fighter Group.
- Mr. Morris:** Like torpedoed? German submarine?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Yeah. There was quite a.....gosh I guess, from that ship.....of course, I wasn't there on that. I guess, over a thousand people in that thing. Of course, it kind of puts the Fifth fighter Group in the little disorganization, before they finally made it into Karachi.
- Mr. Morris:** Did you loose may airplanes? Did you have to keep rebuilding airplanes, or do you actually scrap them and get another?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Well, I think the mechanics kept our planes in pretty decent shape. Of course, we lost a few people on missions. They used to build the runway.....it was kind of built over, kind of on top of rice paddies. When you first took off, it was quite a drop off. So you were always, kind of, happy when you got a few hundred feet in the air. I know one of our fellows, his engine cut out and he crashed off the runway and was killed.
- Mr. Morris:** Did that happen a lot?
- Mr. Dehaven:** No. Not when I was there.
- Mr. Morris:** When did you actually leave there?
- Mr.. Dehaven:** Well, I left in,....early in '45. The war was still on when I came back. I went back to Foster (?) Field and we were with a group there and that's where I got out.
- Mr. Morris:** You said you were testing planes. What sort of planes were you working with?
- Mr. Dehaven:** 51s and P-38s and.....
- Mr. Morris:** What were they doing? Modifications on the planes?

- Mr. Dehaven:** They were doing some modifications. Quite a number of those people had come over back from the service, either in England, or France, or.....they came there.
- Mr. Morris:** Was that a fairly large operation, fighter-testing stuff?
- Mr. Dehaven:** It was fairly (unintelligible). OK, when time goes, you know, that's a lot of years ago. You kind of forget about some type of detail.
- Mr. Morris:** I'm sure that's true. What happened when they dropped the bomb in August of '45? You were at Foster Field then?
- Mr. Dehaven:** I was at Foster Field. It wasn't too long after that when the war was over.
- Mr. Morris:** What was the attitude, I mean, I'm sure that everyone was glad the war was over, but did everybody, well you, for example, did you just decide you had had enough of the service?
- Mr. Dehaven:** That's when I went back to Findlay, Ohio where I originally came from.
- Mr. Morris:** Was that, pretty much, the consensus of the flyers you were flying with then, that, because I know a lot of guys had stayed with it and made a career of it.
- Mr. Dehaven:** Yeah. Some of them did.
- Mr. Morris:** What did you do after the service?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Oh, I finally went in business for myself and we were in the lawn and garden business. Finally, my son, after he went to college, he came back and got in the business with me. We've been (unintelligible) with stores in Findlay and Mimar. (?) My wife used to work in the store to, but we are retired from it now.
- Mr. Morris:** You're store just (unintelligible)
- Mr. Dehaven:** Oh Yeah. I have a son and three grandsons that handle it now.
- Mr. Morris:** That's nice. Did you quit fling after that, or did you ever....?
- Mr. Dehaven:** Yeah, I did.
- Mr. Morris:** You didn't fly any plane?
- Mr. Dehaven:** No I didn't.

Mr. Morris: Obviously sounds like you have a (unintelligible) even though it was a war, you really enjoyed your time over there.

Mr. Dehaven: Oh yeah.

Mr. Morris: Did you ever.....any specific people you remember, over there?

Mr. Dehaven: Oh yes. Some, they say, when we had one of these reunions, that the Chinese from Los Angeles, I hadn't seen him after sixty some years ago. I met him for the first time. So it has been interesting. When we started having these reunions, fortunately, John, in the group, he kept it going, the First Fighter Group, I meant our Third Fighter Group, just never planned anything and I have no idea what ever happened to them. When I got in the Fifth Fighter group then, we started coming to some of our reunions and kept some relationships there.

Mr. Morris: You said while you were in the Third Fighter Group at one point, right?

Mr. Dehaven: Originally.

Mr. Morris: Did a lot of those fellows move to the Fifth when they were organizing that?

Mr. Dehaven: No. Just about two of us. I don't know now, he never followed up into the Fifth and whether he is still alive or not, I haven't been able to find out. So, you know, we're all in the eighties, some in their nineties. So my wife and I were hoping that, I think they are planning to go to Taiwan next year, in the spring. Mary and I are going to try to go to that.

Mr. Morris: Sounds like that would be a great time. Well, anything else you'd like to?

Mr. Dehaven: I think that is about all.

Mr. Morris: Well, I sure appreciate your time and I really appreciate your service.

Mr. Dehaven: Well.....(Tape Ends)

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