

## Wesley Fronk Oral History Interview

CORK MORRIS: This is Cork Morris, and today is December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and I'm interviewing Mr. Wesley Fronk. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas, in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information related to this site. Well, I appreciate you coming in and talking to me. As I said, I usually like to start with a little background -- where you were born and your folks and how you came to be in the service.

WESLEY FRONK: Well, good morning, [Curt?]. Pleasure to be here. My name's Wesley R. Fronk Sr. I was born in Jordan, Montana on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1922. My folks were homesteaders originally, and my grandmother and uncle all homesteaded together there around Jordan, Montana. I lived there until about 1928 to '29. We moved over to Belgrade, Montana, where I started school, and eventually then we moved on to near Ellensburg, Washington, Kittitas. Stayed there until about the end of the summer of '34, and my father and I moved back to Barton, North Dakota, which is a little town way up in the north of Rugby, and I attended seventh grade school there.

And then we moved down near Devil's Lake, North Dakota, to a little town called Crary, and I spent the eighth grade and high school there, so I graduated from high school in May of 1940. I ended up starting college at the university of North Dakota in Grand Forks in February of '41, and while I was working there during the summer, I was interviewed by -- for Lockheed for a job in Burbank, California, so I went out there and began working up for Lockheed in October of '41. I worked first on the Lockheed Hudson bombers, the A-29. It never entered the US Air Force inventory. It was being shipped to England, for the battle of the Britain and so forth. Then I transferred to the P38 line, and also what they called the wide P38, which was being shipped to England and to Canada. I entered service on the eighth of December, 1942, a year and a day after Pearl Harbor. I was drafted from Burbank, California. I was inducted at Monterey, California. I went through basic training at Fresno, California, at the old Japanese internment camp, it had been. And then after basic, I was sent right back to Los [Angeles?] to a tech school, and I graduated from the engineering and operations clerical school.

From there, I was sent to Bowman Field, Kentucky, which was the headquarters of the troop carrier command. They then in turn shipped me back out west to Alliance, Nebraska. I was assigned to a troop carrier squadron, and we were engaged in [halting?] paratroopers and pulling gliders and glider infantry. After some time there, I was assigned, actually, as an operations clerk, but I qualified for what they called the army specialized training program. I got shipped to Fort Sheridan, Wyoming, up in Laramie, to what they called the "STAR unit" -- STAR -- Specialized Training and Replacement Unit. I missed the shipment back down to UCLA by one day. I ended up being sent to South Dakota State College in Brookings, South Dakota. I was enrolled in the engineering course. It was an 18-month course, so it led to a commissioning as a second lieutenant. We finished the first nine months -- I started in June of '43 -- finished the first nine months in about March of '44. At that time, the tide of the war seemed to be turning, so they decided they didn't need so many second lieutenant eighteen-month wonders, so they shipped me to the 97<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. And I went through infantry basic there, and one day we were out on flood detail on the Missouri River, filling sandbags. An orderly came from the battalion headquarters and said,

"Bring your gear. We're going back to headquarters and you're shipping out."

So I went back and packed up, and they shipped me then back to Bowman Field, Kentucky, to headquarters troop carrier command. I was working there in the headquarters, and normally headquarters people didn't draw KP. Well, I went out on pass on a Saturday night, came back in, and there was a note on my bunk. "Report for KP at 5:00" or whatever it was. So I got up and went in and was doing my thing, and then the orderly came and said, "Wes, you're off KP. You're shipping out." Well, I knew they were forming a new troop carrier wing at [Pullfield?], North Carolina. I thought, "Oh, good opportunity. Open manning, so on and so forth." Anyway, they put me in a Jeep, took me across the air field, and deposited me with the 347<sup>th</sup> Aerodrome Squadron, which was shipping out the next day to overseas, for overseas processing up at Bear Field in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The 347<sup>th</sup> Squadron -- Aerodrome Squadron -- was supporting the 4<sup>th</sup> Combat Cargo Squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Combat Cargo Group.

So anyway, we went up to Bear Field, went through the overseas processing. Eventually we were loaded into a

troop train and ended up in Santa Anna, California, in the old training center there -- the cadet training center -- where we were processed again for overseas shipment. We departed San Pedro on a troop ship, the *General Butner*, and we spent 45 days en route from San Pedro to Bombay, India, with an overnight stop in Melbourne, Australia. They wouldn't let us off the dock, so we didn't get to see anything of Australia. I haven't had the chance to go back since.

When we arrived in Bombay, we disembarked, and we were eventually then loaded on the train, and we started across India. Every time we'd reach a major river, I think there were two of them, we'd have to disembark, offload our gear, cross the rivers on the ferry, and then load up again the train on the other side, because there were no bridges and the trains had different wheels.

CM: Oh, gauges. Gauges on the track, sure.

WF: So anyway, we ended up in -- I think it was in Dimapur, offloaded, and then we were trucked down to Imphal, which was the -- Imphal and Kohima was the points where the Japanese had penetrated mostly, the furthest they penetrated into India during their attack on India. They'd been beaten back by the Brits, the British army, before we

arrived. But we arrived there not long after the fight, the big battle. So our mission there was air supplying the British 14<sup>th</sup> Army, and the 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron was flying C-47s at the time. The pilot planes were dispatched over to China to help evacuate some of the bases that were being overrun by the Japanese when they made their big push against the US bases there. Then we air supplied the British 14<sup>th</sup> Army. We also moved Chinese troops over that Chiang Kai-shek had released to be trained to assist the British in Burma. We hauled those troops to Ramgarh, a training base which was a former British training camp, and the troops there were then equipped and trained by American officers and NCOs. When they were ready and the British were driving the Japanese from the north of Burma down towards Rangoon, the Chinese troops went into combat alongside them, and we were air supplying them. I went on drop missions, and we were dropping rice to the troops and oats to the mules. The Chinese had no motor transport. All they had was mule power to carry their gear. So eventually, after the surrender, we assisted in moving the Chinese troops back over the hump to China, and then the squadron converted to the C-46, and then that's what we went over the hump in.

CM: I've really never heard of the C-46.

WF: It was the [Curtis commando?]. We had fairly new aircraft, and after we went over to China, we were at several bases there. We were at [Lu Chao?], [Kue Lin?] and I think [Han Cao?], and our main mission at the time was assisting and moving the 92<sup>nd</sup> Chinese Nationalist Army from the south of China, from Nanking, which is Nanjing today, up to Tientsin, where they faced off against the communist troops. Actually, the communists were on the north side of the strip, and the nationalists were on the south end of the strip, and our planes were flying and landing and offloading in between them. But luckily there was no fighting going on.

CM: The civil war hadn't started?

WF: It hadn't started yet. So anyway, when we finished our mission there then in November '45, we went into Shanghai, and the squadrons aircraft then were left at the airport there, and it was my understanding that some of those planes became the nucleus of the Flying Tiger airline. So then we eventually then came home to San Francisco by a troop ship. Well, it actually wasn't a troop ship. It was a merchant vessel, the USS [*Annabelle Likes*]. So we ended up in San Francisco in December, early December, and then I was sent from San Francisco on a small aircraft carrier -- I believe it was a Red Heart -- and we ended up in San

Pedro. And I was discharged and [processed?] in December of '45, and that was the end of my military career. After a few months, I had ended up in Alameda to visit my father, and he suggested I look for a job there instead of going back to Lockheed and Burbank where I had reemployment rights, so I applied for a job with the Navy at Camp Shoemaker, California. It was a Navy reception disposition center, so I worked there from about April of '46 until August.

In the meantime, I had become interested in going back overseas again, as a civilian employee, so I had gotten a job with the army in the Philippines. So in September of '46, I went out to the Philippines on a one-year contract, working for army ordinance. After two years, three months with army ordinance, I transferred to an organization called the Adjutant General Records Depository, which was holding the records of all the Philippine army, Philippine constabulary, Philippine scout, and recognized guerilla troops that had been [abducted?] the armed forces of the United States from 1942 to 1945, and what we were doing was certifying the service and death and disability information on these veterans to the US Veterans Administration Office in Manila. Well, I spent a total of six years in the



Philippines. I worked three years, nine months for the army there. I came back to UCLA and I finished college at UCLA, and I went to USC for grad school for a while, and then I wanted to go overseas again, so I had gotten a job in Morocco with the Air Force, in what was called the Nouasseur Air Depot in Casablanca. I worked there three years, and then I transferred to Chateauroux, France. I worked for the headquarters of the US Air Force Materiel Aero Europe, which was a subordinate command of the Air Force Materiel command out of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, Ohio.

So I eventually came on back to the States. I transferred back to the Washington area, and I worked for the Defense Logistics Agency for about six months, and then I went back to the Air Force and worked in the air staff. So I eventually spent three tours in the Pentagon. In between, I had gone back to Germany again. I was a logistics plans officer, and spent seven years on another tour in Germany, and then came back to the Pentagon, and then my next assignment was with the Department of Defense [Dependent?] Schools. That [tore a hole?] near a base in Madrid, Spain. I spent three years as the supply management officer for what they called the DODS, the Defense Schools of the

Mediterranean Region. We had 34 schools spread from the [ASORS?], Spain, Italy, Turkey, Greece, and Bahrain. And I was able to visit all of those school except the [ASORS?] and Bahrain. So I spent three years, and then I went up back to the Pentagon, and eventually retired. I went back to Spain to live, and made a trip around the world in '98, from September to December. I forgot the year now.

Anyway, I ended up back in Spain, and eventually went up to Germany and started working for the army for a short period in what we call MWR -- Morale, Welfare, and Recreation.

But I had applied for a job with headquarters, US Air Forces Europe, but (inaudible) and Ramstein Air Base, Germany. So after about six weeks with the army, I got a job down there, and I spent over six years working for headquarters, US Air Forces, Europe, and the MWR.

One of the last things I did before I finished up was I was the MWR project officer during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. We were supplying the troops and equipment [morale?]. People that did the recreation set up the recreation facilities downrange, and my job was to assign the people from various units within Europe, the Air Force in Europe, that were deployed to the war zone down there. So I eventually retired in '96, June of '96, from civil

service. So with the combined service, I had nearly 48 years of service, all with the Department of Defense. DOD. That's about the story.

CM: Well, let's go back to China. Were you actually a pilot?

WF: No. I was an admin guy. I was an administration guy, but since I had worked for Lockheed during the war as a sort of mechanic, you might say, when the admin work -- I was basically a finance personnel clerk. In fact, I spent some time in Burma at [Michina?]. Our first combat cargo group headquarters was stationed there one time, and I was sent TDY -- Temporary Duty -- up there for several months, in fact. But when I had spare time, I'd go down the flight line and assist in the engine buildup on the flight line. Another time, I was detailed into Burma to head a field lighting team, on one of the advanced air strips. Our duty was to keep the landing lights operative. Our main thing we had to do was replace the red and blue lenses, because the Burmese natives would come by and knock them out at night. The next day, they'd come drive by and try to sell you blue sapphires and red rubies.

CM: Is this all generator run? They didn't have any electricity for these lights. It's all generator run because [all forward bases?].

WF: Right, yeah. We had to keep the generator operating.

CM: I've heard stories about these runways that were there that were made 50,000 people just [ka-boom?] and you've got a runway. Was this these sorts of things?

WF: This was in China (inaudible), yes. It was all done by labor, manual labor. They'd haul rocks in and break them up and then they had these great big stone rollers, and there would be thousands -- hundreds -- of people pulling these rollers, and that's the way they built the runways. Now, in Burma, the runways were repaired, and then they put down PSP -- pure steel planking, and that was the main way with that they did the runways. One of the things I remember, our squadron -- in fact, my squadron commander -- led a flight into one of the Japanese air strips that had been liberated, you might say, after the Japanese were driven south. They towed the gliders in with engineering equipment, bulldozers and graders and so forth, and they'd offload that equipment and filled in the bomb craters and leveled the field, and it was operative by -- they'd land in the morning, and it was operative by nightfall. So that was one of the main kind of things we did, also. We towed gliders and dropped paratroopers.

CM: Did they do much of that? Churchill?

WF: A lot of parachute drops. Not so many paratroop jumps, but there were some. But it was mainly aerial resupply,

because these guys were in the jungle. And also there were detachments, radar, and detachments on the mountainside, the mountaintop somewhere. They were tracking it up and tracking the aircraft, and they were air supplied, and then also we had the OSS that was behind the lines, and they were being air supplied. That's how they got their ammunition and equipment and foodstuffs and so forth. So that was about it.

CM: I'm curious about this. I'm an airplane guy. Like I said, I've never heard of a C-46. Is that a comparable plane to the C-47?

WF: It was larger.

CM: Oh, larger?

WF: It was larger. It had a greater capacity, and more powerful engines, but it was a tricky airplane to fly, apparently, and we had more accidents during the conversion than we had with the C-47s. But it was a good airplane after they got the bugs out of it. When they rushed it into use, and all the bugs hadn't -- there were certain faults with it, but the manufacturer had tech reps over in India back at -- they had like an overhaul depot there, and they eventually -- some things that they managed to correct, and so it made a more reliable airplane.

CM: The plane could still fly higher?

WF: Oh yeah. It had better capacity, and I think it could fly higher. In fact, I went over the hump in a C-46.

CM: What was that like? Cold?

WF: Well, it wasn't all that cold. Well, of course we had the heavy, you know, the heavy flying gear on, with like jackets, wool-lined and sheepskin-lined jackets and so forth, but what I remember about that flight is that the crew chief had come back -- and there were two or three of us that were flying and we were actually hauling our personal gear and office equipment, so on and so forth. And one of the things one of the commanders, the squadron commander, had acquired a wooden bed somewhere in India, and it was on board there. So the crew chief came back and said, "Well, we're having a little problem with one of the engines. We may have to toss off and lighten the load." So I remember I and another sergeant from the orderly room were there, and so we decided right then and there the bed was the first thing that was going to go. But then after a bit the crew chief came back and said, "Well, it's OK. Got straightened out. You can relax now." So that was the only incident we had.

CM: Well I understand that those kind of flights were never like a routine thing. It was always just scary, and I guess --

WF: The storms. The weather was horrible over there, for the most part. It could be good, and yet again, like you say, sudden storms, winds that toss you up and down. Well, there's so many airplanes that crashed on the hump flight that they were just strewn all over, and it's called the aluminum trail.

CM: I've never heard of that one before.

WF: Yeah. And there were hundreds of planes lost, and a lot of times the guys would run out of gasoline, out of fuel, on the way back, because what they would do -- everything that was supporting our troops in China at the time had to be flown over the hump because the Burma road was closed, and that was the objective of driving the Japanese out of North Burma, was to reopen the Burma road and complete a leader road and so forth. But they had these converted -- like a B-24. There was a B-24 and a C-87, which is a cargo version, and the C-109, which was a tanker version. And then they were flying gasoline over in the C-54s, and what they'd do when they get the other end, they would offload the cargo, the actual load, and then they would drain the actual plane's tanks to the point of just enough gasoline to return to their home base -- what was calculated to be the amount that they would be required. But sometimes, they'd get blown off course, or they would hit headwinds,

and so they would consume more fuel. Well, then they would eventually just run out of fuel and have to bail out, and so a lot of the guys, quite a number of crews, were able to do that, but they'd jump out and walk out and be rescued.

CM: Well that would be my question is like, I mean, that's such desolate territory. How do you walk out of there? I mean, that's got to be a pretty arduous, horrible trek. I guess it depends on where you --

WF: It was. But the natives, the hill people, they would help. They would assist, and many of the flyers that went down were injured and so forth, and they would be assisted by these people. And they would be rewarded not with money -- they didn't want money -- but of all things, opium, because that was like salt. It was currency, you know. But they were very cooperative, and there's some good stories about the rescues that they -- in fact, the correspondent, the war correspondent Eric Sevareid was on one of those flights that went down.

CM: Really? I didn't know that.

WF: Yeah. Is there anything else?

CM: No.

WF: I don't have any really scary tales to tell.

CM: Well, the thing you find out when you do this lineup is that, like, what it takes to run a war. It takes a lot of



people that don't do all that scary stuff to get the war won.

WF: Well, that's very, very true. We were at the end of a 12,000-mile pipeline, a supply pipeline out there. That was a major problem of supporting the troops was the logistics of getting supplies and equipment and fuel into the hands of the actual combatants. We air supplied the British -- I mean, besides the British we were air-supplying the [marauders?] and like I said, everything in the beginning, everything that was supplied was supporting the Flying Tigers. All the fuel and everything had to be flown over the hump. That was why they were draining the tanks of the actual aircraft, to gain as many gallons of fuel, because sometimes they would just barely have enough fuel to fly their mission and return. And they were just, you know, really waiting for the next tanker to come in so they'd have more fuel to fly. I did make one trip back to China, in September '05. It was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the defeat of the Japanese, and the Chinese government had pretty much a big celebration kind of thing, but we were a group of about 120 China-Burma-India vets, and dependents and caretakers and so forth made a trip over there, 18 days, 16 days in the country, and we were in Beijing first for three or four days, and a lot of banquets and

sightseeing and so forth. My roommate and I, since we had no dependents with us, were asked by the state department cultural attaché if we would like to go to Chongqing for the -- they were having a separate ceremony up there for the dedication of the Stilwell library and museum in his old headquarters. And we said, "Yes." We wouldn't mind. So while the rest of the group went on to another place, we went to Chongqing for about three days, and that was an interesting side trip. Then we rejoined the main group in Kunming and spent some time in Kunming. Now, when I was in China the first time, I was just there -- we (inaudible) remained overnight en route from India to the end of China, and just spent one night there and then we moved on to our first base, which was [Lu Chao?]. But then we went from Kunming to Nanjing, and from Nanjing we went on into Shanghai and spent only about a day and a half there, and then we flew back to Beijing and out back to Los Angeles. But that was the first time I'd been back, although I had been to India. I went back to India in '88 and was able to visit the Taj Mahal and Kashmir, Srinagar, and that was a good trip, but I didn't get into any of the combat zones or anyplace where I'd been, and it's almost impossible to get into Burma anymore, although I understand there are some trips. But it's not --

CM: Tourist friendly?

WF: -- not a very choice tour to take. Anything else we can add?

CM: I don't think so. I think we probably pretty much covered this pretty well. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me. This is all very interesting.

WF: Well, it's been my pleasure, and I'm just happy to be around to be able to do it.

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