Hugo Werner Oral History Interview

ED METZLER: This is Ed Metzler. Today is the 30th of April, 2010. I'm interviewing Mr. Hugo Werner. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas, at the Nimitz Museum. The interview is in support of the Center of Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, and it's for the preservation of historical information related to this site. So let me kick off, Hugo, by thanking you for coming up from Kerrville and spending your morning with us, and sharing with us your experiences. And let's start it by having you introduce yourself. Tell us when and where you were born, little bit about your family.

HUGO WERNER: Okay. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Massachusetts General Hospital, for that matter. And --

EM: On what date?

HW: Oh, October 21, 1924. And I left Boston when I was about a year old.

EM: What did your dad do for a living?

HW: He was a refrigeration engineer. Registered number one of that license in Massachusetts.

EM: And refrigeration was high-tech back then.

HW: It really was. His business was primarily in ice plants. You know, not the store stuff, but gigantic ice plants.

EM: You used ammonia as one of the refrigerants, I think, back then. Those big old --

HW: Yeah, they still do. Yeah. And --

EM: And your mother was a homemaker?

HW: Yeah, homemaker. The only sibling I had was my sister. Sister [May?] Josephine Werner something else, and she was about six to seven years older than I am.

EM: Okay, so you were the baby?

HW: Yeah. She died in about 1963, I think it was, having been hit over the head with her son -- by her son with a hammer. Not nice.

EM: Oh my goodness. What a tragedy?

HW: Yeah. So I had no siblings after that. And [didn't have?] no relatives. Anyway, before long we left Providence and went to --

EM: Well now so you moved from Boston to Providence, right, when you were like one year old?

HW: Yeah. At about seven or eight years old, moved to Manchester, Connecticut. And there I went to school through grammar school and high school, and graduated just by the skin of my teeth. I was 414th out of 415.

EM: Well there was somebody behind you to take up the rear.

HW: Yeah, well I had my clique there, so --

EM: Well, studying wasn't your bag, right?

HW: No, I just wasn't very good at studying. Or behaving, either one.

(laughter)

EM: I see. Is there a story there?

HW: Yeah, well, I was kicked out of mechanical drawing in the last part of the last year. Slight misunderstanding over the language that I was using. (laughs) So I didn't have enough grade points to get out of there because I had failed second-year algebra. The final exam I got a zero.

EM: Boy, you were perfect.

HW: Yup. So they let me take it over. Twice. And the bad part about it is it was four quadratic equations.

EM: I hate those.

HW: Oh, they're simple. But I had never heard of them before.

(laughter)

EM: You weren't listening in class!

HW: No, I wasn't.

EM: You may not have even been in class.

HW: Quadratic equations are very, very simple. But -- okay. After that --

EM: Well now, see, so you graduated, boy --

HW: In ’42.

EM: Forty-two. So the war had started. So, what, you were a senior or -- when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

HW: Yeah. So they wanted me out of there, mainly.

EM: What do you remember about that day? Everybody who was alive then seems to remember what they were doing that day. Everybody except you, maybe?

HW: No, I don’t have any particular -- you know, wasn’t doing anything more than usual. I think I was downtown, however. What I was doing that time of the day, I don’t know. But I was downtown with a couple of guys. I don’t think any of us were surprised. Anyway, I soon became a member of the United States Army, and they --

EM: Did you get drafted?

HW: I volunteered for induction, which is a little different. But anyway, I wound up first at Fort Devens as a repel depel, and from there that led to Miami Beach as a recruit. And I went through their 100 day program, and then I became, [embarrassingly?] a drill instructor and physical training instructor while awaiting -- shipped to aviation cadet program. Well, that --

EM: Did they do a bunch of testing to see where your aptitudes were to see if you were --

HW: No. They give you a test, and that was it. Eye test, you know, good physical, and a lot of questions. The questions were nothing difficult. But I went from there to what they called at the time aviation -- what the heck did they call it? It wasn't aviation cadet, it was a three month preparatory course. And I didn't do very well at that because I decided that I wasn't really interested in becoming an airplane driver at that stage. It bothered me that if I went through the whole program, the war would be over by the time I --

EM: By the time you got called on, huh?

HW: Yeah. And I didn't behave very well there. And I actually had a little trouble with the second lieutenant and what not. And I wound up in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, as a prisoner.

EM: As a prisoner?

HW: Sure. And they --

EM: So you were wearing stripes, but the wrong kind of stripes, then, for being in the Army.

HW: I wasn't wearing any stripes at the time, of course. But anyway, our squadron commander in the aviation something

school, he was a lawyer, and intelligent. He screwed up the charging papers, which I'm sure he did on purpose because he was a very intelligent, sharp person. And so they had to throw me out of the prison.

EM: They were forced to throw you out?

HW: Yeah. It was quite a pleasant interval -- time we had there with a couple other guys, and --

EM: How long were you there?

HW: About not more than a couple weeks. And they sent me to Gulfport, Mississippi where I had a little difficulty because on my way I was traveling alone, of course, and I took a couple days off in New Orleans. And when I arrived there at Gulfport as another [repel depel?], and nothing happened for about five or six days, and then the squadron commander wanted to talk to me. I had a pretty good idea about what. And I wound up digging a -- his name was Major Flint. (laughs)

EM: You remember his name, huh?

HW: Yeah. That name I remember. But anyway, I wound up digging a ditch that is now the South Louisiana Canal, I think.

EM: So you got some manual labor out of that deal, huh?

HW: Yes I did. And they shipped me to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to go to radio school.

EM: You were all over the place!

HW: Yes. And I took a couple days off to visit with my friend who was going through the same program I had been in. Only it was ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program. And I was a little late arriving, of course. I didn't think anybody would notice, but they did, and I wound up -- [in a?] short course I was -- only had to move a big coal pile for there to there.

EM: More manual labor.

HW: Yeah, right.

EM: Well, you were in good physical condition, anyhow.

HW: Yeah, I was. And I was ready to get out of there, and I got pneumonia. I died. Had an out of body experience.

EM: Really? Tell me about that.

HW: I was up on the ceiling -- up where I thought I was, anyway. I was looking down upon my empty bunk, and a nurse and doctor. And the doctor says, "I don't think he's going to make it."

EM: So this is when you had pneumonia. So they put you in the hospital, and then you basically, as far as you're concerned, you died.

HW: Yeah, just about anyway. But the next thing I know I was back in the bunk. And I recovered nicely. But I get out of there, they send me to Yuma, Arizona, which is gunnery school. And I loved that. I had a good time in the gunnery school. I had a friend that was able to get use of the merry-go-round site, and [Jeep?], the (inaudible), going around in a circle behind in the (inaudible). It was fun. Dollar and a quarter apiece for the shots. And then they sent me to Columbia, South Carolina for --

EM: So the war's over by now, right?

HW: Oh, no. Hell, no.

EM: Seems like it with all of these spots you're going to.

HW: Well, that happened to a lot of people. I wound up in Columbia, South Carolina, which was, I don't know -- didn't have much faith -- didn't like Columbia, and nobody else did because Fort Jackson was next door with over 100,000 troops. And it was a 40,000 person Marine place, and an air base with another 20,000 or so, all wrapped around this little town which is the capital of South Carolina. (laughs) But I got out of there soon enough.

EM: Now what kind of training were you undergoing there?

HW: At that time, none. I was just hanging out, waiting to go someplace. It didn't take. Then I went to Greenville, South Carolina.

EM: Where?

HW: Greenville.

EM: Okay. That's just up the road from --

HW: Yeah. And there -- it would be [20 miles?]. And that was pretty good, too. We made up the crews pretty quickly, and flew a lot of short missions.

EM: And so what was your -- you were a gunnery man?

HW: Radio operator gunner.

EM: Radio operator gunner.

HW: Yeah. [They had us at?] three months there. I liked Greenville. It was one of the other bases around. The mountains were handy, and get up -- in the hills was a place called [Vale Halla?], a saloon. That was a hell of a good place.

(laughter)

EM: But what about the B-25? Was that a nice aircraft?

HW: Oh, the best.

EM: Really? Why is that?

HW: Well, it was rugged. And it was capable of a lot more than -- well, for instance, we went in the Aleutians. We flew

missions 800 miles each way. That's way beyond what that airplane was intended to do. And we flew low altitude 10 to 12,000 feet going that away, and on the way back we, to avoid the winds, the way back we just stayed down on the deck. But after we got out of the --

EM: So how many in a crew?

HW: Six.

EM: Six in a crew for a B-25?

HW: Yeah. Pilot, copilot, [flight?] engineer, radio, and tail gunner.

EM: Okay. So the turret that you were gunner on, was that the top turret on the B-25?

HW: No, the top turret was flight engineer.

EM: Okay, and what was -- because there was a belly turret as well, isn't there?

HW: There was on the early aircraft, but it was useless in the first place. I don't know why they ever put it in there. You had the regular setup with the handles, you know? But you were aiming as if you were aiming in a mirror. Every time you turned right, the guns went left. It would take a tremendous of practice, and it didn't do much good, so -- Those were all in that -- I think [B models?] was the last

one that had it, and they took it out. [Then they just?] passed you the bottle.

EM: What were you flying, a C model, or what was it?

HW: In the Aleutians?

EM: Well, when you were on --

HW: No, they were Cs and Ds there. There was a bunch of them.

EM: So was there a particular wing or squadron or anything that you were assigned to, or --

HW: Yeah, but I didn't know what it was.

EM: Didn't matter, right?

HW: No. It was just an outfit. A training organization.

EM: You were still training. That's right.

HW: Yeah. And I don't remember its name, but it doesn't matter. Columbia, South Carolina. I mean, Greenville, South Carolina. So --

EM: So what is this? This is what, '42 or '43 now that we're talking?

HW: It was '43 now. And in fact, then they sent us to Savannah, Georgia. That was where the troops were sent out [all over?].

EM: Kind of a point of disembarkation.

HW: We didn't stay there long. We got flying equipment. That's about it. And they told us, "Get on this." And

they flew us -- I don't remember how the hell we got there. I know that we finally wound up in Fairbanks, Alaska. And in a C-119.

EM: Fairbanks! Man, that is way up smack in the middle of Alaska.

HW: Yeah, it's cold. It was the beginning of January when we got there. It was 50 below zero.

EM: Well, being from Boston you're used to this.

HW: Well, not 50 below zero. We were way the hell off somewhere. They let us off the airplane, and I made it to the hangar in about probably eight seconds, which -- I was dressed like you are, except [in a?] jacket.

EM: Right. Just regular street dress.

HW: Yeah. But we didn't stay there long.

EM: Now, you and your -- you were a member of a six man crew. Were you guys kind of --

HW: We were -- the crew was put together in Columbia. (inaudible)

EM: And you guys got kind of tight, right?

HW: Oh yeah. That's common. [Any?] crews are that way.

EM: Sure. It's actually good, I would think.

HW: Anyway, they put us on a gooney bird. Went out 1700 miles to Attu.

EM: Is that how far Attu is?

HW: It’s a hell of a long way from Anchorage.

EM: I mean, that’s half way across the United States! And it’s still in Alaska.

HW: Well, they bend the --

EM: Well, it strings way out into the Pacific.

HW: They bend the dateline like that to accommodate the Aleutians.

EM: So it can be in the same day.

HW: Yeah. They left the same day a long time before we got to Attu. And so there we were, sitting in Attu, and --

EM: Well now, when you were in Fairbanks that was just a stopping off point?

HW: That’s where we got transportation -- was drawn out to the --

EM: So you still don’t have your aircraft yet, then, do you?

HW: No, the aircraft was sitting in Attu.

EM: So you’re on a C-47 getting out to Attu?

HW: And that’s it. We got to move around in two or three -- couple of Quonset huts, which were called. They weren’t. They were smaller, they were fiber whatever.

EM: They weren’t metal?

HW: No. They --

EM: Were they cold?

HW: Yeah! It was cold. Not bad, though, because they were -- most of the year they were covered with snow.

EM: So it almost kind of self-insulates.

HW: Yeah. And we had kerosene heaters, which occasionally blew up.

(laughter)

EM: That must be exciting.

HW: But anyway, that was --

EM: So how many crew do we have staying up there at this site?

HW: Well --

EM: I mean, just give me a rough --

HW: I have a bunch of photographs that I meant to bring, but I've been moving stuff and that disappeared somewhere. But there's a sheet I have that shows the existing crews about the time we left to go -- before we left there. And a lot of them aren't around anymore. I never paid much attention, but according to John Tidball, who keeps track of such things, I lost about half of our crew.

EM: At this point in time, you mean?

HW: Yeah. And we didn't fly in any missions.

EM: So, but I mean we're talking about 25 aircraft? Ten, 30?

HW: Well, when we left there it was 16.

EM: Sixteen, okay. That's giving me a feel for --

HW: I think it was 16. I don't really -- never paid attention to what happened, but eight crews wound up in Seattle. I believe it was the first organization to -- first people to come back from the Pacific. As a unit. Eight air crews. That's what it was.

EM: So, let's see. I'm a little fuzzy on my Aleutians. There was Adak, Attu, Kiska -- And you were on Attu.

HW: We were on Attu.

EM: Was that the largest island?

HW: No, but it's the furthest west. End of the chain.

EM: And we had, what, a naval base there, we had aircraft?

HW: Yes, there was a naval base. There was an Army unit. About 6,000 people on that rock.

EM: And was this the one that was attacked by the Japanese?

HW: Yes it was. The Japanese took it over early in the war. And they had to be pried out of there. Highest casualty rate of any campaign in the war. However, most of them were for [transport?], or a large number. They sent them up there with regular shoes.

EM: That's a shame.

HW: It was horrible.

EM: Because as I remember from what I've read and heard, there wasn't much resistance when we went in to take over. That they basically -- the Japanese had left.

HW: No. The Japanese hung on till the last man on Attu. The next campaign was Kiska. And that's 100 or so miles to the east, 150 I guess. And the troops landed there, and came in and walking across the countryside, and nothing's happening. And a lot of them were scared half to death because they figured they would hide in somewhere. But they were all gone.

EM: That's what I was thinking of there.

HW: Kiska later became another base for B-24s. Our overall outfit was the 28th composite group.

EM: That's what I was waiting to hear.

HW: Yeah. And it included the -- I don't know the squadron for the B-24s because I never saw them, but ours was the 77th bomb squadron.

EM: Okay, so you were the 77 bomb squadron? So tell me about -- after you got up there and you got settled in, now it's actually time to join the war, huh?

HW: Oh yes.

EM: So tell me about it.

HW: Oh yeah. That was it. It was a little strange. We climbed into the airplanes, and head off -- [mind you?], 800 miles. The aircraft bomb bay, the top half of it was devoted to gasoline. We could only carry 400 or 500 pound bombs. That was it.

EM: Yeah, you were a flying gas tank.

HW: Right. And we had, let's see -- navigator in the nose had a machine gun. There were package guns on both sides. Exterior plugged in. That made four more. Top turret had two. I had two flexible guns, one on each side, and there was two in the tail.

EM: That's a lot of guns!

HW: A hell of a lot of guns.

EM: I mean, you're all guns and gasoline. What about -- they forgot about the bombs.

HW: Yeah, all 400 or 500 pound bombs. We didn't -- we could have put -- there was provision for putting bombs on the wings, but we would never get the 800 miles.

EM: You'd get the extra weight and drag.

HW: Yup, that was it. Weight and drag.

EM: So what was the objective of most of the missions that you --

HW: To bust up the -- there was a -- a dual mission, mostly. One was to bust up any shipping. The other was to strike important targets on Attu and Shimushu, the two northernmost islands of the Kuriles.

EM: Kuriles are north of Japan --

HW: Yeah. They were an extension of the Japanese islands.

EM: Right. And they worked their way up to the Soviet -- the main -- I mean, the Soviet Union.

HW: Yeah, they got to be about a mile or so from the Soviet Union. The Kamchatka peninsula comes down a long way, and then it’s got a little skinny point called Cape Lopatka. And the next island is Shimushu, and then Paramushiro. And --

EM: So Shimushu? S-H-I-M-U-S-H-U?

HW: Yeah. Shimushu and Paramushiro. Now, Shimushu had an airbase -- a naval base, rather. And on the other side, Paramushiro, they had a big military installation.

EM: Was this Japanese territory at the time?

HW: Yeah.

EM: Or was it Russian that they had taken over?

HW: Oh, Japanese territory. And we had -- actually, we normally avoided the one mile passage between the two islands because they were very, very heavily armed.

EM: From both sides.

HW: From both sides.

EM: As I understand.

HW: And before I got there, they had gone in there and busted up some things. They had 12 airplanes, and four got home.

EM: Four of the 12 B-25s made it home?

HW: Yup.

EM: The rest of them shot down, or were they lost at sea, or what?

HW: No, they just got shot at and hit. That's it. Nobody knows their story, of course. Maybe one or two crews may have gotten to Petropavlovsk, which was our alternate. And crews that went there, they'd land and the Russian troops would drag them out of there and -- you know, they're [interned?] now. Not military [here?] or anything, but they got themselves an airplane they could repair, and they eventually, most of them, got home -- that went to Paramushiro. But it took months, walking and trekking.

EM: So let me see if I understand. Most of them that didn't return ended up either crashing or landing in the Soviet Union?

HW: Yeah. And I don't know how many --

EM: And then they probably made their way, like you say, through prisons, and interrogation, and who knows what, and finally made it out the west side of Soviet Union?

HW: To the west side. At least one character, Al [Parrish?], a friend of mine. He mostly walked across Siberia. And it took him six months, I think. And then when he got to the border with Iran, they had a truck. Told him to get off the truck and run. And so he runs, hard as he could go, and they're shooting around him. In other words, they were making him an escape from what, oh hell -- They were at war with -- [not that?] war with the Japanese. So they were supposed to keep him, and they failed. That's it. They --

EM: So it was an arranged escape, kind of type thing.

HW: Arranged escape. He didn't have any teeth left, and he was in pretty bad physical condition when he got out of there, but no particular complaints this time I talked to him because they --

EM: When did you talk to him?

HW: Oh, a couple months after I got out of -- I was discharged.

EM: So this goes way back?

HW: Yeah. I talked to him on the phone. Anyway, we -- I don't know how many total. We only flew 13 missions, our crew.

And there was another one that we missed. They went into the corridor between Shimushu and Paramushiro. And they had airplanes, and I don't remember how few of them got home. I think four of them got home. But they sank a couple ships, and they were sent there to do that. And so that was it. And we flew over, and went out and we used to hit a place -- couple times we hit a place called Masugawa, which is a bay. It had a headquarters there. And we bombed that a few times. Nothing really exciting.

EM: What kind of a resistance did you give? Was it anti-aircraft, or did they ever send any aircraft up?

HW: Yeah. A little -- see, you stayed away from that corridor, they didn't -- there was no anti-aircraft to speak of. There was at Masugawa, but it wasn't big, and it wasn't very effective. One thing they did, though, that was kind of fun, somewhere along the border or the edge of the place, they had coast artillery. And they would shoot off one of them big old shell, and try to land it right in front of you. Get you to try to drive through a wall of water.

EM: So you're down on the deck, then, during these --

HW: Yeah, we're always on the deck.

EM: Really? So none of this is medium-altitude bombing. You're coming in low, dropping an egg, and out you go, huh?

HW: Oh yeah. We had to climb a little bit to drop the bombs, but normally we flew, what, at 50 so feet or something like that.

EM: Wow. That is really skimming the waves.

HW: Well, you can avoid a lot of hazard that way.

EM: Yeah. Except when they put a big five-inch shell in the water right in front of you.

HW: That was a little strange.

EM: Did you ever actually have to go through one of the --

HW: No. Some of the -- I think the navigator and the copilot saw one of them very close by. I was busy, I guess. Anyway, finally they tell us, "Okay. You got airplanes, eight of them. You're going to go to a place called Araido."

EM: Spell it.

HW: A-R-A-I-D-O.

EM: Araido. And where is that?

HW: That's some -- I don't remember the distance. Maybe like 50 miles to the east of the Paramushiro.

EM: So this is an island?

HW: Yeah. And it had a fishery. That's about all -- and we went there to blow up a fishery. But that really wasn't the reason. Reason was as a diversion for the Navy, who was going to do something with Paramushiro or something. And so they didn't want too many of the Russian fighters around.

EM: Russian?

HW: I mean Japanese.

EM: Okay, because you have to keep it straight here with the Soviet Union around.

HW: There were a whole bunch of -- we got off of that target, and the sky was full of Japanese fighters. And, well, that was the idea, you know?

EM: That's right. You were successful.

HW: Yeah. And geez. It's wasn't too far from Cape Lopatka, which we shouldn't -- you know, we're not allowed to go there. But, flight leader decided we'll go that way to get rid of the fighters. And --

EM: So you're really jumped by what, Zeros, or who knows what kind of Japanese --

HW: Oh, I don't know. They had funny names. Jacks, I think they were, which was one of the newer ones. But I -- you don't ask for their pedigree when you're shooting at them.

EM: All the bullets sting. So did they shoot you up pretty good?

HW: Huh?

EM: Did the Japanese aircraft shoot you guys up pretty good or not?

HW: Well, not us. We didn't even so much as get a projectile, but we went over Cape Lopatka, and they started shooting at us. Which they had perfect right to do. And I had a thing -- you know, we're going 240 or so miles an hour, and I didn't have much of a field of view. I'm looking out on the ground, and I see this gun, which it didn't seem like it was pointed at us, but it was a gun and I shot at it. And by the time -- you know, I thought I saw a big flash, but I don't know. So I didn't worry about it.

EM: So do you think that was a Japanese, or was that a Soviet Union?

HW: No, that was Russian. We were over Cape Lopatka at the time.

EM: I see. This is your ally now that you're shooting at.

HW: Well, no. They were not allies. They were neutral.

EM: Well, versus Japan. That is correct. Until right before the war ended.

HW: Yup, exactly. They were neutral, and so they had a perfect right to shoot at us. I rationalize it, of course. They may be okay to shoot at the airplane, but not me.

EM: There's a big difference there. (laughter) But some of the other aircraft that were out with you guys got shot up.

HW: Oh. That part of the deal is that there was only four aircraft.

EM: Four of you?

HW: Yeah. I said eight before, but it's a lie. Four aircraft. And two of them got lost in the weather and went home. That left us the two aircraft.

EM: That's a pretty small diversionary course.

HW: Yeah, it was. We were big enough. And the other aircraft was shot down and landed on Shimushu, which is about like that.

EM: Flat.

HW: Yeah. The airplane was not really beat up too much, but of course they were captured.

EM: By the Japanese?

HW: By the Japanese. And not really -- one of the crew members from that crew was at our -- the only one of the reunions that I went to. And he had a pretty good story. He wasn't really mistreated or anything. There was no big deal. And

so there was -- one of the pilots, I believe, got sick and died. And then the other four people -- oh, I know what happened to them. They were being sent to Philippines prison camp. But their ship was sunk by the US submarine. So much for that.

EM: So never heard from again, huh?

HW: That's right. And that [one was?] the sole remainder, was the one at our meeting down in Vegas. But anyway, there we were in the middle of the damn Pacific Ocean with a perfectly good airplane, but we were just all by ourselves.

EM: Yeah, really. In so many ways it's a forgotten chapter.

HW: Yeah, very much so. Although, in the official Air Force chronicles of the war, we got credit for our organization in general. Got credit for keeping 10% of the Japanese air force busy. Now, that's a huge accomplishment, with what little equipment we had.

EM: Well, that's right. You kept that front of the war active, and they had to do something about it.

HW: Yeah. We had the 77th Bomb Squadron. There was also a Navy outfit that flew missions. I didn't know what the hell they did at the time, but I learned later out of a [plane?] magazine that they were doing the same things we were with Lockheed Venturas.

EM: I was going to ask you what aircraft they were flying. I don't know the Lock--

HW: [P-2, V-2?].

EM: Lockheed Ventura. That's not an amphibious aircraft, is it?

HW: No, no, no. It's a --

EM: It's landed.

HW: It started out to be a short-distance passenger aircraft, but it was turned into a light bomber. And they flew the same kind of missions that we did. And then, of course, there was the other -- the B-24 outfit that flew long --

EM: That's long range.

HW: Yeah. They didn't have to go very long like we did, but -- 800 miles is a long.

EM: Yeah. Especially for a medium-range bomber.

HW: It was never meant for that. But it was a good airplane. And the early ones were bad for only one reason: they had straight stacks off of these -- that 14 cylinders. And the noisiest object that's ever set foot on the earth, I think. God, they were awful! And [they planned it?], they put a collector rain and then the [voice?] exhaust stack, and they were a lot better. But that [had?] mission. After we got across Cape Lopatka, the fighters arrived at the end.

And one individual trying to make a pursued curve on us, and we were just flying at probably 100 feet. And I shot him, and I knew when I hit him, and he knew, too, because he went right down into this fog he couldn't not -- you know, no way for him to get out. And so we managed to avoid that problem. We didn't see any more fighters after that.

EM: So you got credit for a kill, then, huh?

HW: Yes. It was -- let's see, yeah. After that we just went home. Now most of the action that was seen, of course, was by the people in the front end of the airplane. I can only see what happened, not what's happening.

EM: You were looking out kind of the side, weren't you? Huge stuff was going by at 250 miles an hour.

HW: Yeah. That's it. And the folk up front got to see a bit more. It was the (inaudible) leader that decided to go over Paramushiro, and that wasn't too bad an idea.

EM: So what was life like in between these missions? Here you are stuck back on this little iceberg.

HW: Yeah, well, it was -- I don't know. It was the most pleasant of all the Aleutian Islands because it snows most of the time. I can go to Adak, 400 miles that way, and most of the time it's mud. Kiska was a bit of mud. Had

some. But Attu wasn't bad. There was good fishing. Really good fishing.

EM: So you went fishing?

HW: We went fishing. It wasn't much sport because the beginning of the run, salmon were crowding the [cells?] out of the creeks.

EM: So you were fishing salmon coming up the creeks?

HW: Yeah. Fishing salmon. Went over to lake whatever it is, and they had a place was alive with Dolly Varden trout. And --

EM: What kind of trout?

HW: Dolly Varden. It's similar to a rainbow. They seem to get a good -- that place was alive with them. And crews around.

EM: So all of this was close by to where you guys were stationed?

HW: Yeah. It wasn't very far from anything -- nothing was very far from anything else. It all gathered around Casco Cove, which is part of Massacre Bay.

EM: So how big a town was that back then? I mean --

HW: It wasn't a town. It was just a -- the Aleut natives who --

EM: So they had a village, basically.

HW: Yeah. And they lived in what they called barabaras. Sod huts. At the beginning of the war the Army, or whoever, dragged them out of there and brought them mostly to Sitka, I think. And I don't think any of them came home.

EM: It's not good for them, I wouldn't think.

HW: Yeah.

EM: But the Aleuts stayed there. Were they on the island when you guys were there?

HW: No. They'd been --

EM: They'd been evacuated?

HW: They'd been drug out of there before the Attu --

EM: So there was nobody there --

HW: Nobody there at all.

EM: -- but us guys, huh?

HW: Zero. And basically the Aleutian Islands were abandoned. Just a rather strange place, you know?

EM: It does sound strange.

HW: Like Attu. Most of the time you could ski, and I skied a lot. I don't where the hell they came from. The Army probably brought them in there, but --

EM: So you climb up, and then alpine ski down?

HW: Yeah. It was interesting to do. Had a nice hill, terrible mountain. And of course there wasn't any ski tow, although

the Army base had a tractor with a [fly wheel?]. And they had a post way up the hill with a wheel on it, and they had a rope tow.

(laughter)

EM: So you're telling me you were in the Army during World War II, and you were basically at a ski resort?

HW: That's basically it. And a fishing camp.

EM: And fishing in between.

HW: Yeah.

EM: Oh, that's tough duty.

HW: We didn't have much to do, you know. I don't gamble. A lot of people spent a lot of time on that.

EM: What, playing poker and stuff?

HW: The big game was 4-5-6.

EM: Four-five-six?

HW: Dice game.

EM: Dice game, okay.

HW: But I never participated.

EM: What was the food like up there? I mean, I guess you ate a lot of fish that you caught.

HW: Well, that was an occasion. Every once in a while everybody got tired of Army food and they got on a barge in Casco Cove -- half a dozen or more people. And [hand

line?], and they'd wind up with 200, 300, 400 pounds of flat fish. What the hell is its name?

EM: Oh, the flounder type?

HW: No.

EM: Sole?

HW: No. Those are little fish. This is a big fish.

EM: A big, flat fish?

HW: Yeah. I can't remember the name! One of the best eating fishes there is. I can't remember their name. I don't eat fish anyway, so it didn't bother me.

EM: But you did back then, I bet.

HW: No, I didn't.

EM: Really? You fished but you wouldn't eat it?

HW: Nope.

EM: How come?

HW: I didn't like it. I still don't like fish.

EM: That would be a good reason. So you ate the Army food.

HW: Yup. But it was only on occasion they'd go out and fish. Kind of an easy thing to do.

EM: So what did they have, a mess hall there, and then they'd have cooks and --

HW: Yeah, we had a mess hall.

EM: -- they'd cook the old standard Army stuff?

HW: Yup.

EM: Powdered eggs, powdered milk.

HW: Oh yeah.

EM: Powdered steak.

HW: Whatever. Never bothered me much. I don’t know who did it, but somebody illicitly acquired some beer. The Navy had beer.

EM: But the Army didn’t.

HW: The Army didn’t.

EM: That doesn’t seem fair.

HW: Yeah. But the warehouse in which the beer was located was guarded by four Marines.

(laughter)

HW: It wasn’t an unpleasant place, really.

EM: Well, did the Army ever get in there and get any beer?

HW: I don’t know. I don’t know where the small amount of beer that arrived came from. Probably came in on a Gooney Bird.

EM: Yeah. Packed as something else.

HW: Yeah.

EM: Well, did they have a, you know, a place where you could go and watch a movie, or anything like that?

HW: There was a movie theater, believe it or not.

EM: I’ll believe it.

HW: Right near our place. But I never set foot in it. Just wasn't interested.

EM: So did you read, or just hang out with the guys? Let's see, you didn't gamble --

HW: I read, wandered around, and talked to a lot of people. We had in our hut for a while, we had two writers. One of them was a very famous writer in sports and hunting and fishing magazines. I don't remember his name, but he was right there in the top of that business.

EM: Oh, no kidding? I mean, that must have been heaven for him. The fishing and everything?

HW: Yeah, well, he didn't stay very long, but they were there to -- having a story on the Aleutians. He and the other guy roamed around a lot. Talked to them a lot in the barracks. I don't suppose he's survived by now. But there wasn't a hell of a lot of entertainment, let's put it that way.

EM: No, I was going to say. And I guess you had long days, short nights, and then followed by long nights and short days up there?

HW: I liked the short days best.

EM: Really? You must be a night person.

HW: Yeah. But it was a lot of -- strange thing about it. When we got out to fly a mission, it didn't bother me. I was perfectly happy. Stupid, that is. And --

EM: Didn't know any better.

HW: Things were not going well for the squadron. Losing a lot of people. There was a lot of apprehension going on. And I talked to one guy, I don't remember his name. I should. Something like Friedman. But he was [in before mission?], says he was getting rid of some flying jacket and a couple other things, giving them away. Said, "I'm not going to come back." Everybody said, nah, come on! Anyway, he didn't come back. But in his head he just knew that he wasn't going to come back.

EM: That's strange.

HW: That's not terribly uncommon, what I understand. But I suppose most of them do get back.

EM: Yeah, and are pleasantly surprised.

HW: Yeah, right. But that's something else.

EM: Man. So let's see. This was 1944 that you were up there.

HW: I got there in January '45.

EM: Forty-five. So, okay.

HW: January.

EM: And so we’re right in the last eight months or so of the war.

HW: Yeah, right.

EM: And were you there when the war was over?

HW: Yeah, we were there. Celebrated on VJ night. Had a bunch of flares. Set the theater on fire.

(laughter)

EM: Not good! Although you wouldn’t be needing it after this, anyhow.

HW: And strangely enough, that day, VJ day, there was six suicides on that island.

EM: Why do you figure?

HW: I don’t know. But that’s what it was.

EM: Was suicide an issue up there before that?

HW: No. Occasionally somebody flipped, I guess, but I never heard of any. They had one of our mechanics go over the -- he’d been there since Christ was a corporal, you know? And then he just went crazy. They hauled him away. Never heard what happened to him. But he was ranting and raving, and swinging a sledge hammer, or a ballpeen hammer, and beating on the airplane. It was -- No real problems. It wasn’t too bad living there.

EM: Did you have much contact back stateside with family members?

HW: Very little. I had a girlfriend that I met while I was on convalescent leave after pneumonia. And she became friendly with my mother, but since I wasn't writing any letters she got a little irritated, I guess. And when I got back she decided she wasn't going to have anything to do with me because I didn't write her any mail. I didn't write to anybody else, either.

EM: Well, you were consistent.

(laughter)

HW: But that was --

EM: You just weren't much of letter writer, huh?

HW: No. Wasn't much to say. If you had anything to say about the mission --

EM: They'd cut it out.

HW: Yeah. It was censored. So there wasn't anything you could say.

EM: What were your officers like up there? I mean, did you like them? I mean, were they good guys?

HW: Oh yeah.

EM: Did they treat you good? I mean, how did they treat you?

HW: The only dislikable one was when I -- he never knew, [I imagine?] -- was squadron adjutant. And it's the adjutant's duty to do all the dirty work that the Commander doesn't want to do. That's basically it.

EM: Right. He's the gopher.

HW: Major something. And most people disliked him intensely, but I didn't know him. And I -- Commander -- Colonel [Finker?] I guess his name was, he was a good guy. All the air crews, you know, particularly -- you know, air crews stick together. There's a -- very rare to find an air crew that has a command structure, you know? And so --

EM: And who was the captain of your air crew?

HW: Huh?

EM: Who was your pilot?

HW: Tidball.

EM: Tidball was the pilot. Okay.

HW: Yeah.

EM: And he's still alive on the west coast, from what you tell me.

HW: No. Lincoln, Nebraska.

EM: Lincoln, Nebraska?

HW: It's where he's at. Was his home town. Fred [Toaty?] flight engineer. He came from upper New York State. But

after the war he went to California. When I was stationed in California, I lived two miles from him. Never saw him.

EM: Didn't know he was there?

HW: No. Fred Toaty. And he was a gambler. And he and his wife, they moved to Vegas mainly to do that. Made money. The navigator, he was a gambler, and we never found him after the war.

EM: After the war he just kind of disappeared, huh?

HW: He did. The way -- he was a gambler. And tail gunner, I never understood, but he became a -- after the war, sometime after the war, anyway. He became a -- opposite from a nun. What --

EM: Oh, a priest.

HW: No, not a priest. What do you call it?

EM: In the church, though, huh? A monk?

HW: A monk!

EM: He became a monk?

HW: Yes, he did. And he didn't attend any of the reunions, which I didn't either because nobody knew where I was. Moved around a little bit.

EM: Yeah, and you stayed moving, huh?

HW: And --

EM: So you said you went to one of them, though. Didn't you say you went to one reunion?

HW: Yeah. The last one.

EM: When was that?

HW: Let's see. I don't know what year it was, really. My time scale got [fouled?] up during the time I was a 24-hour, seven day a week carer. It was about 19-- about 2000, I think.

EM: Okay, so it was in the last 10 years or so. It wasn't early on, it was later on.

HW: Nineteen-ninety, 2000.

EM: Where did you guys meet?

HW: Vegas. Toaty's sister was the head (inaudible) newscaster in Cincinnati.

EM: Oh, an anchor, huh?

HW: Yeah. And she got us a really good deal on the hotel. It was -- had a good time, actually. Stayed there a week.

EM: Yeah. Got to see some old faces, huh?

HW: Yeah. Toaty was there.

EM: How many people were there? It was more than just your crew, right?

HW: No. It was a crew --

EM: It was a crew thing, not a bomber thing.

HW: Tidball, Toaty, me, and the guy from the other crew. The navigator that was in prison. That was it. Now the copilot, at that time he was deathly ill. And that's it. Now there's only Tidball and me. And he seems to be -- he had a bad heart problem sometime back. I had a triple bypass. Didn't go well, but that's okay.

EM: Well, you look well.

HW: Yeah. I'm in fine shape. I lost about nine-tenths of my muscular strength during that year and a half. And having trouble regaining it. I wounded my knee just recently by kneeling on it for about -- mostly for about four hours trying to get the damn gate to work. And it would have been all right if the actuator was up there, but it ain't. It's down on the ground. I'm now an expert on those things.

EM: Yeah. More than you really wanted to know, probably.

(laughter)

EM: So when the war was over, you guys were then transferred back and mustered out down --

HW: Well, the first that happened when the war was over, they sent us to Seattle. And the eight aircraft. We landed, of course, at Anchorage and stayed there for I think two nights. And then went on down. We headed from there,

we’re going to Seattle. Boeing Air -- Seattle Boeing [Airport?]. But the weather was bad down there, so we had to stop. Now, there are hardly a hell of a lot of places to stop on that trip. But there’s an air base, Canadian -- RCA base on -- oh, Christ. A little island, anyway. And we landed there. And the Canadians were real nice to us. We drank all their beer and we ate all their food. They didn’t have a goddamn [bit?] left! You know, it was just a small group of people. (laughter) They gave us the whole thing. We took off next day and went to Seattle. It was kind of a celebration. The mayor was there. It was the first outfit to return from the Pacific. And it was pretty good. I got a pass to the press club, and anybody wanted to know anything, I was the guy that they would talk to. At the press club they had a good bar.

EM: That’s important.

HW: And I had a great time there. A little over a month we stayed there.

EM: Really?

HW: Yeah. Nobody knew what the hell to do after. Big airplanes you got to think about, you know? And they took us to -- we flew to Wyoming. No, Montana. Great Falls. Yeah. And left the airplanes there.

EM: Of all places.

HW: By way of Fort Devens, Massachusetts for me. No, it wasn't.

EM: They fly you home?

HW: Yeah. Where the hell was that? It wasn't Fort Devens. That's where we went in the Army. Came out of it someplace. Big military base in North Carolina, anyway.

EM: Fort Bragg?

HW: Huh?

EM: Fort Bragg?

HW: I don't remember.

EM: Doesn't matter.

HW: Anyway, that's --

EM: So how did it feel to be out of the Army?

HW: Well, I don't know. I was at a loss of what to do. And I just loped around a long time on the GI bill, and finally I joined up again.

EM: You did?

HW: Yeah.

EM: You re-upped?

HW: Yup. In October of 1945. Went to the Army recruiting office, signed up. Stayed there until I was finished off 20 years. Then I went to law school.

EM: Really?

HW: Yup.

EM: Where?

HW: In the McGeorge College of Law, which is part of now, University of the Pacific in Sacramento. It was a single -- or just one organization. McGeorge Law School before they got uppity and started getting instructors, professors from Harvard and Yale, and whatnot. They were nowhere near as good as the ones they already had, which were practicing lawyers. But that's what happened anyway. Soon after, that became part of the University of the Pacific. Probably be able to keep the tuition up with Stanford. Which they seem to do that.

EM: Did you get your law degree?

HW: Yup. I practiced for 15 years. Almost all of it -- I started out with general law up in Paradise, California. But there was two things wrong with it. It was totally populated with retired people, and the other problem was there was no money in it. So I went to work for the State of California Department of Real Estate. And that was not bad. All the upper echelon were not much for anything, but most of the troops were very, very good.

EM: Yeah, the working class, right?

HW: Yeah, right.

EM: So you spent most of your rest of your life in California then, huh?

HW: Well, about 32 years I lived in California. I was at McClellan Air Force Base. And just about the only air base is McClellan, flying airborne early warning and control aircraft. [Twelve?] hour flights, doing nothing.

EM: Just going in circles, huh? So what do you think as you look back on the World War II years? Was that just kind of an interesting experience in your life, or a seminal moment, or what?

HW: An interesting experience. The only thing -- you know, you don’t get a hell of a lot of being in combat or anything else. But one thing you do learn -- two things, actually. One is that -- maybe this is all the same. It changes you. Ordinarily for the better. And I remember that happening. I was no longer -- there’s a Scottish song -- was a wild rover. And settled down. And then the other thing you learn, or hopefully learn, is that fear is your friend. You’re frightened, (inaudible), all kinds of physical -- your physical ability could sometimes get to be big enough to lift up a truck, you know? And fear, as long as you’re able to function rationally, fear is your friend. Because

that’s how you got to this enhanced physical and mental ability.

EM: When did that happen for you during the war?

HW: Oh, trouble is I can’t remember any particular instance. My air crew wondered at that. I was never frightened.

EM: Never uptight, huh?

HW: Yeah. At that meeting [made?], we all got together talking, and they said, “You know, you’re the bravest man I ever saw.” Because no matter how bad it got, I was like water off a duck’s back. Stupid. (laughter) But that’s the way it is. But the two things I learned is that I became a solid citizen.

EM: You grew up in a way.

HW: I grew up. Right. In the end of the war, I didn’t -- I had few (inaudible). After -- I was in Panama. I came up to Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts, which is near where I was reared. And I was there on leave. Red Cross sent me up there because my mother was dying, which she wasn’t. So I was up there. I had to go up to Westover for something, so my mother and my sister decided hey, I’d like to see what they got up there. Okay. Got in a car, went up there. My sister says, “You know, let’s stop and have a drink.” Okay. So we stop in at this bar.

EM: Now where was this?

HW: This is Chicopee Falls in Massachusetts.

EM: Chicopee Falls. Okay.

HW: And then Westover was just a few miles off. So I'm sitting there with my mother and my sister, and they're each having some kind of a drink. I'm drinking a beer. Some guy comes up to me and he says, "Your name is Werner, isn't it?" I said yeah. He said, "You're the guy that shot up the NCO Club in Fairbanks!" I had a dim memory of something like that happening.

EM: What happened again?

HW: Shot up the NCO Club at Fairbanks.

EM: You shot up the NCO Club?

HW: Apparently. Me and a guy by the name of [Sandstrom?]. A flight engineer of a different crew. We're up there to get modifications to the aircraft.

EM: And you didn't really remember that, then, huh?

HW: No.

EM: Until he mentioned it, and then it was a dim --

HW: It was something -- I didn't know what the hell happened. But according to what I later found out is that low and behold, we were there, I don't know what time, but the bar

was closed. And either me or Sandstrom decided that was not right, and -- But I didn't really know about it.

(laughter)

EM: Strange.

HW: I was drunk.

EM: I guess you were.

HW: Huh?

EM: I guess you must have been if you don't remember something like that.

HW: I had no clear memory of anything happening. But this guy told me I had done it. Nice thing to do while I'm sitting there with my mother and sister.

(laughter)

EM: Well, maybe not the perfect time for this [recognition?]. Well, well. What do you think about the Japanese now? You never really saw one in hand-to-hand combat.

HW: No, never did. I'm sort of ambivalent. They are not really our friends, but on the other hand I had some very good friends amongst the Japanese Issei and Nisei where I lived in California. Some good friends. And all the Japanese I knew were fine people. And I suppose most of the ones now in Japan are also fine people. With the end of this bushido business.

EM: Yeah. Not good for the middle outlook, you know?

HW: Well, I wasn't fond of them while I was on the big island. But we were there to kill them.

EM: That's right. I mean, if you love your enemy, that's taking it a little too far.

HW: Yeah. Ask General McChrystal about that. He's got the air crews screwed up so they can't function. But that's the way it goes. But anyway, the only -- there was one time that I was a little nervous. Coming back from Paramushiro, and low and behold, you can't land an aircraft in Attu, period. It just wasn't -- people down there couldn't see their hand in front of their face. So I'm [ready to gun it?] when I'm going to go to -- oh, drat. Little island -- just a few miles to the east of Attu is this little island, the name of which I can't remember right now. Shimushu.

EM: Well, Shimushu is the island that you were attacking.

HW: It's very similar to that. Anyways, it's almost like an oversized aircraft carrier. Flat on top, and cliffs down to the river. So we're [droning?] toward the place, and we're running out of gas very quickly. And there's no place to bail out. You get in the water you die in five minutes. So we're droning along, and call up Sitka --

whatever that rotten name is. And they say, okay, this is ground controlled approach. Turn --

END OF AUDIO FILE