Robert Owens Oral History Interview

ED METZLER: This is Ed Metzler. Today is the 31st of May, 2012. I'm in Fredericksburg, Texas at the National Museum of the Pacific War. And I'm interviewing Mr. Bob Owens. 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 related to this site. First let me thank you Bob, for spending the time to share your experiences with us today, we appreciate that. Now let's get it started by asking you to introduce yourself. Give us your full name, place of birth, that kind of stuff.

ROBERT OWENS: It's a pleasure to be here and to see the Nimitz Museum. My name is Robert Cecil Owens Jr. In the Navy I went by RC. I was born in Wichita Falls, Texas on January 20th, 1926. My interests have always been in aviation. From little model airplanes all the way through, and I followed that for a full career. Went to high school there in Wichita Falls and most of my studies were directed toward aviation. Soon as I could select any electives they were always aviation, aeronautical subjects. And there again, I was building model airplanes and flying them.

Before the war -- well actually the war started I have two brothers. The older one went into the Army. That would be -- can't remember exactly, about 1941, some time there. And he actually participated in the first landing invasion in Guadalcanal. He was a foot soldier at that time and survived that. His oral history is in the Florida State University and available for review. That's one of the better oral histories that Dr. Olsen has said he's ever taken. I won't get on his side of the story but I'll touch on it a little later. My other brother, middle brother, went into the Marine Corps. Guess that was after Pearl Harbor. He served in the Pacific too. So I was in high school in 1943 and decided that I wanted to get in the service too. That's how we all felt then. We had a job to do and let's get on, then. So I had a brother in the Army, one in the Marine Corps, so I had to select the Navy. Didn't want to choose sides. And of course my objective was to be a fighter pilot. By that time I had had a couple of airplane rides. Actually my sister gave me my first airplane ride and I -- Curtis Condor biplane, which was an American Airlines type passenger plane. When I was about six years old. And I said, "Oh, this is it." And then later on she -- that was five dollars and five dollars for her at that time was something else.

EM: That's big bucks.

RO: Big bucks.

EM: That was probably in the Depression too.

RO: Yes it was. After that, about the time I was in middle school she also paid for a ride in a Ford Trimotor, piloted by Clarence Chamberlin. He was a stunt pilot, he was doing loops and things with a Ford Trimotor right on the ground. That was much better. But anyway, that really cemented my desire to be a pilot. So when the chance came to join the Navy, of course I wanted to join the Naval Aviation Cadet Program, it was called a V-5. And when I went to sign up, had a little glitch with my birth certificate. I had never seen it and I had previously filled out my Social Security application with my full name, my father's name as a junior. So I used that same name on my Navy application for enlistment and it was rejected by the Navy because it did not agree with my birth certificate. So, OK. So we decided, my family has several -- their father's, but it was my cousin's, had just initials for names. There was DJ and --

EM: JR. (laughter)

RO: JR. You know, WD. And I ran across several in the Navy later on that did it the same way. So anyway I filled out the application again as RC Owens Jr., so that's been my

name. Soon as I turned 17 on January 20th, 1943, I signed up and went down and took my physical exam and was accepted.

EM: Now your parents had to sign for you if you were under 18 --

RO: My dad was not interested in signing but my mother did. So she did sign for me.

EM: Why do you think she signed for you?

RO: Because I wanted.

EM: You were the youngest of the three.

RO: I'm the last -- three sisters and two brothers, so there was six of us. I'm the baby.

EM: What did your dad do for a living?

RO: Dad -- my birth certificate lists him as a cattleman. A stockhand. He was a cowboy. He was born 50 years too late. He would buy cattle for packing companies or slaughterhouses, he worked in a slaughterhouse for a while, worked in a number of butcher shops. That was his thing.

EM: Born 50 years too late.

RO: Both my brothers were also in the butchery trade, working like I did too. I worked in the butcher shop Saturday mornings. Instead of going to the morning movies I was grinding sausage and boning stuff, as my brothers did.

EM: So anyhow, here you are 17. Momma signs for you and in you go.

RO: No not exactly. They said, "You're a little too young to really be a pilot. We need two years of college."

EM: That's what I thought.

RO: So I said, "OK." "So what we can do is that next class available we'll send you to a V-12 program, which is a college training program. I said, "Oh, OK. I get to go to the university." So I went to California to visit one of my buddies whose family had migrated out to the Burbank area. I went out there after I graduated in May and then in early July I got a call from my mother who said, "Your Navy papers are here, you'd better come home. They want you to report." So I did, I came back and went down and was sworn in. They sent me to Arlington, Texas, the North Texas Agriculture College, in the V-12 program, the college training program. And it was to build up my time there to get credit so that I could become an aviator. And that was interesting because I was -- my brother's family lived in Dallas and of course we were right near there. So on weekends I could go visit them or I could come back to Wichita Falls.

EM: Yeah, it's not that far.

RO: No, and there you could hitch hike. At that time you just get out on the road and stick a thumb and boy, you got a ride right away. So after about a year and a half down there in Arlington, I kept hounding my executive officer because I wanted to be a pilot. So he called me into his office one day and said, "OK Mr. Owens I got two pieces of paper for you here. One is stay in the V-12 program from here you'll go to University of Texas and the engineering schools. And after four years you'll have a degree and a commission. But you'll need to sign on for another hitch in the Navy and I can't remember if it was four or six years, something like that. That didn't set too well. And I said, "I want to be a pilot." And he says, "Oh, OK. We've got that too. So this is your other piece of paper." So I said, "I want to stick with the pilot training." "OK." So he approved that and pulled me out of the school there and sent me over to Grand Prairie Naval Air Station. It was just a few miles away, I was still able to get home on the weekends. So there I got no flight training at all, I was just actually a flight line flunky. When the wind storms would come up I'd install the batten boards on the bottom of the wings so that the wind wouldn't blow them away. I cranked the engines for the cadets that were flying there in their primary training. And I didn't get

to fly except one day I did convince one of the students who was going up for his last flight before his check ride, to get his license. They liked to do that because that way they could put the passenger in the back seat and they could fly from the cockpit, that's the way they'd fly with the instructor. If they flew solo they'd have to fly from the back seat. But he didn't like that so he put me in the back seat and away we go. We went up and for an hour he did every acrobatic maneuver that there was in the book except the falling leaf and inverted spin. I didn't sick but boy oh boy my stomach was in a knot for several days. I didn't feel like eating for a while, I know that. Just on takeoff --

EM: But you hadn't actually piloted yet, anything.

RO: I had not been in the control of an airplane. On takeoff he takes off in the steersman and starts to climb. Now you're not very far from the runway. And he says, "Is your seatbelt tight?" And I said, "No, it's not very tight." And I reached down to -- and I popped the belt buckle, seatbelt off. And he started to do a slow roll. Now we're upside down. I grabbed the bottom of the seat and I hit the seat height release. Now the seat ratchets out and I'm sitting right in the slipstream by a foot. I said, "Oh

God, my first ride I'm going to fall out and die."
(laughter)

EM: Things are not going well.

RO: Not going well. But I banged on it -- of course you had no communications. Well other than the instructor sitting in the back seat had his Gosport. That went to the -- it was just an audio system. But I banged on the cockpit and got his attention and he leveled out and I tightened up and then he went into all the maneuvers and stuff. But that was the only flying I got to do when I was an aviation cadet. Went from Grand Prairie to the Louisiana State Normal College in Natchitoches, Louisiana. Hot, humid, yeah.

EM: Yeah, by Wichita Falls standards, definitely.

RO: Yep, so I was there and I did not record the actual dates but I was there for probably a semester, a semester and a half. And all we did was classroom work and physical exercise. Played soccer -- I had never played soccer in my life. I was a softball player and out there in that hot sun and at night you'd sleep in the bunk, no ventilation, no fans. And you'd just be laying in sweat.

EM: Sleep in your own sweat, yep.

RO: Yep. So I developed a rash from that, and I'd go out and I developed a sun tan from playing soccer in the field. And

then the rash would dry up or heal and the sunburn would be brown so I had white spots all through my brown sun tan.

EM: And you're still wondering, when am I going to be able to become a pilot?

RO: When can I get to fly? Well they had been flying Piper Cubs there, but then they just stopped it. So I didn't get to fly there. So the next assignment there -- well actually, see Natchitoches, that was called preflight. No, flight prep. Just book work. So I went to University of Georgia, officially in the V-5 Aviation Cadet program and again, no flying. More and more book work, celestial navigation, instruments, and all this stuff.

EM: So when this getting to be now? '44?

RO: We're talking now the end of '44. Some place along there, at University of Georgia, they called in all the cadets. Big auditorium, and they gave us a big lecture about the war and all this stuff and said, "Well, the war's coming along very good and we're not losing as many Navy pilots as we thought, so we're not going to need as many. So you go back to your quarters and we'll tell you who's going to be here for supper." Said, "We're dropping one-third of the class by grade point average." I survived that and I said, "OK, no problem at all." And we're still there at University of Georgia and they called in, same thing again.

They said, "OK we need another third of the class out of here." I survived that. But I can see the handwriting on the wall.

EM: They're closing in.

RO: They're closing and they don't need the pilots so that also they were washing pilots out for minor inabilities. You bounce a landing, "OK, that's enough for you." So I decided, well my two brothers were out there fighting the war. I said, "I want to get out there before it's all over." So I volunteered to go to gunnery school, to be an aerial gunner. And that sent me just across the border to Northern Florida, to Yellow Water Florida. There, five or six weeks in gunnery school and they assigned me to a crew who had been in flight training up in Hutchinson, Kansas. So they had already selected their pilots and copilots and the flight engineer, what we called a plane captain. They were up there and they had been flying the Liberty bombers. Then they moved down to Jacksonville, to the municipal airport there, to pick up the rest of the crew. The gunners, navigators and stuff. And that's where I got picked at random I guess, and joined the flight crew.

EM: As a?

RO: As a gunner.

EM: A turret gunner?

RO: Yeah, a turret gunner. The airplanes that we flew there were all equipped for training for night bombing. And they had taken out the belly turret, the ball turret. I'm a small guy on the crew, I get the belly turret.

EM: You were saying earlier.

RO: And but they had taken the turrets out and put in the radar. The Radon, that's retractable, for use in night bombing. We did some night bombing missions there out on some lakes out in the swamps. Made several anti-submarine patrols. At that time the German submarines were just raising havoc out there on the Atlantic coast there. And we flew out and my very first flight -- of course, you didn't get in the turrets and stuff, when they're flying like that you just sit out on the after deck in the airplane. No seat belts, no seats. You ricochet around. But we flew out and there was a big major storm and we flew into the storm front. Went out into the Atlantic, patrolling out there all night. Turn around you come back through the storm again. Well that was too much. So I got sick, threw up in the back of the airplane. I figured, "Oh boy, there's my flying career."

EM: They found an excuse to get you out of there.

RO: Now they needed the gunners because the Navy was building up their squadrons for long range land based airplanes.

For use in the Pacific. So my flight engineer was a little guy -- he had been the belly turret too, he's now the plane captain. He cleaned up the mess for me. We couldn't land at Jacksonville, we went down to Vero Beach, I think is where we landed. And we went down for breakfast and I think they were serving shrimp casserole or something and that didn't go down very well either.

EM: You probably weren't really interested in anything at that point.

RO: Not really interested in food. But anyway, later on my pilot said, "That didn't matter, a lot of them get sick on the first rides like that." And that's what happened. So we trained for about six weeks there in Jacksonville and then went San Diego to Naval Air Station Miramar in San Diego and there we picked up brand new, factory airplanes. It was the later version with the single tail, the Privateer. We thought it was a better airplane and now it had a gun turret. I had the left, port gun turret.

EM: Because it had more turrets but up high on the Privateer.

RO: The Privateer we had two top turrets instead of one. They took the belly turret out and put in two blister turrets. They would rotate down and converge at about 100 feet, fire beneath the airplane. And that was good, now I had my gun turret.

EM: So you never really flew the PB4Y-1?

RO: Yes, that's what we flew in Jacksonville.

EM: OK, that's right. And then the PB4Y-2 is the Privateer.

RO: We picked those up in San Diego. Because those were the airplanes we were going to fly overseas. And we spent another month or so there doing just cross training. The submarine crews were training, and they had to be out there and we'd come out and we take turns making simulated bomb runs on them and they'd crash dive, this sort of thing. And my pilot had been out as a copilot in the South Pacific out in the New Guinea area. So he's now -- we call them patrol plane captains, PPCs. And so he's the pilot and we had two copilots, they would alternate flying or navigating. I got to know the one copilot very well. He and I would go on the Miramar Air Station with bows and arrows, looking for jackrabbits.

EM: (laughter) Some people were in bars and you were out shooting jackrabbits.

RO: Yeah, I never went into bars. I think I was turning on 19 at that point. Girls? They scared the heck out of me.

EM: At that point. Yeah, yeah.

RO: Well they showed us all the VD movies, guys with their crotch rotting off and I said, "Boy, that's not for me!" But he and I got to know each other real well and that's

interesting because I was just a apprentice seamen. Maybe I had one stripe at that point, or two stripes. And but he was also a model airplane builder so we had an affiliation there. So we fraternized all the time. The flight crew were not nearly as strict about that. No saluting on the flight line, any of that kind of garbage.

EM: No officers and enlisted men --

RO: They just had officer's country and enlisted country so you didn't cross those boundaries. He could come over or we could do something, leave and go out on the base with our bows and arrows and stuff. But never really got into any trouble with that. I guess one time later on over in the Philippine Islands, we were building and flying model airplanes there. You could build models. We each had gas engines, using that real 130 octane fuel and 70 weight oil. But our PPC did one time comment to my copilot Phil that you really shouldn't be doing that. He explained, "Look, this is the only guy on the crew that ain't (inaudible) and when we're on duty, it's strictly business." And that's true. But when we're off duty, why can't we fraternize? And went through the rest of the war that way. Never had any more problems. And Phil and I are still the best of friends. I've designed model airplanes and he's built them, the same as I have. He has got shingles and it

settled in his eye and he lost his sight in one eye. So he hasn't been coming to the reunions. That's getting ahead of the story. From San Diego, we got through with our gunnery and bombing. We bombed islands out there and stuff like that. And Bill was very good. This was my patrol plane captain. He had been out before and in combat and he tricked those submarine guys. He flew in circles around one of the islands, so they couldn't see him. When our turn came to make a pass we were already practically on the submarine before he crash dived. We straddled him with bombs. Just little smoke bombs, really. They looked like little bombs but they had a shotgun cartridge in them that was powder, just to make smoke.

EM: Just so you could see where they hit.

RO: See where they hit. So then came time to do our trans Pacific flight to Hawaii. So they had you fly over halfway.

EM: Did they give you any leave before you went overseas?

RO: Oh, in between these various assignments you always had a week or two. And since they provided the transportation, you always managed to get around. Even there hitchhiking by air wasn't all that bad. One time I did get a ride from Burbank to Albuquerque in a Liberator bomber. It was some general, it was his private airplane. But they let me sit

in the back so that wasn't really that bad. Or we rode the trains or buses. Military always had priority, had no trouble getting on the transportation. When it came time to go overseas, I think we were assigned to the VPP-177 at that time. And they had been operating in the Saipan-Tinian area during the Saipan invasion. And developed quite a record for enemy airplanes and destruction at that point. And so we wen to Hawaii -- the rule was they didn't trust you to find Hawaii on the first trip out so you'd fly, go halfway, turn around and go back to San Diego. They figured you could find the West Coast of the US easier than you could find the islands in case you got lost. So we did that, did a half of what we called a Trans-Pac flight. We did that OK, no problem at all. And then came time to fly over and it was about a 12 hour flight. The bombers, they'd cruise and then about 130, 140 miles an hour. Got to Hawaii, it was my first trip to Hawaii. I remember the landing there, the engines came to a stop. I hopped out and looked and there was a bird sitting on top of the propeller blade. (laughter) It had just stopped. They were being friendly! So we did about another four, five weeks of training there, where we trained against fighters.

EM: Where were you stationed there?

RO: At Kaneohe Bay.

EM: That’s on the North Shore of Oahu.

RO: North Shore of Oahu, yeah. It was a very nice base. I liked Hawaii climate, it was very good. But our training there consisted of aerial gunnery. We actually fired live fire at sleeve targets being towed by Wildcats. The FM-2 Wildcats. It was always fun. I’d go down on the flight line when they were towing their sleeve targets. They’d lay the cable out from the tail of the airplane at the start of the runway and the cable was about a thousand feet long and it went down the edge of the runway with the wind sock -- or the gunnery sock, the sleeve target. The Wildcat would take off, start his run. As soon as he got air speed he’d pull the nose up at a 45 degree angle to get the cable off the ground. And then there’d be an enlisted man down on the field holding on the end of the sleeve target and soon as the airplane got up to the length of the cable they would level out and at that time the guy on the ground would just pop the sleeve target up in the air without touching the ground and away they’d go. And each of the gunners would find ammunition with a color dipped in paint. So theoretically you were supposed to be able to see who was shooting and who got the hits and who didn’t.

Well they all came out black, so the guy that got the black always got the high score.

EM: (laughter) Yeah, it's amazing how that works.

RO: I caught it one day because I hit the tow line right at the leading edge of the sock and we lost the sock, we lost our count for that day.

EM: You shot the sock off.

RO: I shot the sock off.

EM: (laughter) Well you should get extra credit for that, I think.

RO: No.

EM: It didn't work that way?

RO: No.

EM: But they didn't know it was you, did they?

RO: Yeah. They accused me of it anyway, so it probably was right.

EM: You couldn't prove it wasn't you.

RO: Right, didn't have the paint there. I guess the concern was that you should be shooting at the sleeve, not where the airplane is. He's got a live pilot in the thing. They didn't have any protection. Other than the worn armor plate on the back side. But then OK, it came time to join our squadron and we flew to Johnson Island, which is actually just a coral atoll. They extended the runway by

piling coral on top of the airplanes that crashed on the end. The first time I got to see goony birds there, the albatross. One night there and then another night in Kwajalein. Guam got in there somehow.

EM: Now you're flying with your aircraft and your crew.

RO: Well we thought we were going to keep that airplane, we didn't. It turned out we went to Kwajalein from there to Samar in the Philippines. Parked the airplane on a dusty, old field and a war weary PB4Y-1 from Mindoro, where our squadron is now based. One of the guys flew over with a skeleton crew and picked us up. We parked our new airplane in the dust over in Samar and they took us over in a war weary 4Y-1. And so then we start flying our patrols. Our mission was to cover the South China Sea between the Philippine Islands and the French Indochina which is Vietnam now. That whole area there was our sector for patrolling. They were still getting a few ships up and down through there, but we never actually saw any. I arrived in the squadron in May 1945, just about the time that FDR had passed away. And also D Day pretty close there in Europe.

EM: Yeah, that was early May and I think Franklin died in April 12th or something like that.

RO: I think we were in Kaneohe Bay when that happened.

EM: So your patrols were in the South China Sea.

RO: Yeah. The squadron had 18 crews and I don't know how many airplanes, probably slightly more than that count for airplanes that were not air worthy. We'd send out five patrols every morning. You'd get up at about three in the morning and do your toiletry stuff and go down for chow and then report to the flight line. They had trucks that would take us down to the flight line. We were assigned an airplane, we didn't have an airplane that was ours.

EM: So you don't know what airplane --

RO: Don't know what you're going to get.

EM: But they were all basically the same.

RO: They were all basically the same.

EM: These are all --

RO: These are 4Y-1s now.

EM: Ones, right.

RO: And they were war weary. They had had a lot of time on them. We had, the patrols were numbered nine through 13. Starting at Saigon was nine and then close up to Huey which was near Hainan Island. It was divided. You'd fly out, hit the Indochina Coast, then flight along the coast for about an hour and then turn around and fly home.

EM: Was that Japanese occupied?

RO: Oh, it was all Japanese occupied, yeah. They had their main railroad went right along the coast there and that was one of our primary targets of opportunity. And we -- I don't remember seeing any shipping that was worth anything. Maybe shipping boats or sampans.

EM: So you did low level bombing?

RO: I don't think we ever flew above 4,000 feet. You can't see anything if you're too high! No we'd always go in low. I'd frequently -- our favorite target were bridges. If you knocked the bridge out you'd stop all transportation. We'd also come in at about a 45 degree angle to their railway bridge and down as low as you could get. And they usually positioned their defensive guns on each side. A sort of a quadrangle there, each side of the road, each side of the river. So they knew that we'd be coming right over their head. And my pilot was always -- if he got shot at, he'd go down. No matter how low he was he would go down, get lower. And we had frequently come in with small guns fire, machine gun rounds in the airplane. Engine cowling. Never took a hit that would damage the engine there. And we had self-fueling fuel tanks. So that worked all right. But we'd come back and count a few bullet holes here and there.

EM: What about enemy aircraft?

RO: Very seldom. I had one story that I'll tell. The Japanese fighters would come up and escort us up the coast. They knew when we were gonna get there. You take off and fly in daylight for six hours, well it's new. We're their new target practice. They learned pretty quick to not mess around with the Liberators. They would pick us up as we came in and turned to fly parallel with the coast. And we'd be over the coast, so we'd be tracked pretty easily. There'd be a fighter or two parked out of range. They'd escort you. They didn't want to die either. But they did not attack. And soon as we turned to the sea and headed back for home they'd disappear.

EM: That's amazing. And you never had any escorts.

RO: No, single plane patrols. Except for one mission. One day our top turret gunner who was really a good, good gunner. He said, "Bill, can I take a potshot at that fighter out there? He seems to be acting like he wants to come in." He said, "Yeah, give him a shot." Well as soon as the guy banked up a little bit, like to fake an attack, our gunner fired a burst out there and pretty soon it was trailing smoke and it turned and left. And that was at maximum range, about 2,000 yards. Those 50s were effective. And he just happened to get, probably got a few licks into him. But we didn't take any credit for that. Could be he just

poured the power on and a plume of exhaust smoke, something. But anyway, they were very leery about coming in and attacking. Very seldom did we see anything real worthy of going in for. Although we did catch one locomotive. Watch the railroad tracks, although we had bombed out sections of bridges, the darn railroad tracks were shiny. Their trains are running on the tracks. So we'd watch and we saw a little spur go off into the jungle and there was a little bit of thatched shack out there and there was a locomotive in the thing. Well Bill makes another pass, goes back by there, and lays one right into the cab of this thing. And then he let us shoot out that. Of course in the 4Y-1 we had no belly turret. Well way back in the beginning we did have fun with belly turrets but then they got taken out. So I would get to ride in the belly turret. And that was a great gun position, because you're laid out down on your back looking forward into the belly and you can see everything that's ahead of you. You're the lone man on the totem pole there. A great strafing position. Depress the guns about 20 degrees and when your target appears you start shooting at it left or right or straight down. Then pick it up and wait for the next target.

EM: What's your thought about the B-24? Was that a lovely airplane, a dog? How do you feel about it?

RO: I feel it's a great airplane. I know the B-17 guys claim the B-24 is the box that the B-17 came in, B-24 is the box the B-17 came in. But they suddenly did not have the range or the load carrying ability, axed for the speed. But the Liberator was not a good airplane at high altitude. The B-17 had more wing. And it performed better in Europe.

EM: It was a lot sexy looking, I should say. But the B-24 was achingly ugly.

RO: No, that's in the eye of the beholder.

EM: That's true, that's true. And it was a reliable thing and tough, from what I heard.

RO: You know we had a lot of long flights. 14, 15 hour patrols. And those little Pratt Whitneys just kept right on running. The only time we really got into any trouble, we'd been assigned a mission that there'd been some reports of naval shipping over in the Gulf of Sian. Now that's across Indochina, Cambodia, in that area. So they assigned the airplanes that had sectors nine, 10, 11 to join together as a three plane flight formation and go over Saigon and we did a little strafing there, and kept on going and went over to see Kampot Bay, it was called. We carried some incendiaries, which we dropped on the town on

the way in just to give them something to think about. And there in the bay sure enough there were some boats. Well they were boats, not ships. And as they turned and came in, we got in trail and because there was really not that much activity or number of ships, maybe three of them. So we came and we were the third guy in the trail. And I don't know exactly what happened. At that time they gave me a camera, a K-28 camera which is a four by five roll film camera. You held it like this and you had a frame site, advance the film and pull the trigger to shoot it. So I had that camera and I would stand by the last waist hatch. We had the guns on pivoting mounts there, one on each side. So I would stand behind the guy on my left side, he was more friendly that the guy on the right. He didn't mind me being there. So my plan was to always take a picture of the target as we got close to it and then as we passed over it you could feel the bomb release and try to estimate when the impact would be based on how high we were, which is probably pretty quick, we were never more than 200 feet, 300 feet over the target. We had three second delayed action fuses on those bombs. They were combination bombs. We'd use them for depth charges, we'd explode with hydrostatic fuse at 25 feet under water or they'd contact fuse with a three second delay. So I'd try

to time that to get a picture of the explosion if I could, and then rack it around and the pilot would pull up and we'd turn left and I'd get a picture of the target for bomb damage assessment. So that worked out real good and I got some nice pictures. Well this particular time, we're coming in and I look up and there's our target, there's the boat. Whoops! A column of water up in the air. The guys bombed from the airplane leading us either didn't delay, maybe the fuse strain was destroyed or something, or we were too close or he was too slow. Anyway the spacing was wrong and that plume of water was up in the air and it hit our left engines. Well as soon as I saw that I took the picture there and I pulled inside and about that time we hit the water and the airplane skewed to the right real heavily. That got me -- I was on the right side so it skewed in the other direction. It knocked me down, camera came out of my hand and I was laying on the bilge of the airplane back there. Got up and then I saw water. I said, "Oh my God, we crashed! We're crashed!" Then I said, "Wait a minute, I hear engines running." Number one is running, number two is running, number three -- uh oh, it stopped, it's feathered. But number four is running. I heard them talking on the intercom as soon I got up I put the earphones back up. They said, "Have you tried this to

start it? Have you tried that?" The pilots were talking to each other about restarting that engine. About that time some fighter planes jumped us. I had heard that there were six. An official report later, after the war came out it said that there were nine of the fighters, they called them the Oscars. It looked like a Zero but they were Oscars. They saw us with an engine out so they began to come at us. Well the one came in on the tail and our tail gunner, meanwhile his ammunition links had separated, split, or elongated so it wouldn't feed through the gun anymore so one gun was jammed, wouldn't feed but he had one good gun. We were not more than 150, 200 feet off the jungle at that point. He was boring in at six o'clock and I said, "Get back in the turret of the airplane!" And he did. I looked up and he fired a burst and the fighter started to go away from it. Came back and lined up again and one more short burst and it hit right in the right-hand lane and the wing just blew off. He was in the jungle and gone right quick.

EM: Those were fragile airplanes, weren't they though? Japanese fighters in particular.

RO: They did not have any armored protection on them. No self-sealing fuel tanks, so that's what got that one. So I looked back outside and off of our wingtip I saw another

one coming in. Put my camera up just as he hit the jungle, exploded and in my photograph you could see the engine trailing smoke. So we had two and then some place along the way we got another half a credit. So out of that we shot down three of their -- I heard, our crew said that there were six fighters. Well the official report after said that there were nine. But as soon as the fighters came in the guy who was leading the group, he peeled off and went home. He deserted. And fortunately, my pilot and the other pilot, Glen Mount, his dad was in the other airplane. They stayed with us. And we finally let the engine windmill so you couldn't tell that it was not running.

EM: But it was out for good?

RO: Well later on we got it running again. Probably it was the water that got it. Years later I talked to my copilot, my model airplane buddy. He was flying as a navigator that day and he was standing between the pilot and the copilot and saw what happened. Reached up and hit the alternate air switches, so they would not have direct air coming into the carburetors. Now that brought in air from someplace else where it was not subject to water contamination. Now that probably saved our lives. That time the alternate air

doors closed, we didn't get that water directly on the engines.

EM: Because you probably would have lost them all, you think?

RO: At least the two on the right. That would have been a long flight home.

EM: Can you fly on two for any sustained period of time?

RO: I don't think so. Not with the load we had. We hadn't dropped our bombs at that point. Except the incendiaries, and not very many of those. But anyway, I picked myself up off the floor and looked outside and all I saw was jungle coming up. We were at sea level. And we were below the level of the palm trees on the other side of the gulf. And we're at reduced air speed because of the engine conking out. And only having three. But we did manage to nurse it and we cleared the palm trees and then the fighters really got interested in us. But after we shot down three of them they got less interested. (laughter) They wanted to go home too. So we high tailed it for home and got off floating stuff on the airplane. We threw away everything that we could, including our life raft and survival gear. Dumb? Because we still had the South China Sea, almost a thousand miles of sea to get over. We still had about 300 miles of jungle.

EM: What was the range of the B-24?

RO: I don’t really know. It depends on how you leaned out the engines. If you’re doing a hundred miles an hour and you’re up for 15 miles you got that. It probably was approaching 2,000 miles. I think that maybe seven, eight hundred miles over the South China Sea, and then we would go inland a ways. And then we’d go down and go back again. But we never came close to running out of fuel. We had what they called Tokyo tanks, they were additional fuel tanks in the outer wing. They were internal but they were not plugged into the regular fuel system. So to get the fuel used out of those you had to go back into Bombay, loosen a hose clamp, take a hose off, put it over on the other pump so you could pump the fuel from the auxiliary tanks into the main tank.

EM: Seems like a strange arrangement.

RO: Yeah, very strange arrangement.

EM: An add-on.

RO: A last minute add-on.

EM: A jerry rigged thing.

RO: (laughter) You could smell the fuel but we never had a problem with it. But instead of climbing straight back to Mindoro, we diverted to Palawan Island, landed there because we had no idea whether there was any damage to the airplane, the tires or wheels or what. And landed there in

daylight, just before dark. Spent the night there and one of our buddies came down and got us the next morning, ferried us back. I don't know when they got the airplane back, I never heard.

EM: So when would you say this was in '45? Was it getting close to the end of the war?

RO: Yeah, it was in the June time period. Let me see, that was a 4Y-1. I think I flew 23 combat missions and only five of them were in the Privateer, the 4Y-2. So this was all on the 4Y-1s. The recommended overhaul time on those engines were 600 hours. We had some on there that were over 2,000 hours, had never been off the wing.

EM: Well my understanding was that you really didn't have proper maintenance and ground crews available to you.

RO: We did. The Navy had what you call a Combat Air Service Unit, CASU. They were mechanics, ground strictly for the maintenance of the airplanes and guns. So we never really had to do work on our own airplanes.

EM: So why were they running so far beyond the recommended --

RO: Because they were running!

EM: Good enough, this was a war!

RO: If it ain't broke don't fix it.

EM: Did you ever listen to Tokyo Rose?

RO: You know, I really never heard Tokyo Rose. I would occasionally go down and when we were en route we would have night watch on the airplane. One of our crew members would keep watch on the airplane to supervise the refueling and assist in the refueling. Well there we could run the little on board generator, the putt-putt, and turn on the broadcast radio, BC-48 and tune in. Sometimes you would get Stateside stations.

EM: Really? All the way out there?

RO: We'd get the sky waves bouncing in.

EM: Pick up a little local US sound from time to time.

RO: Yeah, I don't have any idea where they were being broadcast from. But occasionally you'd turn the dial. Something to do.

EM: How did they treat you on the ground between flights? Did you have visits from the USO? Movies? Was the food any good? Where did you sleep?

RO: On Mindoro, which was the base that we were stationed at and the only one for any length of time, we had the typical GI tents. We had four enlisted men per tent.

EM: And these tended to be members of your crew?

RO: Yeah, you had your own crew members. So the officers, I think they had two men per tent on those. As far as the food was concerned, it was mostly Spam and dried, powdered

eggs, maybe powdered milk, I don't remember that. We had a ration of maybe four cans of beer a week. I didn't drink beer at that time so I traded with one of my buddies, one of our crewmen, a beer tab for a Coke tab or a chip. So I was drinking more Cokes than beer.

EM: Probably just as well. You were just a kid.

RO: What, 19 at that point. I was an old man!

EM: Well that's a point too, you were starting to get up there. You're 19 now. So what's your rank at this point?

RO: At some point in there, I don't have the actual date, I got upgraded to third class. Aviation machinists make third class. I got three chevrons.

EM: Three stripes.

RO: Yeah, that's a buck sergeant in the Army. And of course with that comes a bit of a pay increase. We were getting flight pay, because we were accumulating what -- 70 hours a month or something. We'd fly about every third day. So if you had 10 flights and they were up to -- all of them were up to 10 hours of flight. It would build up. And enlisted men kept their log books. The officers, base operations filed out their log books for them. So I still have my log book, hand written.

EM: Did you communicate much back home? Did you write letters? How did that work?

RO: Yeah I wrote letters. A lot, a lot of letters.

EM: Did you get letters?

RO: Yeah, family mostly. Occasionally I'd get one from a brother. Mostly my mother. I did have a few girlfriends here and there that I would correspond with. But they did it out of sympathy I guess. One interesting event there, the mail was delivered out under a tree and it was a pigeon loft box, grid with letters on it for the alphabet and letters would be put in there. Two guys went up and got their letters and they were both in the same pink envelopes. They looked at each other and looked at the two letters and they started comparing notes and they were from the same girl. So some place along the line at one of the bases, they had each dated this same gal. And she had the same, carbon copy practically to each of the guys. They put them together in one letter and sent it back to her.

EM: (laughter) I guess maybe she got that message, huh?

RO: I guess she got the message. She wasn't going to be able to marry one of those guys. We had movies. I didn't always go to them but I did occasionally. And it was out in the open. The only one USO show that I got to see and that was a stage play of *Oklahoma!*. We enjoyed that and between the second and third act the base commander went up

and made an announcement that we had just dropped an atomic bomb on Japan and you know the story from there.

EM: Yeah, and the rest was history as they say.

RO: And the rest was history. Boy, that night there was more anti-aircraft fire around that island. Everybody was shooting off guns.

EM: Of course, that was pretty much -- everybody knew then that this thing was going to be over. Nobody knew what an atomic bomb was!

RO: I had studied enough and done enough physics classes in school that I knew the potential there of what it could do with the uranium stuff.

EM: At least you knew that you weren't going to be going in with an invasion force in the home islands.

RO: They had already talked to us and said that we would be going in either Okinawa or the Japanese mainland invasion. And we would be going back to Tinian and reforming the composites. And maybe let some of the senior guys return home and pick up others and getting ready for the Japanese invasion. So I figured those bombs saved my life. Because of the million people that, GIs that were going to get killed, a lot of them were going to be airmen.

EM: Probably almost as many Japanese. Because of -- it was going to be, you know, complete chaos.

RO: Keep doing it until you're all dead.

EM: That's right, it was all they could think about.

RO: Yeah and the Japanese had more airplanes on reserve at that point than they did at the beginning of the war.

EM: They were short of pilots but it didn't matter because they only made one flight.

RO: All they had to do was take off.

EM: Yeah that's right. Golly. What do you think about the Japanese after having been through a war with them?

RO: You know I really never wanted to hold a lot of animosity there. And then in my working career -- I came back from the service and I did not have enough points of credit to get discharged immediately so I was in -- we came back to Naval Air Station Miramar and Camp Kearny at that time. And they assigned me as a flight line mechanic from -- we came home on Armistice Day, November the 11th, our cruiser came into [North?] Island.

EM: What cruiser was that you were on?

RO: It was the USS Santee. It was an aircraft carrier. And I thought the USS Santee was named for the town east of San Diego, but it was not. Because there had been a number of ships in the Navy that were called the Santee. Apparently it was a battle someplace.

EM: Some obscure war someplace.

RO: But yeah, it was a Jeep carrier, a converted carrier. A CVE-27. Yeah that was an interesting ride. The whole hanger was cots, nothing but cots. Every morning you'd have to fold up the cot and put it away. And that evening you'd have to find one and set it up someplace.

EM: So that was sleeping under the stars?

RO: Well on a hanger deck --

EM: Oh you're down one level.

RO: But it was OK over there. As we got in closer to the States, a couple days out it got a little rougher. And again, I didn't get seasick, but it got to where I couldn't even go to the chow hold.

EM: You just weren't interested.

RO: Not interested. But it was down, several decks down. You'd start down there and get the fumes coming up from that galley and I'd just --

EM: Fumes. Not aromas, but fumes.

RO: Well I had a job. My uncle back in Wichita Falls had a chili factory and I worked part time in his chili factory and those spices and the steam -- I couldn't handle it, I just couldn't handle it. And when I got into kitchen duty -- or KP, as I guess the Air Force calls it -- I couldn't stand that. Being there with those big steam things,

dishwasher stuff. They'd say, "Aw, you're gold bricking. Get in there!"

EM: So how do you think being in the war like you were changed you as a person? You went in as a kid, a fuzzy faced kid.

RO: Well I had a devotion to duty. You know, my brothers were in there and they both survived. Oh, one time I was out flying my model airplanes on the baseball diamond and I came back and there was a guy on my bunk in my tent. I thought, "What's going on?" And I started to yell at him -- it was my brother. The one who had been in Guadalcanal got moved out to Leyte and he hopped a DC-3 and came over. And we visited there for a day, or most of the day and he hopped back. I went AWOL. I told my pilot, "My brother's here, I haven't seen him, we're going over to his island, Leyte." He said, "Well I don't have the authority to give you permission to leave." And I said, "Well that's where I'm going if you need me." You never heard anything about it. So I went over with him, spent three nights with him. He was the butcher, had all of the kitchen facilities and everything. He had come in from Australia with a five gallon milk carton. And there was still a little bit of milk in there. Well I finished that off, that's the first real milk I had. None of that stuff in a long time. They had steaks, just high on the hog. But then I hopped a

ride, came back home and joined the crew again. And then just after the war we had transitioned back to Tinian Island. We had been there a brief time, the squadron. So went back to Tinian and one night another USO show. I just didn't feel like going to it. My stomach was upset and so I went to sick bay after dark. I didn't eat anything for supper that night, went to sick bay and the corpsmen there turned around and said, "You've got appendicitis." So they called over and got one of the doctors out of the USO show, came back and I was operated on and had my appendix removed right there.

EM: Wow. Well that pretty much takes you off line for about four to six weeks, doesn't it?

RO: I was in the hospital for 18 days. Just as one of the big hurricanes came through. Typhoons over there. And that typhoon sunk several destroyers. They had not refueled at the proper time so they did not have any ballast. So they turned turtle, several destroyers.

EM: Now where was this?

RO: This was on Tinian Island. And the Quonset huts had vents on top, they overlapped like this? And the rain was coming in right down on my bed. I had the nurse come in and move my bed to the other side.

EM: When was this? After the war was over?

RO: After the end of August.

EM: OK right after.

RO: Right after the war. Because we moved out of Mindoro almost immediately. And so I had one of the crewmen come over to visit me and I had him dictate a letter to my mother. "Everything's OK, had my operation for appendicitis, blah blah blah." He mailed that letter and then came back another one that said, "I'm still in the hospital but I'm doing OK." The second letter got there before the first one that explained why I was in the hospital.

EM: Oh my gosh, they figured you had been shot up or something.

RO: Yeah, right? (laughter) When the first letter finally arrived they understood what was going on.

EM: But in the meantime.

RO: Meanwhile they had a tough time. As far as my feeling towards the Japanese. My work after the war, I went to a engineering trade school and became an engineer and went to work at Lockheed. I graduated -- it was a two year school, it was a trade school. So I didn't do all the English -- they told us we'd get a degree but they never had enough professors credited to do that. But Lockheed was very close by there. I was in Glendale, California. And Lockheed is in Burbank, right next door. And some of the

instructors were actually engineers that had a sabbatical to come over and teach school. Because that was a real nice area for getting new, cheap engineers. And I worked with those guys, several of them, for years after that. But I graduated on -- I got a letter of recommendation on a Wednesday to graduate on Friday. Well on Wednesday I had the application filled out to work at Lockheed. But then the other guys in there, several were from Fort Worth, which is my home country, and they said, "Well why don't you come with us and go down to Convair? They're building the B-36 down there." I said, "Well that's a good idea." So I filled out that application. I said, "Well, Lockheed's closer, I'll just go over there and if I can't do that then I'll go to Fort Worth." Went over, interviewed, got hired on Wednesday. Got all checked in, graduated Friday, went to work Monday. I worked for 32 years and three months.

EM: (laughter) Man, how times have changed.

RO: One job. Now not having a degree in an engineering organization, one of my stories talks about that. How did I get to be an engineering manager without having all the degrees? Well my chief engineer, I sent him -- my CD has that story on it, about how did you arrive at being a department manager? Which was a temporary job because I

was going out too, I was retiring. I sent him that and he said, "That's good, but you didn't need a degree." The kind of work that I was doing. Now today you'd never be able to get that but I did other stuff, extracurricular stuff. Did a lot of night school in electronics, supplemental training. I was making drawings of the Constellation, you know what the Constellation is?

EM: Connie.

RO: Yeah Connie, I worked on that. The 749 version for KLM and TWA, I was drawing instrument panels, working with the airline pilots. For Air France, was translating some of the nomenclature and the switch panels to French for them. So I was interfacing with the pilots and I said, "Gee, maybe I should get a pilot's license, learn to fly." So I had some GI Bill eligibility left, so I applied for that, got approved, and I went to flight school and got my private pilot's license and a total of about a hundred hours of flying before the money ran out. So that set me off into being a pilot.

EM: You finally got to be a pilot.

RO: I finally got to be a pilot on my own. Well, with Uncle Sam's help.

EM: Well yeah, financing. But they never would train you.

RO: Didn't need me. It's just as well. I see those movies and things and all the activity that's going on, it's something else. But I worked there on the Constellation and the 1049, the longer one. And I decided that one of my buddies suggested to me that since I'm dealing with the customers too that I should really go into field service as a tech rep, go out and get airline experience. I said, "That's sounds like a good idea." I'd just been married two years. (laughter) And I said, "I can still do it." And I did, I volunteered to go out, took a little pay cut. Went through the training school there at Lockheed where they trained airline inspectors and mechanics. I took the same class with them. And the first thing you know, they say, "Well we've got some assignments for you." They said, "You got two months in Madrid." At that time when the customer bought a couple of Connies, they were the small ones, just for national status they would buy the Constellation. That was an eye catcher. So Hiberia bought two airplanes, and then Pakistani International bought two airplanes. Qantas bought airplanes and then they had been flying the first ones, the 749s all along. So these are your three assignments, you'd get two months each. When the airlines bought the airplanes they'd get a resident representative for six months and three training inspectors who would do

on job and classroom training for two months each. Well I went out, I taught the electrical power system and the air conditioning control system, which was pretty complicated. So I taught those classes eight hours a day. Meanwhile, I was arranging for my wife to come over to Spain. We went first to Pakistan, where I got very serious dysentery. My weight now is about 165 pounds down to about 145 pounds. My buddies there were saying, "Hey Rick, we're going to send you to Switzerland." I began to turn the corner. Karachi, Pakistan was a stopover for the Qantas flights. The Connies would fly with one crew to Karachi. Another crew would take the flight to London. Then they'd bring it back and they'd swap crews again. So they did that. We got to know the Qantas pilots because we were going to be down there next. We had the same training team going there. So we got to know those guys and then we went down to Sydney, working with the airlines. And then one of the pilot's wives sort of took us under her wing. And every Sunday she would sort of put us in her car and we'd go someplace, touring this or going out into the Blue Mountains on picnics. Really, really great. So we had a lot of fun doing that. We helped him out too because the dollar exchange was such that to their advantage, for them to give us Australian money and they'd take our greenbacks.

EM: Back when the dollar was a dollar. Now we've practically got parity with the Australians.

RO: We were given a per diem of 10 dollars a day and I couldn't spend it. Came back to Madrid, I was arranging for my wife to fly over on a delivery flight. And when the delivered the Iberia 1049 Connies. Well there was big mix-up and we didn't ever telephone, we were writing letters back and forth and the California state law was that if you flew passengers out of the state, you had to pay income tax on the airplane. Can you imagine the income tax on a two million dollar airplane? So she -- what they would do is that they would fly to Las Vegas and do a title transfer there. This one, finally they flew it out of Burbank but it didn't carry any passengers. So she had to fly to New York and wait in New York for the airplane to arrive. Well when it arrived the guys bought refrigerators and washing machines and loaded the airplane up with that. Then she got to act as a stewardess for the flight crew. And it was all the Burbank flight crew. We arrived in Madrid within one hour of each other, me coming from Australia and her coming from New York.

EM: Talk about timing.

RO: The timing was perfect. Great Fourth of July we had.

EM: So you really have had an airplane life, haven't you?

RO: Yeah.

EM: And still flying today in your own personal aircraft.

RO: Right.

EM: That’s pretty impressive. Well I’m going to end it here unless you’ve got some more World War Two yarns you can spin for us.

RO: I have. And I’ll send them to you in writing and on the DVD -- CDs.

EM: I appreciate your spending the time with us Bob. And I’m going to go ahead and end it here.

END OF AUDIO FILE