Martin Mehron Oral History Interview

LARRY RABALAIS: Good afternoon. This is Larry Rabalais. Today is the 31st day of May, the year 2012, and I'm interviewing Mr. Marty Mehron. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg at the National Museum of the Pacific War, Nimitz Building, in the audio room. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information relative to this site. And with that mouthful, Marty, I'll turn it over to you and let you go ahead and tell us your life history through World War II. Go ahead, Marty.

MARTIN MEHRON: Thank you, Larry. My name is Martin Mehron. I was born February 19, 1923 in Newark, New Jersey. I was brought up and lived with my grandmother until I actually went into the Navy.

LR: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

MM: I had one older sister who was about probably a year or two older than I was and unfortunately she died in an accident. She fell out of a window and died and unfortunately this basically destroyed my family. And my mother left me and I was basically abandoned and --

LR: What ancestry was that? Was that Italian?

MM: Armenian. And it wasn't her fault. She just, she couldn't live with it. And I found out later that she had to go into a mental institution and everything and --

LR: So you say you were with your --

MM: My grandmother was from Armenia. She wasn't a citizen; she couldn't hardly speak English, but she raised me until I went in the Navy.

LR: Okay, you went to school in New Jersey?

MM: I went to school in Newark. I went to Bergen Grammar School. I went to Central High School, which was a technical high school, very good school actually. And I got out of the high school and then I worked for a year or so for Western Electric.

LR: Okay, what year would that have been?

MM: Nineteen forty-one, February of '41 was when I graduated. And I worked for three months in automatic coil winding company and then I went -- for a year I worked at Western Electric in Carney, New Jersey.

LR: So Pearl Harbor happened during that part of the year. So where were you when Pearl Harbor happened?

MM: I was home at the time and I remember hearing the news and I was shocked.

LR: Did you know where Pearl Harbor was?

MM: No, I never heard of Pearl Harbor. I had never heard of Pearl Harbor, didn't know anything about it, and I didn't realize we were that close to being at war, frankly. And --

LR: Did you have any feelings of unhappiness or hatred with the Japanese?

MM: Not at that time.

LR: Because you really didn't know too much about it.

MM: No, I didn't know anything about it. But I went to work at Western Electric which had been converted, like everything else in this country, into war work. And no one will believe these stories, but when I went to work there the normal workweek was 70 hours a week.

LR: Seventy?

MM: We worked seven days a week, 10 hours a day.

LR: Well, you were making pretty good money, though, doing that.

MM: I think I made $28 a week, which was probably a lot of money in those days because when I grew up it was all during the Depression that I grew up and we were very, very poor, I'll tell you. We lived on like $5 a week or something. We were --

LR: So you were doing okay. How did you end up in the Navy?

MM: Well, I --

LR: Okay, were you being drafted maybe?

MM: No. I didn't get drafted and what happened was I decided to go into the service and I decided to go into the Navy. And in those days, I guess because of my age, I was only, I don't know, 19 or whatever, I had to get my father's permission. He had to sign the paper for me to go in and he didn't want to do it, but I talked him into it and he finally let me. But one of the things I wanted to tell you before I forget, because it's an unbelievable type of thing, while I was working at Western Electric, seven days a week and 10 hours a day -- and they hated if you took a day off because they paid you time and a half and double time for the weekend so if you took a Monday off (laughter) you couldn't do that though. I just worked flat out every day. I decided to go to college at night, Newark College of Engineering, and believe it or not I actually went to college for a year and I would go four nights a week for three hours a night.

LR: Wow.

MM: Besides working all that time. I did that for a whole year.

LR: Believe it or not I did the same thing.

MM: No one will believe that anymore.

LR: Not anymore. So you had gotten quite a bit of additional learning by going to school.

MM: Oh, technical.

LR: Technical learning.

MM: Oh, yes, very good technical --

LR: Was it electrical oriented?

MM: When I went to high school you had a major basically. My major was electricity. And of course when I went to that college I was in engineering and this came in useful later because when I decided to go in the Navy and my father finally allowed me to go I went to Newport, Rhode Island for boot camp. I think I was there three months, I don't remember. And then they sent me to radio school in Jacksonville, Florida.

LR: So that was a natural since you had some background for them to send you to radio school.

MM: Right. I don't even know if I asked for it. I don't think in those days I don't think --

LR: They probably discovered that on your interview or your form.

MM: They probably just figured that out.

LR: So you went to Jacksonville.

MM: For radio school. And I think that lasted three months, I'm not sure, but the interesting thing was at the end of

the course, the radio course, there was a two-week special course in radio operation.

LR: That was a new thing then.

MM: Absolutely. Not only new, but secret. You couldn't even say the word radar. In other words, if you went downtown on liberty you were never supposed to -- we used the word airborne radio or something, but you never could use the word radar. And so it was a two-week course on how to operate a radar set. And the radar sets they had basically came from England, the original ASE which was a low frequency -- I think it was 175 megacycle and it had -- the one I flew when I was in the training was at Jacksonville, it was on the PBY and they used two antennas that were like 12 feet long. They were Yagi antennas sticking out the side of the airplane.

LR: So this was airborne radar then?

MM: Airborne radar.

LR: Not ship radar?

MM: No, my school was an airborne radio --

LR: That was very, very new.

MM: Yeah, airborne radio. It wasn't Naval shipboard radio, it was airborne radio. Everything was airborne radio.

LR: Now where was that mounted at in the PBY?

MM: One out of each side of the fuselage. They were about 12 feet --

LR: Behind the navigator, somewhere in that area?

MM: I don't know, but they were like 12 feet long.

LR: Oh my goodness.

MM: And those were the receiving antennas. The transmitting antenna was a wire along the back of this -- along the top of the fuselage. And that was the transmitting antenna.

LR: Wow, pretty primitive in today's society.

MM: Oh, yeah. But that was the ASE. The British developed it. And a little while later they came out with a higher frequency version of the same thing. The antennas were probably a foot or two and they were mounted on each side, but these you could actually move. They had --

LR: So it wasn't a rotating --

MM: No, nothing like that.

LR: It just stuck out?

MM: Stuck out there.

LR: Did y'all practice flying with the radar?

MM: Yes. This was just, I guess, part of our training or whatever.

LR: Did y'all practice like intercepting other aircraft?

MM: Yeah, you'd go looking for ships mostly. We basically were looking for ships primarily.

LR: Search radar.

MM: Yeah, search. And so anyway so I went three months to radio school and then I went to two weeks of radar school and then I'm supposed to go out to the fleet. Hopefully that's what I was supposed to do, but when it was time to do that they called me in the office or whatever and said, "We want you to stay here in Jacksonville as a radar instructor." And I said, "Oh my God."

LR: Did you feel pretty comfortable with it?

MM: No. I mean -- no. I didn't mind doing it. I mean I feel like I'm a natural teacher --

LR: But you didn't feel you were an expert yet.

MM: No, that wasn't it. I wanted to go into the war.

LR: Oh, you wanted to go to the war?

MM: I wanted to go into the war.

LR: You wanted to fight?

MM: Right, exactly. So I didn't go into the Navy to --

LR: So how long did you stay there?

MM: Nine months.

LR: Nine months, that's a long time.

MM: I think it was nine months and --

LR: It probably was pretty good duty though.

MM: Oh, yeah, it was good duty, but I didn't -- and I kept putting in for transfers. And first I put in for lighter

than air duty. And I knew the head of the school, a lieutenant or whatever he was, an officer, got to be a friend. And I put in to go to -- they had that zeppelin, that thing in New Jersey, the Hindenburg.

LR: Yeah, at Lakehurst.

MM: Yeah, Lakehurst, right. So anyway I was looking for an escape so I put in for lighter than air duty.

LR: Well, they were flying blimps then.

MM: Oh, yeah.

LR: A lot of Navy blimps, yeah.

MM: So they turned that down of course. And then a month or two later I put in for submarine and he called me in the office, he said, “What the hell are you doing? First you want to go lighter than air, then you want to go in a submarine?” I said, “I just want to get out of here.” So what do they do? They sent me to radar school.

LR: Where was that at?

MM: Corpus Christi, Texas. Now that was a real school. I mean that was like seven months.

LR: Pretty intense.

MM: Oh, yeah, that was the best school in the Navy.

LR: So you took a lot of schooling.

MM: Oh, yeah. That was the best -- probably the toughest school to get into in the Navy. The best school there ever was and you --

LR: So by now this would have been late ’43 or early ’44?

MM: No, probably ’43. So I went there for seven months, I guess. And like I say, that was not radar operation primarily but maintenance.

LR: But the maintenance and the guts of it --

MM: Yeah, it was really deep technical stuff. And normally the way you’re supposed to go to that school is you went to a one-month pre-radio and then two or three months or whatever of radio school and then you went to radar school. In other words, the regular track going there. But I didn’t go that way because I was over in Jacksonville. I didn’t go to these other places and I made a direct transfer to the radar school and in order to do that I remember I had to take a test and pass the test and I did that and they sent me to Corpus Christi. And from Corpus Christi I was sent out to San Diego to join VPB-117. So I was there before the squadron was formed, the beginning of the squadron.

LR: Had you ever been to the west coast before?

MM: No.

LR: That was your first time?

MM: I don't think I'd ever been there, no. I'm sure I hadn't. And I went there and we were in training with old warplane -- old B24s or whatever they were, I guess. And in the meantime they were making brand new airplanes. We got brand new airplanes.

LR: The PB4Y.

MM: Yeah. Five one, I guess. And I remember the first time I went there I ran into some guys that I knew from radio school or something that were in the crew, like [Avansic?] or one of those guys. Maybe I knew him from boot camp, I forget. But when they saw me they told the pilot, "Get him in our crew." So he said okay. So I remember we went out on a training flight, the first flight I did, and they gave us a briefing before the flight, and you flew out into the Pacific off of San Diego and I remember they told us they had a, I think they called it a red zone. They said, "Don't fly over the red zone because they're doing ground-air fire training." So they told us where the red zone was. So okay. So I get in the back and I turn the radar on, we go off and fly and I'm looking at the radar map and I says, "Shit, we're flying right toward this red zone." So I call the pilot of course. Like I say I just got there and I was a little tentative. And I said, "Sir, I think we're flying toward the red zone" and he said, "oh, no,

that's a different island. That's Catalina" or whatever it was, some other island. So I said, "Yes, sir" and I didn't argue with them. So then he flies some more and I said, "Shit, I'm sure he's going to the red zone." So I called him up again and he said, "No, no, no." And then goes about another five minutes, says, "Holy shit, you're right." Because --

LR: Some anti-aircraft fire?

MM: Anti-aircraft is flying all over the place, you know? And he thought I was a magician back there. I mean he wouldn't fly without me and without the radar.

LR: So was this one of the newer PB4Y --

MM: No, this one of the old war [worries?].

LR: Basically an old converted something.

MM: I don't know what the --

LR: Was it a four engine?

MM: It was a four-engine plane. The other thing I remember is the damn things were so bad you'd take off, you'd get up to 500,000 feet and an engine would quit.

LR: Oh my goodness.

MM: So you'd say oh, shit, so we'd have to turn around. By the time we turned around another engine went down. I was used to that. I mean it never bothered me to lose an engine because every time it went on (inaudible) we'd lose the

same engine. So then they made us these brand-new airplanes. I think it was a consolidated (inaudible) or whoever made them.

LR: Yes, (inaudible) was making them.

MM: Anyway, but they came stripped. They had nothing in them, no equipment in them.

LR: No guns?

MM: No nothing. Nothing. No radar, no radios, no gun, no bomb -- I don't think anything was in there.

LR: Did y'all have to help do it?

MM: Yeah. So they shipped us with the airplanes to Phoenix, Arizona in the middle of the summer and we were there for a month installing our own equipment.

LR: Now, did y'all still have a full complement of machine guns?

MM: Yes.

LR: And so you had gunners on board?

MM: Oh, yeah. We had nine enlisted men.

LR: Did you have to man a gun?

MM: No, but I did. Yes and no. In other words, I didn't man a gun; I didn't man the .50 caliber guns. We had twin nose guns, twin deck guns, twin tail guns --

LR: A turret?

MM: Yeah, up on top. We didn't have anything in the belly because the radar was down there, but they had them out the [waist?] guns. Those were singles.

LR: So you had quite a few guns?

MM: Oh, yeah, like eight guns.

LR: So and your station in an emergency would be to maybe man one of these guns?

MM: No. What I did -- I had an office for radar.

LR: Oh, a big shot?

MM: I did. I had an office (inaudible), I really did.

LR: So were you looking at a little oscilloscope screen?

MM: Yeah. I don't remember how big it was. But that's what I did and I did it for 12 hours at a time.

LR: You didn't get airsick having to look at that thing? Because that would make me --

MM: Later on I would hear how the FAA, you can only look at a scope for an hour. We used to go on 12 hours. You know how bomber -- we'd take off and -- anyway so what the guys did for me is they made me a portable 30 caliber machine gun that you could hang on the wall.

LR: Where would you stick it at?

MM: It was on the wall. It was hung on the wall. And we had an entranceway into the plane --

LR: From the bottom?

MM: From the bottom and what it was, was like crossed aluminum bars and plexiglass around it and I don’t know if they made it or if it came, but it had a hole in the middle and I would drop the barrel of the gun down the hole.

LR: So in theory you could add an extra gun to the --

MM: And I did use it on a run.

LR: Really?

MM: I did use it on a run that we made. We made a bombing run and I looked for the wake and when the wake of the ship came I pulled the trigger and it had 100 rounds in this case. And the other thing I remember is it fired twice as fast as the .50 caliber. The sound was so different than the .50 caliber. Like that and it’s gone.

LR: After Phoenix then, after y’all got through installing all of this, that was in a new plane.

MM: Brand new.

LR: So then you went back to San Diego?

MM: We went back to San Diego and I don’t think we stayed there. I think we right away -- they flew the airplane to Hawaii, went to advanced training in Hawaii for six weeks, I think.

LR: Were you part of that crew that flew that over there?

MM: No. I went over on a ship. For some reason they put us on a carrier and we went over on a ship and I don’t know how

the damn things were flown over, but they were. And like I say, I think there were 18 ships.

LR: You don't happen to remember the name of the carrier, I don't guess, do you?

MM: No, but the other one I'd like to find the name of I can't. So we went there, we went to Hawaii for six weeks and I remember stopping at Johnson Island going out to the Pacific. We went to the Marianas.

LR: That Johnson Island is pretty small, isn't it?

MM: Oh, yeah, that's just a runway.

LR: Bunch of birds and goony birds there.

MM: And a bar. I remember they had a bar that said, "Park your guns outside" or something. You're not supposed to take your gun into the bar. But that's all it was, was a runway.

LR: No girls?

MM: No, nothing. So then they went to the Marianas, I think. And we ended on Tinian for a long time and then we flew to the Philippines and we were the lead squadron for the fleet. Remember when MacArthur said, "I'll be back"?

LR: Yeah.

MM: That was the fleet came back to Leyte, we were flying lead patrol, my squadron. And when we got there they only owned

a little piece of the island. The Japs were on the other side.

LR: So we had not fully conquered that yet?

MM: They just -- no. They had nothing. [phone ringing]

LR: You want to answer your phone or it'll turn off?

MM: No, I don't.

LR: Those things can be a bother.

MM: I don't need to know who it is. No one usually calls me.

LR: So the air strip that y'all were on --

MM: It was a Marston mat that they laid --

LR: This was on Leyte probably?

MM: It was on Leyte. And all they had was probably, oh God, I don't know, a mile or a half a mile.

LR: So barely enough.

MM: And it was hills there and they were fighting on the other side of the hill so it was that bad. And we owned that airstrip basically.

LR: So when y'all were fully fueled you were pretty heavy probably and it probably took all of that to take off.

MM: Oh, yeah. It was tough.

LR: So you don't normally carry -- on those search missions did you normally carry any bombs at all?

MM: Yeah, bombs, three --

LR: Oh, you did?

MM: Yeah, three 500-pound bombs. So but the other thing is there was no place on the land for us to live. We were land based.

LR: So y'all in tents or…?

MM: Yeah, we always lived in tents, but there was no room for us. So we landed our airplanes and there was enough room for the airplanes and what we had to do was get on the landing craft and go to a ship.

LR: (inaudible)

MM: To live on the ship overnight. And then in the morning about 3:30 or 5:00 or whatever it was in the morning we'd eat breakfast, get on the landing craft, go back to the island, Leyte, and fuel and get the plane --

LR: Were you all doing search missions at that time primarily?

MM: Yes, that's it.

LR: Looking for any Japanese that might be coming towards you?

MM: Japanese ship, right. It was basically looking for Japanese ships.

LR: Y'all flew pretty low level on that search stuff or pretty high?

MM: You mean flying? Yeah, low level.

LR: Now, did your radar work at that low level?

MM: A thousand feet maybe or something.

LR: Your radar worked pretty good at that level?

MM: Oh, yeah, it was fine. I had no problem with the radar.

LR: Now, let me ask you this. This was primarily an air to surface search radar. Did it also pick up incoming aircraft?

MM: It could, but I don’t ever remember seeing much in the way of that. It was primarily for --

LR: Primarily surface search, okay.

MM: And ground too. We used to attack ground bases.

LR: What could you see on the radar in terms of the ground?

MM: I mean if there was islands or --

LR: Okay, pick up an island, yeah.

MM: Yeah, if there was ground there it would be just as good as a map.

LR: Oh, really? Was the scope --

MM: The picture would look just like a map.

LR: Really?

MM: Oh, yeah.

LR: It was that good? It wasn’t just a blip or something?

MM: No, no. I could tell you exactly where you --

LR: I’m surprised at the quality of radar that early in the war.

MM: No, it was good. The difference -- that’s what I tell my daughter. I said it’s amazing to me how we did things during the war and how fast we could do things compared to

the way they do things now in the military. I went to radar school learning about a particular kind of a radar set and you'd figure okay, when you get out you're going to see that. Well, that's already obsolete.

LR: By the time you got --

MM: Oh, yeah, shit, we're three models gone.

LR: Two models in, yeah.

MM: And they would turn out thousands of those things.

LR: Let me ask you this. On these search missions out of Leyte did y'all ever have any engine problems to where you had aircraft potentially go down or…?

MM: I'll tell you, yes and no. We went to Leyte and of course before Leyte we were in other places, but what I wanted to tell you is that we had to live on these boats and we were probably doing this for a week or two till they got enough real estate for us to put tents up. And we had a tent; we had nine enlisted men sleeping in one tent. And it was a burden for these ships for us because they weren't really -- I mean we weren't supposed to be there.

LR: Were you all the only aircraft there of that kind?

MM: Yes.

LR: So you all operated like individually?

MM: Yeah.

LR: Not in squadrons together?

MM: Well, we were a -- yeah. But there was one -- I guess we were the only squadron like that at that time. It was, what, 15 planes or whatever. So every night or two or three nights they'd kick you out and say, "You've got to go to a different ship" because we were taking up too much of their real estate over there. But I do remember once going on a ship and it was some bay, I remember the name had a bay in it, it was a seaplane tender, I think, and the thing I remember about it, it hadn't been back to the United States in 25 years.

LR: Oh my goodness.

MM: I guess the farthest it would get would be Hawaii. You know, provisions.

LR: Was the food any good on these ships?

MM: Ships, the food was pretty good on the ships. It was terrible on land. It was the worst. I tell people now about the food and they can't believe how bad it was. And we never had fresh meat, fresh fruit.

LR: No milk.

MM: No, powdered milk. Powdered eggs. Battery acid we used to call it for you to drink in the garbage can at the end of the line. And the only thing I guess that they had that was halfway decent was bread because I think they baked their own.

LR: Now, on board the plane these missions were pretty long.

MM: Yeah, we had --

LR: So what did y'all do?

MM: They give us K rations. I think that's what they called them.

LR: Not sandwiches but K rations?

MM: No, no sandwiches, but there'd be like chewing gum and cigarettes and --

LR: A box.

MM: -- bars of candy maybe. But that was a treat.

LR: Oh, really?

MM: We looked forward to flying because that was much better than the food --

LR: So on board the plane you were able to eat okay?

MM: Well, considering now I would say it was terrible, but compared to the food --

LR: Now, at that time out of the Philippines were y'all flying those super long missions? Not yet?

MM: Yes.

LR: Oh, you were?

MM: We were. All day long. You'd start at dawn and come back at night.

LR: Ten, 11 hours probably.

MM: They say in there, some place in there, how many hours. I think they were at least 12 hours.

LR: So because cruising speed of the aircraft was only --

MM: It was 160, I think.

LR: I was going to guess 180. So 160?

MM: Something like that.

LR: That makes for a long day.

MM: And like I --

LR: And at low level.

MM: Yeah. Sometimes it would be really turbulent, you know.

LR: I was going to say the weather conditions in the tropics of the Pacific can be very -- all of a sudden thunder heads blow up and y'all get --

MM: I forgot to tell you, every night when we'd go on the ship to live for a week or whatever; we were out on the deck. There was no place inside.

LR: There was no place for you to berth?

MM: No, we used to carry around a canvas cot. I don't know if you've ever seen them, they fold up?

LR: In a bundle?

MM: Yeah, it would be a bundle like this we'd carry around with us and take it on this damn thing. And you'd open it up and lay down --

LR: But then it rained?

MM: Yeah, then it poured down rain every night. Every goddamn night it was pouring down rain. I remember once, I think it was a seaplane tent, I said I'm going to get smart so I put the damn cot under an airplane, you know? Just far from the plane. I was trying to (inaudible) and the damn, I don't know if it was a Betty or -- something came along and dropped a bomb beside.

LR: Oh, really? And the detonation sort of slammed you up to that belly of the plane?

MM: Yeah. And so I --

LR: I was going to ask you if -- I don't know if that was Subic Bay or whatever where the plane tender was, so the Japanese were still attempting to harass y'all?

MM: Yes, and they'd do that. The other thing they'd do is every time if you went -- like they'd have outdoor movies sometimes at night and they'd set --

LR: On the ship?

MM: No, on land.

LR: You mean onshore?

MM: Yeah. And they'd send the damn plane over and screw up the engine so they were out of sync so they made a lot of noise.

LR: So they really did that?

MM: Just to bother you.

LR: How long were you there in that Philippines area? Quite a while?

MM: No. I don't know, three or four months maybe.

LR: And then from there?

MM: Well, what happened to me -- you asked me about planes crapping out. We got these new airplanes, flew them all the time, never lost an engine all that time and then they said -- I guess there was a reg out that you're supposed to have the engines or replaced or --

LR: Every so many hours.

MM: Yeah.

LR: Flight hours.

MM: Yeah. Well, we were way over the number. I don't know if it was 400 hours or 600 hours or something, but we were way over it so they said, "You've got to go. You can't do that in the Philippines. You've got to go to" -- there's an island right off New Guinea, I think. I forget. They had a base.

LR: (inaudible) probably.

MM: I don't remember the name of it. And that's where you had to go.

LR: Probably New Caledonia.

MM: I don't remember.

LR: That would be a full overhaul probably.

MM: Yeah, that's what I mean. We had to get the -- so then they figured it's kind of R&R so they might as well put another crew on there. So we ended up with 24, two crews plus there was a Navy officer who was going home on leave and he figured he'll hitch a ride, save some time. So he got on the damn plane along with a big box with his clothes.

LR: So y'all were pretty packed in that thing.

MM: We were packed. So we go down and we're flying down the Pacific to this place and we lose an outboard engine. And I guess, I don't know if the pilot screwed up or not, but he tried to start it or something and then he couldn't start it but then he couldn't [feather?] it. So the damn thing was wind milling. Of course I didn't know anything. I didn't know the difference. But I knew we were losing altitude. The pilot calls back and says, "Throw everything you can overboard. Lighten ship."

LR: Including that officer's box?

MM: Right, including that. My radar --

LR: Really?

MM: The bomb sight, the radars, the guns, everything that we could detach we threw it off. And the pilot came across the base, some kind of an island thing, where we could make an emergency landing and we did. And Lieutenant [Ben?] was

there at the time and he was an aeronautical engineer and he told me or us, he said, “I thought we were absolutely goners. When you lose an outboard engine and you can’t feather it you don’t have a chance.” But we managed to make it down there and get the --

LR: So did y’all change planes on this overhaul?

MM: No, I think they just took it down and they fixed it and replaced the engine probably or whatever.

LR: Yeah, probably so. Okay, where was your next assignment from there?

MM: Well, the thing that I remember, the next big event -- well, I remember going on the -- we were on a patrol and I was the radar man and I found a target and I told the pilot where it was --

LR: So you vectored him to the target?

MM: About 31 miles away.

LR: Gave him a bearing?

MM: Yeah, I gave him the bearing and of course he couldn’t see it.

LR: So how far away could you scan for a surface ship?

MM: I could, oh, 50 miles, 100 miles maybe, depending on the size of the ship and the altitude and everything. So I found it and I directed it to him and we went in on a bombing run and I used my little thing and everything, but

that's the one that I never realized that there was another plane with us. Lieutenant Sutton was flying with us. It was a two-plane attack and I never knew that, or I forget it and whatever. We were the lead plane. But there's an archives report. If you can find it, it'll talk about that.

LR: But did y'all hit that boat?

MM: Yes. I'm pretty sure we probably sunk it. And --

LR: Did you get to fire your little 30 caliber?

MM: Yes, I did.

LR: Your little [burp?] gun?

MM: Yeah. And then the other thing after that, the other big event I remember is New Year's Eve we went, and this is where unfortunately, like I say, everybody tells the story but they're all different. We went on a patrol, we came back, and as I remember it, or as I found out, no one seems to agree with it, that when we came back they had closed the base. They'd shut off all the lights and everything and closed the base. So anyway they told us to reconnoiter until they --

LR: Circle until they could -- yeah.

MM: Yeah, and then they opened the base. And when we came back and came around to make a landing we ran out of gas. And

about 300 yards from the runway we ran out of gas and crashed.

LR: Into the water?

MM: Into the water right off of Leyte Gulf. And that's when Lieutenant Ben got killed and Lieutenant Sutton the next day was the duty officer and he's the one that got a boat and went out and found our plane.

LR: How did you -- what did you guys do in the back?

MM: When we hit the water --

LR: Had he warned y'all that y'all would hit the water?

MM: No, I don't think we got a warning.

LR: He thought he could make it, but he didn't quite make it?

MM: We just were 10 seconds short probably. And I remember, oh, I didn't know where I was. I don't know if I got blacked out or banged --

LR: Was water pouring into the fuselage?

MM: No, I don't remember any water, but it was dark and I didn't know where I was or -- I think the plane flipped because he had his landing gears down and Ralph agrees with me the plane flipped over probably. And I'm screaming like, you know. I didn't know where I was and [Tomaselli?] came by and said, "Grab my foot" and he put his foot down and I grabbed hold of it and followed him out. Got out of the airplane --

LR: The plane didn’t sink underwater?

MM: No.

LR: It was shallow?

MM: Well, I think that there was no gas in there. That’s why it kind of --

LR: So it floated?

MM: Floated. For maybe five minutes or three minutes, enough -- the landing craft came out. They must have known --

LR: So they saw y’all?

MM: They must have known that --

LR: Was it daytime?

MM: No, it was nighttime. This is when we came home from patrol. But they had lights and everything, you know. But anyway and the pilot I saw was hanging on the edge of the plane so I went over there and he’s all cut and bleeding and I’m trying to hold him up. I was afraid he was going to fall, go down under. And then I look and somebody’s screaming and it turned out it was Ralph Sanders. I thought it was somebody else. His leg was stuck in the damn wing of the airplane. He couldn’t get it out. And this landing craft practically ran over him. He remembers that. Anyway I tried to -- I swam to the rescue boat, took my leather off, I had a flight jacket, put it up there and then tried to -- I figured I’ll go back and try to help

that guy that was stuck. But by that time they had gotten to him.

LR: Did he lose his leg, you think?

MM: No, he didn't lose his leg, but he was in a hospital for nine months. He was pretty bad and --

LR: So they pretty much saved everybody except Lieutenant --

MM: Yeah. But then, see, we all split up after that. And I remember that night they took us to a hospital someplace and probably four or five of us. They must have split us up somehow. The pilot I know was with us because I offered to give him blood when we got to the hospital and they wouldn't take it.

LR: He was cut up pretty good?

MM: Yeah, he was banged up pretty good. And they wouldn't take it and this is where I tell a funny story in my life story. I woke up the next morning and I looked at him in the bed and I'm looking around, there's people kneeling all around me. And I thought I had died and gone to heaven. (laughter) And I realized I'm in a cathedral. This hospital was a converted cathedral. And of course New Year's Day is a holy day. So they were out at mass and I thought I -- so then I decide, you know, I'm not one to stay in the hospital. I said hell, I'm getting out of

here. And I never even checked out or anything. I just said hell, I'm going back to the base. So I got up and --

LR: So you weren't cut up or broken up?

MM: Not bad. I found out later my head was -- I got banged up pretty good, but I said hell, I'm going back. So I got up and walked -- I don't know how I got back to the base, frankly, whether I walked or hitched a ride or whatever. But I remember going back to the base and there was a long like road, a street, whatever you want to call it, I'm walking down this thing. There's nobody there. There's an officer standing in the middle of this road and I walked up by him and he's got a book in his hand and he says to me, "What's your name?" And I said, "Martin Mehron" and he looks in his book and he says, "Impossible, you're dead." (laughter)

LR: So did that mean that you got reassigned to another aircraft?

MM: No. That was the end of my flying for the Navy really.

LR: So what did they do with you then?

MM: I stayed there for probably two or three weeks, played a lot of bridge, I remember, and then they sent me back to the States and they sent me back to the same base I'd started from, Camp Kearney, as a radar maintenance man.

LR: Where was that at?

MM: Camp Kearney. That's where our squadron was formed originally. So they sent us back to the same --

LR: What did they call your squadron, the blue something?

MM: Blue Raiders. That's what what's her name called us, Tokyo Rose.

LR: Oh, really? So she --

MM: No, she's the one that gave us that name when we showed up in the --

LR: So she knew about you guys?

MM: The day we showed up in the Pacific she came out on the radio, radar, and she said, "Welcome to the Blue Raiders."

LR: Let me ask you this. You flew that PB4Y, but did you also fly on what they call the privateer?

MM: No. That's the single engine. That came later.

LR: So later in the war they converted the frame of a --

MM: No, they came out with a different airplane.

LR: Oh, it's a different airplane entirely?

MM: Yeah. It was a single tail privateer. So I went back to Camp Kearney as a maintenance man and I met one of the girls that I had known a little bit before I went overseas who worked in the ship store at Camp Kearney and I started dating her and then we got married in San Diego and when I --

LR: Right at the end of the war this would be?

MM: Well, no, this is before the end of the war.

LR: Oh, even before?

MM: This is 1945, I think, October of ’45. And we got married and I told her I wanted to go to college on the GI Bill and she managed to -- she had a cousin or something who lived up around San Francisco and she contacted him and he got us a place to live in Richmond which was almost impossible. At that time the hardest problem in the world was to find a --

LR: Yeah, housing.

MM: Finding a house. And we went to what they call temporary housing where the Kaiser Shipyard workers used to live. This is in Richmond, California.

LR: What colleges would have been near there?

MM: I went to University of California Berkeley which was another strange story because her -- it turns out her cousin was a big shot in Kaiser Shipyards. He was labor relations manager. So we stayed with him for a week and he got us a place to live, $28 a month and furnished. Then he says to us, “Take him over and get him registered for college.” We go there in the middle of February and there’s a big banner of registration had closed in January. So I was a month later. So I says, “Oh, shit.” So there was a young lady in the lobby there or whatever, the

registrar’s place, so I said I might as well show her. And all I had was my high school transcript and my discharge papers.

LR: So you did have that?

MM: I did have that fortunately. I showed them to her and she looked at them and looked at them and said, “Let me go talk to the registrar.” She comes back out and said, “We’re going let you sign up even though you’re a month late. You’ve got all the credits and grades and everything you need” which never happens with an out of state student.

LR: You think they gave you any credit for that little bit of college work you had done before?

MM: No. But my high school, it turned out, I even had two years of French when I was in high school. I mean you had to have it, you had to have a foreign language. I had four years of math and four years of English and four years of --

LR: So what did you sign up for to study?

MM: Electrical engineering.

LR: Oh, really?

MM: And that’s what I --

LR: That’s a natural.

MM: Yeah. That’s what I did and then we had children, Kathy who’s here and --

LR: What rating were you when --

MM: I was an AETM first class. That's airborne electronic technician's mate.

LR: That's a very specialized rating.

MM: Yeah, first class. And that's what I was in the Navy. But the funny thing is in college I didn't have any books for about a month because everything was late, but it didn't bother me. I mean I had studied that physics and chemistry and math in high school.

LR: You were fortunate that you covered all that.

MM: I had a very good -- then I went from there, I got out of there, I went to work at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base as an engineer for 10 years.

LR: So you stayed in California much of this time?

MM: Just for college.

LR: And Wright-Patterson's up in Ohio?

MM: Yeah, Dayton, Ohio. When I left college I went to work at Dayton, Ohio and they let me go to college at night at Ohio State, they paid for it. So I went and got my master's degree from Ohio State. And of course meantime I've got about five kids.

LR: On my trip next year we're planning on making a loop down and I want to stop at the Air Force Museum in Dayton.

MM: It's wonderful.

LR: I want to try to get to that.

MM: Yeah, that’s wonderful.

LR: I’ve heard good things about it.

MM: Yeah, it is.

LR: That pretty much covers then your -- so you were discharged officially?

MM: In February of ’46. That’s when I got out.

LR: So you spent a good chunk of the time in the Pacific. So you didn’t get any kind of bad specific disease?

MM: Oh, yes, I did, but --

LR: I mean like malaria or anything.

MM: Yeah. I never took Atabrine. You were supposed to take that for malaria and it would turn you yellow so I never took it. I didn’t want to look like a Jap.

LR: You guys in the aircrews, y’all sort of did your own thing.

MM: Right and I’ll tell you this, I didn’t say that in the story, but maybe I should have. Our captain, our squadron leader was E.O. Rigsby, junior, and somehow or other he was connected to the admirals either through his wife or whatever, I don’t know, but wherever he was, whether it was Camp Kearney or Honolulu where we’d go, he could get anything.

LR: So you got special perks?

MM: Special perks. Until we got to the Philippines and then the Philippines were overrunning with admirals, you know. And he was the worst pilot in the world.

LR: Oh, really?

MM: And I don’t know why anybody would fly with him.

LR: Maybe he was a good administrator.

MM: He was terrible in everything, but he had a lot of suction. So while we were living on boats that I told you about we would get up at 5:00 in the morning for breakfast. They would say, “Meet in the mess half or whatever at 5:00 in the morning.” Okay. So the enlisted men lived by themselves and so forth and we show up at 5:00 in the morning and one day we go there and he’s sitting there --

LR: Commander Rigby?

MM: Rigsby. And what he was doing is he was waiting to see if the officers showed up on time and they didn’t of course. They came in late. And what he did was he chewed their asses out right in front of us which I thought was -- I mean it was unusual.

LR: Embarrassing.

MM: Well, I knew it wasn’t proper. According to the regs you wouldn’t do that, but he did. He (inaudible). We go, get on our boat, go in, do our thing, and come back after 12

hours, he's gone. He was transferred to a surface ship. They fired him basically.

LR: Really?

MM: Yeah.

LR: So someone must have complained.

MM: Oh, yeah, somehow or other the word got out and you never see that in the documents. All it says is, they have a name for that, when somebody leaves. I forget what they call it. He was reassigned or something.

LR: They state --

MM: But they didn't say in there why. And then the other story about him is that about five years after that he committed suicide.

LR: Oh, really?

MM: Yeah, I have the article, the newspaper article.

LR: It ended his career, you know, some of these things and if you can't go anywhere in your career --

MM: Right, when you go from the Air Force to the surface ships that's a big demotion.

LR: Oh, okay. Was he a full commander probably, or lieutenant commander?

MM: I think he was a lieutenant commander.

LR: Yeah, I think I saw his name listed. At that time he was lieutenant commander.

MM: And McDonald took over from him, I remember.

LR: Marty, I really, really do appreciate these little bits of details. As I've told many of the other interviewees, everybody knows what the big picture is.

MM: I know it.

LR: Everybody knows what all the main battles were and all, but what we're interested in is your kind of little details and little stories about this happened and that happened and this chewing out. That kind of thing, that's the kind of record details that we need for academians [sic] and historians. They use our data for research when they write books. And on behalf of the National Museum of the Pacific War I'd like to personally thank you for taking the time to share that with us.

END OF AUDIO FILE