Robert Brecount Oral History Interview

MICHAEL FRANKLIN: This is Michael Franklin, and today is July 30th, 2011. I am interviewing Mr. Robert Brecount -- am I saying that name right -- in Austin, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center of Pacific War Studies Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Texas Historical Commission, and for the preservation of historical information related to this site. So to start out with, where and when were you born?

ROBERT BRECOUNT: I was born in July 18, 1925 in Spokane, Washington.

MF: And what were your parents' names?

RB: Brecount. (laughter) They were Ulysses and Katherine Brecount.

MF: And so what did your parents do, especially during the Great Depression? How did the Great Depression --

RB: Affect them? I first remember Dad as being unemployed and living in a small house they owned, and suddenly a sister-in-law approached him with an offer of a job in a four-story apartment house on the south side of Spokane, where he would be the janitor, the maintenance engineer perhaps -- the janitor -- who would keep the place warm in the winter and clean. We resided in that building until he

died in April of 1933. Mother and I survived on savings until she died in 1938, at which time I became a ward of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, a benevolent protective association, and housed in an orphanage in Walla Walla, Washington.

MF: So both of your parents passed away quite young then?

RB: Yes. Yes.

MF: Was there --

RB: They were of advanced age when I came along to begin with. I was adopted at age four, when they were in the sixties, so that explains the age disparity. So I am indeed grateful to them for my name.

MF: So they adopted you at the age of -- so do you know much about your birth parents?

RB: No.

MF: Nothing.

RB: What I told you is all I know.

MF: Is all you know. Were you in high school at this point? You'd have been 13?

RB: I had just finished the eighth grade.

MF: Okay. Did you complete high school in Spokane?

RB: I spent high school in Walla Walla.

MF: In Walla Walla, okay.

RB: From Walla Walla, yes. From there I went to the University of Washington just for a few months during the war.

MF: So you enrolled in school, in college?

RB: Yes. Yes.

MF: You said you had just a few months of college?

RB: That's true, just one semester, after which I was either going to enlist or be drafted. I chose the Navy and enlisted in June, 1943.

MF: So was there a particular reason you chose the Navy?

RB: I thought opportunities for training might be better, and a desire to see the world.

MF: And the other branches maybe didn't have that?

RB: Not so much. I had no wish for the Army. I would have liked to have been in the Army Air Corps, but the avenue I was trained to get into, that is flying, was denied because of my physical disabilities.

MF: And what would that be?

RB: A crooked back, a slight color blindness, and flag feet.

MF: They had very exacting standards for pilot training.

RB: Pilot training was very -- the standards for pilot training were very high, and they had a full complement by '43 anyway, so they didn't exactly need any more.

MF: So you joined the Navy. Where did you go to boot camp?

RB: Now, boot camp was in Farragut, North Idaho, and it was there I was tested for a number of things, like all the rest were. There were three things offered to me. I could have gone to nursing school and become a corpsman, or I could have gone to officers training school and become an officer. I took the third choice, which was radio communications.

MF: So in a way, when you were in college you had your semester, were you still interested in continuing your studies?

RB: Oh, yes, I grew up wanting to be an aeronautical engineer. I guided all my studies in high school in that direction.

MF: So you were very focused on what you were --

RB: I was focused, yes. Being denied air training was a traumatic moment.

MF: Did you feel in any way like the war was interrupting what your planned course of action had been?

RB: Well, of course. I wanted to be in college learning how to design airplanes. This was certainly an impediment to that, but I was and am highly patriotic, I will serve my God, I will serve my country, I will serve my family, and doing one of those will be serving the other two.

MF: So right away in boot camp you were given --

RB: I was given those three choices of further training.

MF: I assume those weren't given to everybody, were they?

RB: No, it was according to what they learned with this battery of tests. I was clerical, and I was rather logical. I was not going to be a gunner; I just wasn't physically able, I was a skinny little twerp. (laughter) But I had a good brain. I had (inaudible) officer, you're not offered officer training or nurses or high technical electronic to an idiot. I made good grades, yeah. Well, it turned out I was the top student in high school and in grade school, so there was a good mind on top of a not so good body.

MF: Were you the valedictorian?

RB: I didn't get that far. I got my diploma in boot camp.

MF: Really? Okay. Now once you decided that you're going to go into radio training, where was that done?

RB: It began in Michigan City, Indiana, for like six weeks, basic electricity or something like that, three months in College Station, where I was an Aggie for three months, and then six months in Corpus Christi as an aviation radio technician.

MF: And what kind of equipment were you dealing with them?

RB: That was the two-way radios used in aircraft.

MF: So at what point did you finish all of the specialized training?

RB: The specialized training, beyond that, occurred the summer of 1944. They invited me out to San Clemente Island off the coast of California to a very secretive school.

MF: All right, so now, because you were at the top of your classes in the Navy as well --

RB: yes.

MF: -- this again, this doesn't sound like something that they're going to offer to just anybody.

RB: True.

MF: All right. Now, so how was this presented to you? We're going to give you some super-secret training. How was it phrased?

RB: It was not offered. Once you're in the Navy, you're assigned.

MF: Okay.

RB: All right. No, I was not at the top of the class in the radio school, I was somewhere in the middle. But for some reason, they invited me, transferred me to this special project school for air, a highly ambiguous title, and transferred, gave me something like two weeks to get there for a school that would last it seems like a month or six weeks, just a special course on how to take care of that equipment. You have to learn how to use it, how it's supposed to work, and how to keep it working that way, and

that was the training that a few officers and a few enlisted men got. I managed to do well in that class, and from there I remember being held for transportation at San Jose in California. So I spent Thanksgiving of 1944 at that place. Something historical about that place, because there was an enormous hanger there that once held a dirigible, of which there were very few built in the ’30s. This was housed in -- I can’t remember the name of the airport now, but it was near San Jose, at the southern end of the San Francisco Bay.

MF: Was it an American built or was it a German built?

RB: It could have been a Zeppelin. The Germans had the best dirigibles in the world, but I’m not sure. There were at least three that were made in America, and it was fascinating to read about them while I was a teenager.

MF: Did you actually get to see it?

RB: No. By 1944 they had all been destroyed. They were very subject to air currents, and nearly every one of them was just wrecked, possibly in mid-air, because they were not rigid. They were built to be rigid, but they were not built rigid enough. Airplanes were far more durable.

MF: So just going back to your specialized training with this equipment, was this a project that was top secret?

RB: It was top secret. We were adjured with terrible consequences should we reveal what we were learning, or the subject we were learning about. We could not mention what, or where, or how.

MF: So you have to have a special security clearance to do this?

RB: By that time I was not informed of any clearance, but obviously I kept my mouth shut anyway. I was not inclined to talk, and so I did not describe that equipment for the next 40 years. It was secret. When we arrived at the ship, it turned out that my officer, or the officer who would be my immediate superior, was in the same class. Officers and enlisted men did not usually fraternize, and so I didn't know him, and I suspect that he did not know me, but once we were aboard he learned he had one technician, enlisted man, and it was the two of us. It turned out to be he was the more interesting character, because Edwin Jenks had been an enlisted man. Later we called them -- it's a name for a cow that was unbranded, an unbranded calf. Oh, dear, I'm sorry, I can't remember that. But he had come up through the ranks, and just before or at some time in the very recent days before he went to that school, he was a first class radio technician, which is as high as you can go and be a petty officer, and

then when he went to school he came aboard the carrier with me on Christmas, or just before Christmas of 1944, as an ensign, a commissioned officer, and he was much smarter than I, with much more experience. I came aboard as an aviation radio technician second class, which is, you know, a good number of steps below him. It was he who brought the drawings and arranged for the equipment's transportation and saw to it that they were properly installed in five airplanes aboard the carrier after it left Pearl Harbor. So those at Pearl Harbor never knew about the equipment, didn't know what it was for, until it was already aboard the ship and the two of us were aboard the ship before the night torpedo squadron Commander Martin knew about it. He accosted Ensign Jenks down on the hanger deck, and as Jenks was giving instruction to a metal smith on where they were working on airplanes, and that encounter was kind of cute. He walked up, and he said, "Who are you?" Jenks turned around and introduced himself, and then they got to talking, and he learned who he was, why he was there, and so forth, and it was a dream come true for Commander Martin, because he had heard of this, and he wanted it. This was radar jamming equipment, radar countermeasures equipment, and it was being put on airplanes that he could send, he could launch out into war.

MF: So how exactly -- now how did the equipment work? It's a radar countermeasure.

RB: Yeah, it consisted of a little tunable transmitter. Of course, it was the box that is about as big as your leg, but the important transmitter part was a tube that I could hold in my hand. It emitted a tiny signal that contained a god-awful lot of noise, and the radar receivers are very sensitive, and they'll pick up all kinds of signals, but they were really loud to hear this noise. When they put it on the screen for any kind of display, it was just noise. Now radar is supposed to get an echo from a particular place, and it loves to get echoes from those little dots out there that are airplanes. Well, what would come out filled the screen with noise, and they can't see anything.

MF: So this is very early radar-jamming type equipment.

RB: Exactly, that's all it was, radar jamming. Now radar jamming has occurred since the war when you broadcast into countries that don't want to hear that broadcast. They will mount a jamming transmitter, so the people around that jamming transmitter can't hear these lovely radio signals they don't want people to hear. Their airplanes, military airplanes, have been fed a continuously evolving kind of radar countermeasures ever since those days.

MF: So prior to this point the *Enterprise* is engaged in night activities with its planes, right?

RB: Yes.

MF: And they're one of the first ships that's doing it, so this is --

RB: This is, as far as I know, the very first practical application of radar countermeasures in wartime.

MF: And after you're done with your schooling, did you know that you were getting sent to the *Enterprise*?

RB: I did not know where I was going to be sent. I was sent to San Jose, waiting for other transportation. I would have to look at my orders to see if that contained the name of the ship to which I was being transferred.

MF: Okay. But you were transported to Pearl Harbor.

RB: Yes. It was there that I found the ship loading ammunition and supplies and people.

MF: So when did you board and become a member of the *Enterprise*?

RB: Within two or three days of Christmas, 1944.

MF: Okay. So it's you and it's Ensign Edwin Jenks, right.

RB: Yes.

MF: And you were the only two people that --

RB: Knew that.

MF: -- knew the equipment and know what it does.

RB: Yes.

MF: So what does your first primary role become then? What did you two have to accomplish?

RB: I was sent to maintain the equipment. We had a few spares, so I would store them at my work station in a compartment next to the radio room on the *Enterprise*. Then I was there, that was my work station, that was my battle station, and it eventually became where I slept. So I was there nearly 24-7 all the time. My job was to take care of that equipment, should there [be a?] need to change out some equipment, I was to see that it was changed out. Once in a while, he'd ask for me to check on certain airplanes to see if the equipment there was working, was installed correctly, and ready to use. It was only after he had been on a good number of missions that it was decided that he needed some relief, and they would send me.

MF: Okay, so Officer Jenks would go on these missions?

RB: Yes, he did.

MF: In the initial [visits?]?

RB: He made a good number of these missions. I went on nine missions. I would expect him to have gone on two or three times as many. I believe he eventually taught the ship's radar officer how this stuff worked, and that person may have been sent a few times.

MF: So how exactly did it work within -- you'd send up a squadron of planes, and these were -- were you flying at night?

RB: One of the air -- yeah, we would go out. I was -- oh, that's funny. I never knew what was going to happen. [Some?] may have heard they're getting ready to launch another torpedo mission, another bombing mission, torpedo planes. We never carried a torpedo, we always carried little bombs. When someone would come into the compartment, find me, and say, "Come with me," and he would take me into the next compartment, which was the ready room, and he'd point to a pilot, he'd say, "You're going to go with him." They would put a Mae West jacket on me, and "You're going with him." Okay. I had no training in the airplane. I didn't know anything about the airplane. But I'd go with him. In about two minutes, the lights would go out, and I couldn't -- a door would open. There'd be a red light out there, and I could just barely make out that man, and I'd follow him as closely as I could out, up, on deck, over to this airplane, engines all turning, a lot of noise around there.

MF: And it's all dark?

RB: It's all dark. Yeah, absolutely dark, and just shadowy ahead of me. How close am I to a propeller? Am I close to

the airplane? I get to the airplane. Okay, my little door's under a sign, he's climbing up on top, and I'm going inside. The gunner would holler down. He told me this first time, he says, "Sit on this broad bench across in there, facing forward. Get a hold of that long bar ahead. Put your head between your elbows, because we're going to catapult, and it's going to tear your arms off." And that's the way we'd launch, just head down, hang on for dear life.

MF: What kind of a plane is this?

RB: This is a TBM or TBF Avenger torpedo bomber.

MF: Okay.

RB: It's the latest and greatest they had at the time.

MF: And this is your first experience being in a plane?

RB: That was my first takeoff, and that was the first time I climbed into such an airplane.

MF: And what were you thinking?

RB: I was thinking "God, help me." I was very excited. I had been in airplanes before, so it was not the first time I'd been in the air. I knew where the equipment was, and I sat in the airplane while it was backing in the hanger deck, all carefully tied and stuff like that, not moving. But here I was up on deck, and the wind is blowing, and the engine is turning, and there's noise and people all around

doing this and that. I'm led to and put in this airplane, and it's the first time, and it's a catapult launch, just like -- sling! Send the airplane.

MF: Like a sling shot.

RB: It's a sling shot, a steam-powered sling shot, and they're throwing a heavy airplane in the air, trying to get it up to, oh, something like 100 miles an hour in the feet -- it's a god-awful experience, I'll tell you there. But once we were in the air, we're depending on the engine, and we're depending on the pilot, that he knows which way is up.

MF: Did their preparations prepare you for what the catapult was going to feel like?

RB: Not at all. It was a brand new experience. Yes. It's just this giant sling shot.

MF: Now, you're assigned to a pilot. Does the pilot have --

RB: He doesn't know who's down there. He knows he's got a radar intercept person.

MF: Okay, and that's what they're told? We've got this equipment?

RB: He might, because somebody had to sign a log, you know. The pilot knew, [should?], the pilot knew -- of course he knew his gunner. They'd been through training together. But this new guy down in the bottom, he wasn't sure of him

at all. Now he would be more respectful of the Ensign Jenks, because there's a fellow that's supposed to know what he's doing, and I was of somewhat lesser stature. But I did, I did what I was asked, and the equipment performed as we expected, and everybody was happy.

MF: So you're underneath? Are you underneath the pilot and the gunner?

RB: Yes.

MF: Is that kind of the --

RB: It's a big airplane. You'll see this greenhouse on top. Well, he's up front, driving, and the gunner's in back with this turret, and I'm under his feet down there, behind the firewall where the torpedo is, would be.

MF: So while you're up there, your role is to basically confuse the Japanese --

RB: The Japanese --

MF: -- strafe carriers? Is this what your targeting?

RB: No, these are shore-based anti-aircraft installations.

MF: Okay, so you're flying the mission. Okay.

RB: They had some very lively guns. They had big bright searchlights, and they had electronic controls from the nearby radar. The radar would find them, show them how far, and how high. They would aim the guns. There were electronic controls to bring the guns around, pointing them

up in that directions, and fire them. Okay. That was all electronic. Unless you take away the radar, and then it's where are they? Where are they? It's night, they couldn't see us. We messed up their radar so badly, they would turn it off at first, because it -- German junk, didn't work. Finally they tumbled that, oh, yeah, if we see this, then they're coming, okay. It took them about three months to figure out a way to get around it, where they might see anyway. They tried it, but Ensign Jenks caught onto that, and it only took him a minute to turn a dial and mess them up again.

MF: He would be able to figure it out, what they were doing?

RB: He figured it out, yes.

MF: How were they going around the countermeasures?

RB: They would change the frequency of the radar. We would tune -- we would make reconnaissance flights and pick up their radars from a long distance, and this equipment would tell us the frequency and the kind of radar it was, and that was very, very important, because even on the way to the bombing site they might have a different radar, but we had equipment we could listen and we could see electronically the frequency they were on. We could crank our little transmitter over there on top of that frequency,

so when it came time to turn it on, it would just destroy their radar.

MF: So everything -- it's basically like you're interfering with each individual frequency.

RB: Yeah. We're interfering with one frequency, that one, that radar, that particular radar installation was using. They didn't have very many.

MF: So there wouldn't be a chance of maybe one is operating on one frequency, and another one's operating on a different frequency?

RB: They hadn't figured that out.

MF: Okay.

RB: They got their equipment from Germany, and it was a little like there were two or different kinds of radar, but that for fire control, that was very specialized, and so once we picked up its frequency we could mess it up as long as we were in the vicinity. And the vicinity would be at least 25 miles. We made one exploratory approach to our own radar. Yeah, we could mess up our own radar, if we want, but I was sent out 50 miles one afternoon. He says, "Tune up the ship's radar. I want to see what happens." Okay. The pilot went out 50 miles, turned around, flew back towards the ship, and I tuned up on the radar and flipped the switch. After I got back he says, "Come here, I want

to show you what happened." He took us up. Now, the advance ship's radar had what they call -- it was a big round screen of some size, horizontal, with a sweep that you see the weather pattern on, see the weather radar showing, okay, and that's what it would do. It would sweep around there, you'd see a bright line, and if there was an echo, there would be a bright spot stay there as it swept on around. This is the search pattern of sweeping. If there were two airplanes there'd be two spots, if there were 10 airplanes, there'd be 10 spots. But it would point to them. It would show on this little map on the screen, the electronic map, how far away, and plot them coming or going or which way they were going, and so forth, under speed. We'd turn on, okay, here's one airplane coming at them. They see it on the radar, a little dot out there. I'd turn on the switch, it becomes a line, a sharp line, all the way from the ship through that airplane and forever and ever. If we got closer, the line got thicker. As we got closer, it became a little wedge. If we got closer, the wedge grew and grew and grew and grew and grew until 10 or 15 miles, it was all snow. No targets anywhere would appear. There could have been 100 airplanes out there. They didn't know where.

MF: So then they have to just go by sight?

RB: Yeah, staring in the sky, look up and see if they can catch one with a searchlight and try to follow it and shoot. Yeah, we messed them up bad. It took me almost the rest of my life to realize that this one transfer was putting up an electric shield out there for that far, 30 miles in all directions, hiding everything within so we could send in whole squadrons of airplanes and protect them from the anti-aircraft radar with just one little radio tube.

MF: Now eventually the squadron, the pilots within these squadrons probably figured out what was happening, right?

RB: Our pilots were told, yeah, “We’ve got a jammer with you.” They were happy about that. The commander was very, very happy to have this. He was delighted at that. That’s why he insisted in going along with every bombing run.

MF: So what were the bombing targets primarily?

RB: Installations on Iwo Jima and Okinawa and another funny little island called Chichijima. They were all in my logbook at home.

MF: And these are the ones that you flew on?

RB: Those were the ones I flew on.

MF: Would you only go at night? Did you do this during the day?

RB: I remember one during the day. I think there were at least five at night. I’m just not sure about the other four,

except for one, in which we were sent out on what was written up to the logbook as an anti-submarine patrol. The water was kind of choppy. I could see a little bit of the ocean. Of course, the view up there, from the gunner and the pilot, was immense, but all I could see was out through this little porthole that big in that direction, down on the ocean. Now forward I could see under the wing, and there's a story about that, but I couldn't see out the other side, just this side. I was interested, because my equipment was right here on my left, and the porthole was there, and whatever happened -- I was looking at the ocean down there, not very far down there, I'd say 2,000 or 3,000 feet. But it was choppy, just the whitecap waves, all over. And I said, "How am I going to see a submarine periscope in that?" and I gave up. I gave up looking. I just looked. But I heard something on the radio, on the intercom. We're going to be in orbit for a while. Eventually turned around and off in the distance there was a black cloud, a black cloud of anti-aircraft fire. It was over my ship! It was under attack, and we were being told to stay away for a while, until this attack was over.

MF: You could see the fire from the *Enterprise*?

RB: I could not see the fire, but I could see the puff, the black explosions over there. They put up a cloud of black

anti-aircraft fire. More Kamikazes at that time. We were always under attack by Kamikazes, no other kind of airplane ever appeared. They would send them over in clumps of 10 and 20, 30, 50, all spring of 1945, and our carrier was one really special target. It had been after them for three and a half years, and they have been at it, and at it, and at it. They have attacked it at time and at time and time again, bring damage, but were never able to put it out of commission. And it was very frustrating to the Japanese, because we were quite tickled (laughter) that we were out there giving them hell every damn day! Yeah. You bet. So there came an anxious afternoon, while we waited, and waited, and waited for a call saying, "Yeah, you can come in now." Can you imagine flying in an airplane over an endless ocean, praying that your landing field will be there when you run out of gas?

MF: How many hours were you in the air?

RB: How many hours was that afternoon? Well, it was about a year and a half. (laughter) It was about three hours.

MF: Three hours on top of what would have been your normal mission length?

RB: Yeah. Well, it was probably an additional hour and a half, because the patrol would probably go for two and a half hours to three hours, so another half hour wasn't much. We

just knew that we was going to have to wait a while, and I think we waited an hour.

MF: Were you also feeling a little bit nervous, uncertain whether or not some of these Kamikaze attacks would be successful?

RB: Yeah, I hoped they didn't find us, because they had -- no, I don't think they would deliberately dive on a torpedo airplane when they had ships to dive on. No, no. We just had to stay way out of the way, because we had fighter planes up there going after them, too, fighter planes and cruisers and destroyers and guns in all directions, just trying to cover -- just blazing lead up there, aiming the best they can and praying that something's going to blow one of those airplanes apart, and they were largely successful. I would guess only one out of 15 would make it all the way to diving on a ship.

MF: So you were there though when the *Enterprise* --

RB: Yes.

MF: When some of those Kamikazes were successful?

RB: Yes. Yes. You want to hear about that morning? There's a story. It was Sunday morning about 7:00 a.m., one of their favorite hours. It was like they started the war at 7:00 a.m. in the morning on Sunday. I'm sleeping on top of my work bench, because it's cooler up there. It's my battle

station, and there I am, at my battle station, night and day. Word came, “They’re coming in!” Well, I could tell, the five-inch gun has just gone off.

MF: How far away is that from you?

RB: That gun could shoot two miles up, and it would, much farther than any other caliber we had, five-inch guns.

MF: Then you were sleeping?

RB: I was sleeping, yeah, on my work bench.

MF: But pretty close to it?

RB: In this compartment, next to the ready room, just below the hanger, just below the flight deck, the next deck up was where the airplanes would land at night. I could hear them. Once in a while one would come into the barrier, and its propeller would dig into the deck, and I’d pray it wouldn’t come all the way through, because I was looking straight up. It was a lot closer than this ceiling. “You guys better get down!” Okay. I got down between this row of benches and that row of cabinets. These were all cabinets, and my equipment was right here.

MF: Off to your right?

RB: Yeah, it was probably -- I’d get in the middle. Yeah, I laid down between these two benches, and they would protect me from most anything. Then we heard the .40s go, poom, poom, poom. They are loud, they are definitely different.

Then that means he's getting closer. Then the .20 calibers, (makes shooting noise) the rhythm is a lot faster, a lot faster, a lot faster, a lot more frantic. And them bam! Okay, the ship rippled from one end to the other, just like you flip a towel, one end to one end. It blew [a man up?], and it echoed the length of the ship. I have said, but I can't prove, that it broke the back of every airplane on the ship, just womp! It just throw them up against their chains, and then jam them into the deck again so these airplanes were just kind of crumpled. Well, it ruins them. You break the back of an airplane, it can no longer fly. So the deck was all messed up forwards, just messed up. That great big ripple was effectively the end of the war for the *Enterprise*. We turned around. We were still steaming hard, but we could no longer take or launch aircraft.

MF: Were aircraft already launched and in the air?

RB: I don't know. If we did, they would have to land at other carriers in the vicinity, and that was always a godsend, because there were times when we took airplanes from other carriers that were not available. So, yeah, we took care of everybody.

MF: Now this was the Kamikaze attack that took out the elevator?

RB: Yes. Yeah, this is the one you should be familiar with by this time, because every sailor on the *Enterprise* knows that story, come in from the stern, probably is going to miss, he rolled over and dived into that elevator. He went almost straight down, just a little behind their elevator, and it made a hole you could not stuff an airplane through, but it did behind the elevator. The bomb in the airplane blew up under the elevator, and it's only today I've seen pictures how high that elevator went. It was like blowing the cork out of a pop gun, but I believe it vented most of the explosive force that could have broken the bow of the *Enterprise.*

MF: And the amount of damage that it did?

RB: Yes.

MF: Extensive.

RB: You have to look at the pictures. There is just massive damage in there.

MF: Well, it blew the whole elevator out --

RB: Yeah, the elevator just disappeared.

MF: -- at least 670 feet.

RB: Yeah, there's pictures of it up in the sky, that elevator fell off in the sea and became a life raft for several sailors after all.

MF: It had blown the people up on it?

RB: No, it didn’t blow people up there, but after it fell in the sea, there were several people in the sea who used that, discovered and used it, because it still floated for some reason.

MF: Really?

RB: Yeah. It’s hard to believe that the elevator wouldn’t sink like a rock.

MF: Those were sailors from the *Enterprise*?

RB: Sailors from the *Enterprise*. There were two or three that were blown off, and their stories have been printed in the publication of the *Enterprise* Association. I didn’t know them.

MF: Did the *Enterprise* pick those men up, or were they picked up by (inaudible)?

RB: No, the *Enterprise* couldn’t do that, but the trailing destroyers -- we always had trailing destroyers, and they would pick them up, and we’d eventually get whoever fell off, we would get them back if we needed them. You know, there were several times I was aboard when this destroyer brought back a pilot and a crewman, yeah, that had to dish their airplane or had to jump out of the airplane or something. Yeah, the destroyers were picking up the pieces, sort of.

MF: Were you ever fearful at any point that you would have to bail out of your aircraft on the times that you flew?

RB: For some reason, I felt that that would not happen. I didn't feel invincible, I didn't exactly feel prayerful or fearful, I put my trust in the pilot and in the protection of my Maker.

MF: Now you were mentioning something about watching the anti-aircraft fire from your position --

RB: In the airplane.

MF: -- inside the plane.

RB: Looking out the window.

MF: And then watching it change direction.

RB: Yeah, flip the switch and watch it go somewhere else. That was a magic moment, sure. Watching it come up, anything I could see was not going to hit us, I knew that. It's not coming this way. It's coming this way, but it's not coming this close. Coming this way. Well, some of those would eventually, if they punted around about to hit us, and I've had the equipment on. Once I had the equipment on, that kind of concentration would dissipate it, and bam. Fire was coming up, but it was not directed anywhere, just coming.

MF: So that you're not getting shrapnel hits?

RB: No.

MF: You’re not getting any of that?

RB: No, we’re not a target anymore.

MF: And you turned the machine on, and it --

RB: Yeah, it just went somewhere else.

MF: Do you think that that made you feel a little bit more confident, more so than you would have if you did not have that radar-jamming technology?

RB: Yes. Yes. Yeah, it made me safer. Yeah. If I’m going to die, it’s not going to be that way. We’re going to run out of gas or some other thing. The longest flight I was on was a little over five hours. I don’t remember where or why, but it’s in my logbook, the length of the flight, and the purpose of the flight, but since I don’t have that with me I can’t repeat it.

MF: So you kept a log of every flight that you were on?

RB: A log was kept for me. I didn’t know that until we were coming back to the States, and I was given that log, signed by the torpedo squadron commander. Someone kept a log.

MF: For you specifically?

RB: For me. I suppose every pilot, since there were a number of different signatures in there. I could count the different pilots. So each pilot was keeping the log for himself and his crew. That’s how they knew whether I did or not, but eventually I got that log, and it’s a most

precious possession, because it's signed record of where and when and who and what.

MF: So you have all the dates? You have all the dates?

RB: I have that.

MF: And who you were with?

RB: Yeah, who my pilot was. It didn't tell me who the other crewman was, but my pilot's always recorded. One of them was [Blalack?]. I saw him in San Antonio at our last reunion, and we had a hilarious time. He and his girlfriend are a pair. They live in North Idaho. Oh, beautiful people. What else? I love them guys. Airplanes are all the same.

MF: What was the squadron that you were flying with?

RB: I was flying with the Night Torpedo Squadron 90.

MF: Night Torpedo Squadron.

RB: Night Torpedo Squadron 90. Oh, man, we're the Night Torpedo Squadron, the first of the Night Torpedo Squadron. Actually there had been some work previously, so the concept and the most initial difficulties were discovered in [Warsaw?]. So this was a performing night squadron, one of the first. The ship was a night operating ship, deliberately outfitted to work at night.

MF: So how was landing different at night?

RB: They used different lights. The lighting was very subdued. I understand it was only a single line, and we had this guy we called paddles, the landing signal officer, with his great paddles, and there was lights shining on his paddles and him, so he was able to see the incoming airplane, and the pilot was able to see what he did in the way of guiding. And the nights, the landing signal officer was another pilot, so he was vitally interested in the operation. Yeah.

MF: So now after the Kamikaze hit, you said that basically took, that ended the *Enterprise* service.

RB: The *Enterprise* part of the participation in the war. We turned around and left the area and went straight to Pearl Harbor. My memory gets fuzzy at that point, because during that transit I remember helping throw a brand new radio equipment overboard. I remember watching crews push airplanes overboard. They were all broken. They just pushed them off into the sea. I understand they salvaged engines and propellers, because they were very, very expensive, but just threw the airplane over, dumped it off. I didn’t know we had a whole room full of spare radios, but we formed a chain, passed radios on. The last one dumped it in the ocean, dumped it in the ocean. They were going to Pearl Harbor.

MF: So these radios were broken in the Kamikaze attack?

RB: No, they were fine, brand new radios, but what were we going to do with them? You got no airplanes to put them in. The ship was broken. Who knows when it was going to get repaired. It was going straight to Bremerton, from Pearl Harbor it was going to Bremerton, where a whole town was dedicated to keeping that ship in the war. Anytime it appeared, and it had appeared before, they would work night and day, nonstop, until it was ready to go again, whatever it needed, what never needed to be replaced or added or fixed or whatever it needed was done, and that ship was given in to the fleet for use. I believe they did it four or five times. When they were through with it in August of 1945, it had more guns, and the latest in radar equipment. It was ready to fight. However long the war continued, the *Enterprise* was in it. But something happened, and it was another ship that went into Tokyo Harbor and became the place where the surrender was signed.

MF: The *Missouri*?

RB: Yes.

MF: Was it initially supposed to be the *Enterprise*?

RB: I have no idea. Pure conjecture and wishful thinking on my part.

MF: I would suppose that that's probably similar sentiment.

RB: It would have been symbolic, yes, because the ship was just a few miles away from Pearl Harbor when it was bombed by the Japanese on December 7th of ’41, and it wasn’t very far off from Tokyo when it took this Kamikaze hit that took it out of commission. By the war’s end, it was ready to continue fighting. So, yeah, I think it would have been entirely appropriate just to poke a finger in their eye, and say, hey, you couldn’t sink this ship.

MF: So did you feel very connected to the Enterprise?

RB: Very much so. I feel almost like a guest, because I was there such a short time, and just only by reading and, oh, I felt the spirit of the ship the moment I stepped aboard. I knew it was a famous ship then, and I’ve read enough since then to discover how, why, and how hard it was to become such a famous ship. There were battles it should have lost. There were times it should have been sunk over, and over, and over. There were times it sent out planes that maybe hadn’t ought to be. There were times it went through storms that were perilously close to sinking the ship. They took it on the edge of danger, on the extreme edge of danger, time after time after time. So even though I was there only six months, yet I became a part of that fabulous group.

MF: And how do you think that that -- how did that affect the rest of your life? I mean, it obviously means very much to you.

RB: It means a great deal now. And it came close to me after I was discovered and enlisted into the *Enterprise* Association, when I began to read stories and see names, and on and on. I was brought back in contact with Edwin Jenks again, and it was through the Association I was able to learn where he was, and was able to go spend a whole lovely long day with him. Two days with him. We were delighted to see each other, and we had a grand time remembering, and he telling me of his career. He stayed on the staff with Commander Martin even to the point that he was on the staff when Commander Martin became Admiral Martin, so he spent the rest of his career as an advisor to an admiral. He was very good. He knew about cruise missiles and enemy radars. He said, “I would lecture general class officers on what the enemy had.” That was his forte. Now he began a -- mustang is the word, an enlisted man who rose through the ranks to become an officer is called a mustang. Yeah. It’s an unbranded horse, yeah. So I just kind of rode his coattails.

MF: Now where did Edwin Jenks, where did he end up settling?

RB: I found him in Homosassa, Florida, down on the West Coast, toward Tampa. He was retired comfortably with his wife, living in a gated community next to a golf course. We visited most of an evening. He asked me to stay overnight, and go to church with him the next day, and he would take me to lunch at the clubhouse, and bid me farewell, because I was on my way to see a daughter.

MF: Now what did you do after the war?

RB: Well, I took advantage of my training. I fixed radios, and I got better at it, and better at it, and better at it. The best day became the day I was hired by Center Power and Light Company down here in South Texas, and even better when I became the technician for their computer controlled generation. It's like radar-guided anti-aircraft. This was computer-guided electric generation, and it was me at the control then, still taking care of the equipment, learning more and more and more. I had a delightful and rewarding career with them, still the hired hand, I wasn't going to be president, I wasn't going to be an officer, but I was their best technician.

MF: Well, you really, you took advantage of all the training --

RB: Exactly.

MF: -- that you received in the Navy.

RB: Well, that was my idea. That was the idea right there in boot camp with those three choices. The nursing, I didn't feel like changing bed pans in a VA hospital. I didn't feel like being a 90-day wonder who would be discharged at the end of the war with no training of any kind. I would have been a good officer, yes, but I had a trade. A trade makes a living, whether you're making boots or airplanes. It's a trade. You make a living with that trade. What are you doing now? You're a writer, or an interviewer. You're using your training that you got. So there.

MF: We've covered a lot. I don't know if there's -- is there any particular piece of information or tidbit that we need to know about that I haven't asked you about, that we haven't gone over?

RB: I've told you the most salient things that I recall. To philosophize, we brought dozens of different trades, trainings, to that ship. It took a lot of people, 1,500 or more, to run the ship even if it were empty. But they were more, they were trained gunners. A five-inch gun crew may not be so good with a .40 caliber gun, or not so good as those that could run the .20, (makes shooting sound) like that. Training, individualized training by experienced people So we depended on that training to perform. We had to perform to protect each other, and this is the core of

the brotherhood of the warrior. Connection, depending on each other's training to perform a cohesive group that could do whatever they were meant to do. There was nothing else like it. You hear it or feel it most among the Marines. You owe the most admiration, Army folks, they're in the foxholes together, or they're crawling through the mud, the trees, the trash, the sand, the heat, and the cold, and they did it all together. They did it because I have to go because he's going, I have to go and take him, or the three of us will go, the one who wants to drag, the one who wants to leave, we're going together, the three of us are six people when there are only three individuals who want to do something else. This cohesion is what makes it. Yeah, I'm happy to be among this honored group. You look at Shakespeare's writing about Henry V and the speech at St. Crispin, when he writes -- he's talking to his cousin Westmoreland. What would you have, Westmoreland? If they come, I don't want a man who -- if any man doesn't want to go into this fight tomorrow, we'll turn him loose. We'll give him change and passage back to England. We don't want him. We want those who will stay, and those who will stay will become those who sit around the fireside in their old age and sipping something and telling their stories, and those who hear the stories will lie in bed at night cursing

because they were not part of that group. You find that speech. It's much better the way he wrote it. (laughter)

WF: I think that was fantastic.

RB: It was a fantastic speech, and according to the Bard it resulted in their victory over the superior French forces the next day, and they won their fight to get back to the sea, because of the speech at St. Crispin. It's spelled differently [than Christian?] did. I have it at home. It's my favorite naturally. The cohesion, the memory. We have something no one else can have.

WF: And you say that probably binds everybody, that experience?

RB: Yeah, the shared experience.

WF: That there's really -- could you say that there's even a comparable equal anywhere else?

RB: Well, in a way. One of the simplest is, say, a polar expedition. We take so much equipment, we have so many trained people in the various trainings that are necessary to mount an expedition to the North Pole. We go. We lose contact maybe, we are self supporting, what we do depends on what each one of us can do. Our success depends on the combined success of each person. No one can slack. Everyone must do his job, and they expect everyone else to do his job, and they will encourage or flog each other to get it done, because that is the survival of the

expedition. More simply perhaps is a crew of a ship designed, well, we'll say to deliver two and a half million gallons of oil to a port in Galveston, and they're over in the Indian Sea. They have to weather the storm, they have to proceed, they have to continue, they have to do, and they, again, depend on their collection of skills, working together successfully to arrive at the destination. What else can we put it to? A winery? Probably as simple as some winery. The winery has an order, it has a boss, it has a design, it has a plant, I mean plants growing. So it takes a vintner, and it takes people out in the field, then it takes equipment, it takes storage, it takes all these barrels or whatever they do to store wine in. Yeah, it's another collective effort. Well, what about automobiles? Well, say, the factory in Pontiac, Michigan, where 15,000 workers all making one product, being guided by the management. They're all trained, one guy mounts tires, one guy fits doors, and one guy does this, and one guy does that. They all have to work together, they all have to do what they know how to do perfectly well. So combined effort, whatever the endeavor, is the parallel. We combine in a massive, just country-wide effort to defeat an enemy across the sea. There was a very well-defined enemy at that time, another one in Germany. We helped England and

France defeat Germans, which was a formidable thing to do. Well, the Japanese may not have been so technically advanced or formidable in that direction, but they had a tenacity, and there was a god-awful lot of them. How's that answer your question?

MF: Perfectly.

RB: (laughter) Ah, wonderful, yeah.

MF: But I really can't thank you enough for taking the time out of this reunion to do this.

RB: I'm happy to do it. You're appreciative, and I like that part. I don't mind how many people get excited to see how you can mush this together into any kind of cohesive report, because we went afar, you and I.

MF: Well, I thank you very much for taking the time, and I think that about wraps it up.

RB: Okay.

MF: Thank you very much.

RB: You're welcome, Michael.

END OF AUDIO FILE