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Interview with

FIRST LIEUTENANT
DAVID BRADEN

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University of Texas at Arlington] where I was involved in ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps].

On December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the entire Cadet Corps, intact, was on the field having a parade that Sunday for our parents. And our parents, I'm sure, looked out and said, "They've got those rifles on their shoulders. They're going to march them into boxcars, and they'll be gone this afternoon!" Well, it didn't work out that way.

I was at that time a freshman. I was just barely seventeen, I guess. I was an aeronautical engineering student. As soon as I could, I signed up for the Army Air Corps Reserve, which at that time was a program which allowed you to choose the service and stay in [school] supposedly until you were called up. We didn't last very long. They called us up in February of 1943, and all of us went together into the United States Army Air Corps.

After I came back after the war, I went to the University of Texas. I became a practicing architect. I practiced architecture for forty-two years in Dallas, Texas. I had my own firm and then became president of a very large firm and really enjoyed a national practice. Now I'm enjoying the fruits of life (chuckle).

I'm currently active. I retired from my firm in

1991. I am currently the Chairman of the Board of the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, which keeps me very, very busy and sends me everywhere--all over the world and all over the United States.

Marcello: Obviously, we need to back up and talk a little bit about American entry into the war. You mentioned that you were in the Cadet Corps at Arlington.

Braden: Right.

Marcello: What were your immediate feelings at that time, once you had heard about the news concerning Pearl Harbor and so on? Apprehension? Patriotic fervor? How would you describe it?

Braden: Well, I would describe it as patriotic fervor. That's what we all really had in those days, and we could hardly wait to go for a lot of reasons. It had always been my thought that, once I got a degree in aeronautical engineering, I'd go into the service and learn to fly. So this was just an early opportunity to do that. I could hardly wait to sign up. And then, after I had signed up, it became obvious that, "Gee, when are we going to ever get called up and get into this program?"

Marcello: And when did you actually get into the program?

Braden: Well, I signed up when I was eighteen years old--in November, 1942--and in February of 1943, we were all called up and went to Sheppard Field, Wichita Falls,

Texas. When I say all of us, there was a huge number of Air Corps reservists--just like myself--that went to NTAC at that time.

Marcello: Now in the meantime, had you undergone any basic training and so on before 1943?

Braden: No, I had not, but at NTAC we were in the ROTC infantry. And I learned, after being in the infantry, that the Air Corps looked like a much better way to go (chuckle), and that was always my interest, anyway. I'd always been a fan of airplanes.

Marcello: Describe the kind of training you received once you were actually in the service.

Braden: Well, first of all, they sent us to Sheppard Field, where we just had really regular basic Army training. I think it lasted for five weeks. Then there were so many of us that were called up at once that I don't think they really knew what to do with us, so instead of calling us aviation cadets, which was what we were supposed to go into, they called us aviation students. They sent us to college training detachments. Depending on how much education that you had determined how long you stayed there.

I went to the University of Tennessee, where I lived under the football stadium where all the athletes lived. That was where we were all housed. We took a lot of different kinds of courses--different for

me--courses in geography and that sort of thing. We also got ten hours of flying time in a Piper Cub.

I stayed there for two months, and then I went to Nashville, Tennessee, where there was a classification center. Much to my despair, I was classified as a navigator instead of a pilot because of my eyes. I'm farsighted in one eye and nearsighted in the other; and although I had good depth perception and good vision, they decided--this was a weird thing--that I shouldn't fly airplanes but I should navigate them. So, while all my friends immediately went through classification and were dispersed to pre-flight training, I was kept at the classification center there for ninety days--three months--waiting to get into navigation school, which was full at the time. I took physical training twice a day, every day, and tore up coal boxes all during that ninety days (chuckle).

Then finally I was made an aviation cadet. I went to Selman Field in Monroe, Louisiana. I took pre-flight training there, and to my great surprise, I found out that I really liked being a navigator. I went on from there to gunnery school in Fort Myers, Florida, where I won my wings as an aerial gunner. Then I came back for advanced navigation school.

Marcello: You said that you found out that you liked navigation. Why was that?

Braden: Well, I think that when I was classified--really because of my eyesight--they said I had the kind of temperament that a navigator should have psychologically. That was their reasoning. I was relatively skilled at mathematics, having been an engineering student. I'm a pretty calm guy--I don't get excited very quickly--so that made me, I think, really qualified for being a navigator.

But the most interesting thing was that I began to like the kind of problem solutions that navigation posed. You know, we were taught celestial navigation, which is a really tough and intricate kind of problem, and it's not an exact science by any stretch of the imagination (chuckle). It requires great judgment.

So I fit into that program really well, and I liked it. I wound up in the top 10 percent of my class, and for that reason they shipped me out to a radar-bombing school. I had no idea where I was headed, but I was going to be put on this magnificent new airplane, the B-29, and I ultimately became a navigator. There I found the answer to my dreams--any navigator's dreams. When you fly 3,000 miles roundtrip over open water and do celestial navigation, you find out that the navigator is relied upon heavily by the crew, and they respect him almost as much as the airplane commander (laughter). So maybe it was an ego

thing, but, anyway, I liked the job. I really liked the job.

Marcello: Again, let's go back and pick up on some things that you mentioned a moment ago. It was at this point that you train aboard a B-29.

Braden: Well, after I left Boca Raton, Florida, I was at that time a second lieutenant. I had just graduated from navigation school. I was sent to combat crew training in Clovis, New Mexico, and there's where I met my first crew. I think B-29 crews were, perhaps, a little bit different because this was a whole new wing that was forming to go to a whole new place to do a whole new thing. Our crews flew together from day one, and we were always in the same aircraft. In many theaters, the pilots flew different planes everytime they took off. We always had the same plane as long as it was flyable. We trained in Clovis. I guess I got there, probably, in late August of 1944 and was in training for quite some time.

We went to Kearney, Nebraska, and picked up a brand-new B-29 airplane. Then we flew it to San Francisco, and from there we went overseas, flying through Hawaii--Oahu--and then we had to make a stop on Johnston Island because we had problems. Then we flew into Kwajalein and then on into the Mariana Islands at Saipan. We arrived there, I think, on January 28,

1945. We were the first replacement crew in the 870th Bomb Squadron, 497th [Bomb] Group of the 73rd [Bomb] Wing.

Marcello: Let's go back and talk about the B-29. What were your first impressions of it?

Braden: (Chuckle) Well, I had the same impression, I guess, that everybody had about that airplane. It was the biggest thing we'd ever seen. It had features on it that no other aircraft had. It was a pressurized airplane. We had an electric gunsight system that was computerized, and we didn't hold the traditional machine guns. We had a Fluxgate compass which was very accurate. We had a "greenhouse effect" [reference to nose of the aircraft which resembled a greenhouse] and all this armament--central fire control system--and it was supposed to do everything in the world. It was just a magnificent airplane. We were very proud of it. When we would fly training missions in Clovis, we all had to carry sidearms. In case we ever had to land for any kind of problem, we had to maintain a guard around that plane. Nobody could approach it. We would check in at various radio points. Sometimes the radio operators would ask us to fly closer so they could just see this aircraft. So it was something else, and we were proud of it.

Marcello: This has absolutely nothing to do with the interview,

but did you know--only a historian would know this-- that the development of the B-29 cost more than the development of the atomic bomb?

Braden: No, I didn't know that. I was surprised to find out how early they started the development of it. Strangely enough, when we started flying those planes, particularly when the 58th [Bomb] Wing was flying out of India, the airplane had a lot of "bugs" in it. They had never ever really fully tested it.

Marcello: You mentioned a moment ago, too, that this crew stayed together in this plane throughout the war.

Braden: Yes.

Marcello: Let's talk a little bit about the crew. Start with the pilot.

Braden: Well, his name was Norman Westervelt. He was a first lieutenant at that time. Norman had been, like many B-29 pilots, an instructor in twin-engine and multiple-engine school for other pilots. For that reason, he was chosen to go into this program. He was a very skilled pilot, and that's the kind we had. I think his home was in Idaho, as was the co-pilot's, whose name was John Betia, who was a very happy-go-lucky guy--flippant, wild, lot's of fun--who wound up later in life as a college professor (laughter). Norman Westervelt was twenty-four years old. John Betia, I think, was about twenty-one, twenty-two. The

navigator was me. I was twenty years old at that time. The bombardier was a fellow named Gordon Nedderson, who was a great, big, husky guy from Waukesha, Wisconsin. He was married and had child about a year or two old, and Gordon's last employment was, I think, as a funeral director. The engineer was a very interesting guy. His name was Lowell Sharret. He was twenty-eight years old--the oldest guy on the crew. He was a Regular Army man. He had enlisted. He had very little formal education, but he was a "cracker-jack" mechanic. He was an aviation mechanic who had worked his way to the position of flight engineer and therefore became a commissioned officer. He was very, very good in his knowledge of airplanes and our airplane. He gave us a lot of confidence, really.

Marcello: How did the crew get along together?

Braden: Oh, we got along marvelously. We all had a lot of confidence in each other. My first real overseas experience with them was flying to Hawaii from San Francisco. It was a long over-water flight--it was night--and it was overcast. Celestial navigation was very, very difficult. It was almost impossible to get a good "fix" on the stars because of the weather conditions. There were two picket boats between Hawaii and the California coast that were supposed to give you radio bearings. We didn't get any radio bearings. So,

when we woke up with the dawn of the morning as we approached Hawaii, I had to do what was called "sunline, landfall celestial operation" to come into Oahu. Any navigator will tell you that when you hit it at "00" [right on the mark], it's really an accident (chuckle), but I hit it at "00," and that crew never questioned me professionally from that point forward. It was good experience for all of us.

The enlisted men...we had a radar operator named Warren Huntington. I think Warren was from Connecticut. Our radio operator was Gerald Frorillo, who later drowned in a bailout from another plane off the coast of Japan. They were all about nineteen years old. We had two waist-gunners, a fellow named Lloyd Kelly, from California, and the other gunner was Thomas Kamenicy from Pennsylvania. I don't recall where they were from. The tail-gunner was a fellow named Herman Knight. He was from Pennsylvania. He's now living in Florida. He had a very interesting experience later, bailing out off the coast of Japan at night--seventeen hours in a one-man life raft--and was rescued by a U. S. submarine. The central fire control man was a fellow named Bob Curtis, and he was from Pennsylvania, also.

Now we flew together on three missions, and then we ditched in the Pacific Ocean. Nedderson was killed,

and so was the pilot. Bob Curtis got his back broken. Our crew was split up and put in with survivors from another crew like that. Actually, it was a crew in the same Quonset hut where we were housed and who had ditched the mission before and lost their navigator, their engineer, and their radar operator. Sharret, myself, and Warren Huntington all went onto the crew of then First Lieutenant James E. Buckheit. I just called him "Buck." He lived in Rock Hall, Maryland (chuckle).

Marcello: At the time that you started this journey from the West Coast to Hawaii to Saipan, did you know at that point that you would be going to Saipan and what you'd be doing?

Braden: Yes. We knew what we'd be doing, really, pretty clearly. We knew we'd be flying missions to Japan, yes.

Marcello: Let's suppose we have you in Saipan now. Give me a physical layout of, first of all, the field itself that had been established there.

Braden: Well, it was Isley Field, which was a two-strip field, and all around it were hardstands [hard surface parking areas] where the B-29s were totally exposed to the weather. A ground crew also was assigned to that plane, and they were like our fathers. They were so covetous of us. They stood there and serviced those aircraft in the hot sun all the time. The squadron

itself was housed in Quonset huts and in tents. We had our own officer's club, which was nearby, and it was a Quonset hut. We had no refrigeration; we had no ice. We used outdoor privies. Wash stands were places where you would put your GI helmet in upside-down and use that to get water out of a Lister bag [heavy canvas bag for storing potable water] that was hung on a pole. We had hot water by virtue of the sun, because it was very, very hot there.

In the Quonset huts we slept on canvas cots, but we did have air mattresses. We had furniture in our hut that was built out of .50-caliber ammunition boxes. We made a desk and a chair, that sort of thing.

The interesting thing about our crew, I think, is that we arrived in January and flew our first mission in February, but the night before we flew was the fourteenth mission that the 73rd Wing had generated--a high-altitude mission. I forget how many planes the whole group lost, but the 870th lost three airplanes on this raid. And two of these crews were in the Quonset hut that we moved into.

Marcello: How does that make you feel?

Braden: Well, it made us feel, you know, like walking on tip-toes because there was just a pall over the whole squadron. Three planes! There were only ten planes in a squadron, so we lost three in one operation, and two

of them of them out of our hut.

Marcello: Had their belongings and everything been removed already?

Braden: No! No! No! No! No, they were all still there. And it was just, you know, terrible.

At that time these high-altitude missions had not been successful. They'd suffered a lot of losses. Somewhere here [shuffling through notes] I made a note as to what happened on that. Well, I can't find it. There's the first raid to Tokyo. But it had been a tragic experience for everybody.

Marcello: Rather sobering, I'm sure.

Braden: Yes.

Marcello: Let's talk about your first raid. What goes through your mind when you get the word that you're ready to go on your first raid?

Braden: Well, just anticipation, but just wanting to see what it was like, you know. I won't tell you that I wasn't scared. You have a few tremors, wondering about what it would be like. The best thing to do is to describe how this first raid was done, I think.

Marcello: What sort of advice are you getting from the veteran crews that have already been through this? What are they telling you in terms of what to expect and so on?

Braden: Well, they were kind of in a turmoil and in a shaky experience, particularly in our Quonset hut, because

they'd lost these two crews. These were crews that had trained in the United States together, had come overseas together, and we were total outsiders who had come in. One of these crews had flown with the 58th Wing out of India and China. That operation was completely abandoned, and one of the reasons was due to the navigational problems involved in doing that, plus the supply problems to those Chinese bases were terrible. But in this crew that had been with the 58th over there, there was a navigator, a young man, who was just a very, very skilled man. So I listened to him a lot because I was just kind of in awe of what skills that he had to have to do that. They kind of kidded us a lot, and I don't know that anybody ever really gave us any real advice. We were just there to do a job, and they figured that we could do it or we wouldn't be there, I guess.

Those missions were kind of strange because the B-29 did have some problems with engines. We were flying high-altitude missions, which were what the plane was designed for. They were doing everything they could to carry all the bombs they could to Japan-- 3,000 miles over open water. They had stripped the planes of everything they could to make them lighter. The big thing they took out was a fuel tank that fit in the bomb bay. They took out two-inch-thick pieces of

glass panels that were in front of the airplane commander and the pilot; they took the cannon out of the tail. They took the bunks out that had been installed so crews could grab a little sack time if they'd wanted it; they took out the heaters that we carried along to give us a hot meal along the way. All kinds of things like that were taken out, and they lightened the aircraft by about 6,000 pounds, which they put back in in bombs. They didn't give us any more gasoline that I ever noticed.

Marcello: At this time, you are, in essence, carrying high-explosive bombs.

Braden: Carrying high-explosive bombs. The runway on Saipan flew directly off a cliff, and we would fly these planes right straight off. We didn't even pull off the landing gear until we got out over the water, at which time the pilot would drop the plane just like going down in a fast elevator. Your stomach would churn. We'd pick up air speed from that. We'd actually get so low to the ocean that you'd kick up spray on the ocean from the propellers, but that would give us enough air speed momentum to begin our gradual climb.

We'd fly at an altitude of about 1,500 feet--something like that--above the sea all the way to Japan in a formation. This was terribly difficult for the pilots to fly in formation that long because it was all

manual flying. They didn't even really set up their auto-pilot. We'd get up to the coast of Japan somewhere about 100 or 150 miles off those islands there, and we would have an assembly point. We'd assemble in formation, climb to altitude, go to the targets, come back [to the assembly point], and come back [to Saipan] again by ourselves--all the way. We didn't fly in any kind of formation and had no real communication with each other.

I think the first mission I flew on was at an altitude of about 25,000 feet, and we found that the target was totally obscured by clouds. We had to bomb by radar, which was not very accurate, and we had very poor results. We had about twelve fighter attacks on that first mission. We lost one plane, and then we lost five men in a ditching, as I recall.

So the thing that I really learned right there was that the B-29 had a lot more enemies than [the distance over water to] Japan. One of them was flak. Of course, the other one was fighters. But fuel--the lack thereof--was just a constant thing on your back all the time.

Marcello: So, in other words, it was particularly on your back, since you were the navigator.

Braden: Right, my back and the flight engineer's. We were flying over the Pacific Ocean--3,000 miles over open

water doing celestial navigation all the way up there and all the back, part of it at night and part of it day; no radio or compass communication. And the plane's four Wright [Cyclone] engines were kind of an enemy, too, because we had a lot of problems with those engines overheating. We lost...three-engine time [running on only three engines] was not unusual at all in flying those aircraft.

Marcello: You said four Wright engines. Wright is the name of the manufacturer.

Braden: Wright, right. The other thing that we discovered was the jet stream (chuckle).

Marcello: I've got that on my outline. I was going to ask you about that.

Braden: Nobody knew about the jet stream. The jet stream was 200 miles per hour, and sometimes it could be higher. We would approach the target downwind. The airplane would be going 500 to 600 miles per hour, and the Norden bombsight couldn't keep up with it. Even when we had good visual bombing conditions, we would just...we were terrible! We could not hit the specific targets that we were trying so hard to hit. That was just a terrible thing, to go through all that and be frustrated and not be able to hit the target. And it was very frustrating, also, for our commander, as you can imagine. That was sort of a typical high-altitude

mission.

Marcello: You mentioned Japanese resistance a moment ago. Obviously, you had both flak and fighters. Compare and contrast, so far as you and the crew were concerned, the fighters and the flak. Obviously, both of them were bad.

Braden: (Chuckle) I think the flak was kind of a constant thing. As you approached the target from your initial point, you could just see these puffs--PUFF! PUFF! PUFF!--all around you. You knew that this was a gauntlet that you had to fly. You knew how many minutes it was going to be, and it wasn't very long. But you knew that you were going to fly through that stuff. Then pretty soon they began to get your range, and you could hear that stuff rattling off the fuselage, you know, just like somebody throwing rocks at you, which meant that you were still pretty safe because you could hear it and had no direct hits. So that was kind of a constant thing.

The fighters...on the B-29, you know, the armament and the central fire control system was beautiful. If we were in a formation flight with three other planes together and they saw fighters coming in, we could designate all those guns except the tail guns to one man on that airplane. So that meant that he could bring ten .50-caliber machine guns to bear on the

target plane. Two other planes would do the same thing, and the guy didn't have a chance. He would literally disintegrate as he flew into that crossfire as he came in.

But the Japanese had a good way of scaring you when they got down to the end of their gasoline. They would drop their landing gear, which meant that they were going to ram us. You know, the word kamikaze...I don't know whether they had invented it at that point in time or not, but that's what they tried to do--tried to ram us. I was on a mission one time which caught one of those guys coming in. He just flat lopped off the top half of the vertical stabilizer [tail], and he just chopped off the tail. The pilot flew the plane all the way home that way. He got three weeks of rest leave in Hawaii (laughter) for doing it. He deserved it!

Marcello: How does that make you feel when you know that there's a guy out there that has no qualms about ramming you and killing himself? I mean, you want to stay alive, and he almost wants to die.

Braden: It made us wonder what kind of folks these Japanese people were; I mean, this was a culture that the Americans didn't even understand. You know, they had religion woven into their flight plans, so to speak. That's just the way they reacted.

Marcello: I do know that one of the reasons, of course, that Iwo Jima was taken was, first of all, to provide a base for fighter escorts and also a place where disabled planes could land. Then, also, I understand it was an early warning network for the Japanese. Did you have to take special precautions when you were flying out of Saipan to get around Iwo? Did that come up?

Braden: No, we didn't fly any route that put us close to Iwo Jima. Of course, we didn't make any radio contact with Saipan at all. The main thing there, that was just terribly distressing, is that we had no way to land. We weren't really worried about fighters coming in off of Iwo. They didn't do that. We had been bombed on Saipan by Betty bombers off of Iwo, but, for the most part, they were just really ineffectual.

Marcello: You mentioned a moment ago that you obviously have to navigate over several thousand miles of open ocean. Obviously, the thought of having to ditch must have passed through your mind. What precautions were taken or what steps were taken to rescue to downed crews? What kind of a network was established?

Braden: We had "Dumbo" aircraft whose job was to go out and find planes when they were down. The main thing was, if a plane got in trouble, even though we were flying back individually, we would communicate via plane-to-plane radio or Aldis lamp that we were in distress.

Usually, when you ditch, you anticipate that you're going to have to ditch, so we would contact other planes, give them our position, and ask them to look for us. That's what happened in our case.

We were, as I said, on our third mission. I believe we had received something like fifty-eight attacks or something. When we were coming off of the Japanese mainland, we had a camera hatch that we opened in the back. It was opened by the radar guy. He went back to close it, and gasoline was just streaming all along the bottom of the aircraft--blowing up into the hatch. He reported it, and we were finally able to determine that we were losing gas out of a wing tank that had been hit. The flight engineer noticed that. So we knew that we might not make it home because we were losing gasoline like crazy.

Marcello: The pilot was still in control of the airplane.

Braden: Airplane Commander Westervelt still had full control of the plane. Nothing had happened to the engines or anything like that. We'd been hit in the gas tanks, and we were losing gasoline. So we began early procedures right there. We'd been trained to do it. The first thing we did was strip the airplane of everything we could throw out of there. I still remember Gordon Nedderson, the bombardier, literally picking up the Norden bombsight and wrenching it up off

of the floor.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Marcello: When I turned over the tape, you were talking to me about lightening the airplane.

Braden: We threw everything that we could out of the plane to make it as light as we could. The radio operator and myself worked in tandem. I knew that we had to know where we were if we were ever going to be found, because if you've ever looked for a life raft in something like the Pacific Ocean (chuckle), it's pretty small potatoes down there. I had had that experience.

Marcello: Is everybody acting calmly and professionally at this point?

Braden: Everybody acted professionally. Nobody got really excited at all. The flight engineer was trying desperately to maintain his records as to how much fuel we had--trying to transfer fuel from one tank to another--and doing all those things those guys do to keep all the engines running.

I was trying to establish either a fix or a dead-reckoning position every thirty minutes at least, and it took--always--thirty to forty-five minutes to determine where you had been thirty to forty-five minutes before. But by that I was able to establish a track and a ground speed and keep good, accurate records of where we were.

Marcello: All this time, the plane is acting normally other than the fact that you're losing fuel.

Braden: Yes. It's flying just beautifully. Well, finally, I think, two planes from our squadron found us. They came in there. They were "buddy" planes, so they flew with us. About 2:00 that afternoon the pilot said, "We're going to have to go down. The engines have started to sputter." When the intelligence officers later debriefed us, they said that we made the absolutely perfect preamble to a ditching. We had done it right. The airplane commander flew into the wind and across the swells of the ocean, which was very rough ocean.

We had made a great mistake. We had waited too long to ditch. All four engines on the aircraft were dead, and, you know, as you go in you drag your tail in the water. He was able to pull it up over the first swell of the ocean. These waves were, I'm going to say, fifteen feet high, something like that. Then the nose dropped down, and we hit the next one head on, and we were going about 100 miles per hour, which is like running into a brick wall at a 100 miles per hour. When that happened, the airplane commander either already had unbuckled his safety belt in anticipation of evacuating from the plane, or it snapped. We don't know. Anyway, the impact of the wave on the

"greenhouse" nose just pulverized it, and he went right through that, and he was beheaded.

The bombardier came up and sat beside the flight engineer, who flew with his face headed in the direction of the tail. The bombardier therefore was sitting with his back to a piece of steel plate. And he had no safety belt at all. So he put his head down like that [gesture].

Marcello: So in other words, he put his hands behind his head and...

Braden: Put his head between his knees.

Marcello: Between his knees.

Braden: Right. He was killed, and we never saw him at all--he didn't ever get out of the plane. We only surmised that he was flipped backwards [slaps hands together], and his skull was crushed against the plate in back of him.

The radio operator, Gerald Frorillo, reversed his position and faced the tail and kept in his seat. The central fire control man came forward, and he and I flipped [a coin] for a position. We had two positions. One was that you sat on the floor with your back to the turret, or you could lay in the tunnel up there. So we flipped, and I won. I said, "I'll take the tunnel." So he sat on the floor. The gunners remained in their position. The tail-gunner came forward and sat back

there with the radio operator. So they were all in the central compartment.

On impact, which was very rough, the co-pilot, John Betia, went out...not out his window. He may have gone out his window, or he may have gone out the escape hatch that was by the flight engineer. But both of them got out on the right side of the airplane. I got up and pulled the astrodome out of the plane, which was our escape hatch. I went out. The radio operator got up and went out. The central fire control man, Bob Curtis, was sitting on the floor with his back broken. He got up with a broken back, crawled that high [gesture]--three feet or so, three-and-a-half feet--got into the tunnel, out the astrodome, and on top of the airplane--spread-eagled, screaming. He couldn't move another inch. The gunners crawled out their escape hatch in the rear, came forward, got on the wing, got two life rafts out--one on each side of the aircraft--and we all got in the raft. Curtis was in great pain. The co-pilot, Betia, had a chunk of meat about as big as your fist taken out of his right calf. All of us were shaken up, scared, cut and bruised--that sort of thing.

Then we started looking to see who was there. We saw Westervelt floating, without any head, out in front of the aircraft. We never saw Gordon Nedderson again.

We tried to go back...the airplane was floating. We tried to go back, but we couldn't make it because the sea was just so rough. So we were there and thanking God.

One of our "buddy" planes flew over and dropped us a "Gibson Girl"--the crank [operated] radio that you hold between your knees. So they knew where we were. They had our position. We felt pretty good about that. We were actually about 120 miles north of Saipan, near Anatahan Island.

So we were there in these two rafts. I don't know how we did it, but we got them together because we wanted to be together. We lashed them with ropes, and everytime we'd go over one of these waves (chuckle), the two rubber rafts would rub together and "WHIRR! WHIRR!" We knew that we were going to rub those two rafts in two. We knew that we were going to have to cut them apart, and that frightened us. But we decided that we'd keep them together for a little while, anyway.

Just about twilight, just about dusk, here came a Navy PBY--"flying boat"--these guys that were flying an airplane that was called the "Rivet Popper." And "Rivet Popper" had been flying "Dumbo" missions. These guys had eighteen months of flying air-sea rescue missions. They had never found anybody! So they said,

"We're going to go get those guys!" And they came in and landed that airplane.

Marcello: Meanwhile, you've been in the "drink" for about how long?

Braden: About three hours, something like that. So they landed their plane, and they were out there bobbing around, and they got to us. They were maneuvering, and we were maneuvering. We got over there, and we all started to crawl in the side blister [shaped window] of the airplane. We got Bob Curtis, the man with the broken back, halfway in and halfway out of that blister. It still had a .50-caliber machine gun in the blister. He got hung up, and he was dangling in that thing. You can't imagine the screaming he was doing. Well, I guess you can, with a broken back. They had to stop, take the machine gun out and get it out of the way, and we got Bob in there and got him tranquilized. We had found that we didn't have all the medical supplies in our rafts. The morphine and that sort of thing had been stolen out of our aircraft, so we didn't have any drugs. But they had some on the "Dumbo." They got Curtis stabilized. So they tried to figure out how to put us in there, and I got to sit on a channel. It was about that wide [gesture], with two legs sticking up. It was between the pilot and the co-pilot, so I was up there between them, sitting on these two prongs.

Marcello: And they were about six or eight inches apart.

Braden: (Chuckle) Yes, right. And we started taking off...first of all, I had never been in an airplane that had windshield wipers on it (laughter) before. And, you know, we were taking off in this ocean--trying to get this thing off. I thought we were going crack up [crash] trying to get off the water. We were just bouncing [smacks hands together two times] all over, and there I was, sitting on that channel. I really had a tougher impact (chuckle) taking off [in that PBY] than I did getting down [in our ditched B-29].

But they got us home, and we spent the night in the hospital. I returned to duty the next morning. Most of us did, other than Curtis.

Marcello: Let me go back and fill in a few things. You mentioned that the morphine had been stolen.

Braden: Yes.

Marcello: Tell me more.

Braden: Well, you know, these first aid kits that were packed in the life rafts contained that sort of sedative drug material. You know, we had a drug problem then, I guess, just like we do today. Not as bad then as it is today. But somebody had taken it out, and we didn't have any. So we were short on first aid supplies.

Marcello: You've described this incident in great detail. Is this because it is so vivid in your memory, or is this

something that has been put together by you and the rest of the people after you got down and were talking about it?

Braden: It's just something that's so vivid in my memory. I'll have to tell you that I could not even tell this story, maybe, for six years after I came back from the war.

The other thing that's interesting to me is the first time that I...after the war, when I came home, maybe three years, four years later, we went down to Galveston [Texas] just for a weekend. I smelled sea water, and I just started shaking. Just the smell of the ocean brought back that memory. I guess I can still get a little emotional about it.

Marcello: Yes. And who were the individuals who were killed as a result of that crash?

Braden: Airplane Commander Norman Westervelt, Bombardier Gordon Nedderson, and then the central fire control man, Curtis, was the guy who got his back broken. He was sent home immediately, and I do not know what ever happened to Bob Curtis to this day.

Marcello: You come back to Saipan, and you mentioned that, with the exception of Curtis, you all returned to duty the next day.

Braden: Yes.

Marcello: In your case, what by-products did you have from this experience physically? Any scratches, cuts, bruises--

that sort of thing?

Braden: Oh, I had some cuts from metal that was ripped on the plane as we tried to get out of there and that sort of thing, but it was nothing serious.

Marcello: Did it require stitches or anything of that nature?

Braden: No.

Marcello: You also mentioned previously about a debriefing after this was over. Of course, it was only natural that there would be a debriefing. What went on in that debriefing?

Braden: A group of intelligence officers and, I guess, people who were involved in safety and training really wanted to know how we conducted what we did and, obviously, what we did wrong, so that that information could go to other crews. That was it. I mean, it was not unlike what we're doing right now. They just asked you how you conducted yourselves, and did everybody do their job and everything else. The only thing we ever did wrong was that we just waited too long to ditch. I think, if we'd had enough gasoline to pull that nose up, we probably would have all survived.

Marcello: Did this debriefing take place the next day? Almost immediately?

Braden: Almost immediately, yes.

Marcello: Okay, you lost members of the crew, as you mentioned, and previously in the interview you mentioned that now

you were either replacements or replacements come to you. Describe this again. What happens?

Braden: The replacements took place entirely within the squadron and, strangely enough, entirely within our Quonset hut where we lived. Lieutenant Buckheit's crew had ditched, I think, two nights earlier or sometime like that, and their navigator had been severely wounded. They had been hit by flak very badly and had to ditch. They ditched at night, and their navigator was badly hurt. You know, it's terrible that I didn't really keep a journal at that time. I don't know what happened to their flight engineer or their radar operator, but they had lost those four members of their crew. So I, Flight Engineer Sharret, Radar Operator Huntington, and Waist-Gunner Kelley went right in with them, and the others went in with other crews in the same squadron. So we all stayed within the same squadron unit.

Marcello: So you're now flying in Buckheit's plane.

Braden: In Buckheit's plane. We all knew each other because we had been living together there. It was a pretty short time, but we knew each other. I had a lot of respect for Buckheit. He was a totally different kind of man than "Wes" [Westervelt] was, but one of the things that impressed us the most is that when they ditched, Buckheit had some men that did not get in the life

raft. They were floating around out there in "Mae West" vests [life preservers], and they were not strong swimmers, and they were scared, and maybe they were hurt. Buckheit was a very strong and good swimmer. He jumped out of the life raft and swam in the darkness of that ocean and pulled two men in. He received a Soldier's Medal for that. He probably should have gotten a Silver Star, but the kind of guy that would do that sort of thing for you...he was a great leader, and we really felt very good about being on his crew. I think we started flying almost immediately after that, and I flew thirty-two missions with him.

Marcello: How old was Buckheit.

Braden: I think "Buck" was twenty-three (laughter).

Marcello: I should have asked you this earlier. We know that most of the planes, you know, had nose art, and they had nicknames and so forth. What was the first plane's nickname? Do you recall?

Braden: The plane that we flew over, we had named it "The Padded Cell" because it was all quilted inside. We thought we were kind of insane to be doing this, so that's what we called it. When we got there, it was a brand-new plane, so they took it away from us, and we were flying, at the time of our ditching, plane number A-27, and I don't even know that it had a name or how we happened to get it. When I went on Buckheit's crew,

they had flown their plane over, just like we had. They had named it "Stripped for Action." It was A Square [number] 32 [reference to symbol representing the squadron painted on the tail section that featured a square-shaped symbol with the letter "A" painted inside the square]. The nose art on "Stripped for Action" was a naked gal laying on an Army cot (laughter). We had all kinds [of symbols], as you've seen, of that nose art.

Marcello: I gather that there were very few restrictions put on what kind of nose art could go on these planes.

Braden: These planes belonged to us, and we did just about anything we wanted to with them. We were the ones that flew it. It was kind of like our second home, and considering the length of the missions, it became like that. As I told you earlier, the ground crew had their picture on there, their names on there. We had our names under the window. So it was really our plane, and we were very proud of it.

One of the things that I had already figured out was that to sit on a navigator's seat, which was the equivalent of this thing we're sitting on right now--like a typist's chair--you sit on that for twelve to fifteen hours, and the high tension got pretty damned old, plus you had two big, heavy parachute straps running under your legs. So one night--to show you

that it was our airplane--I went over to the Air Transport Command strip. I had borrowed a jeep, and I borrowed some wrenches and some pliers, and I went into a C-47, and I just took the pilot's seat right out it. I took it over to my plane. I got a piece of quarter-inch steel from someplace and put it in the bottom of my new chair, and I flew thirty-two missions in complete comfort (laughter) from that point forward.

Marcello: I'm assuming, from what you said, that there were really no problems in switching from one crew to the other. Everybody melded in pretty well, again, because you shared the same Quonset hut.

Braden: Yes. And we had also shared the same experience-- ditching. We knew what it was like to do that.

Marcello: In the form that you had filled out for the Admiral Nimitz Museum earlier, you mentioned that most of your missions had been to Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka.

Braden: Right.

Marcello: Was there one that was worse than the other, or was it six of one and half-a-dozen of the other? In other words, if you found out that you were going to Tokyo: "Oh, my God! We're going to Tokyo--that run!" Was there one that was worse the other?

Braden: Yes. Target 357, which was the Musashino aircraft factory, had a concrete roof purported to be eight feet thick; so if we ever hit the damned thing, it was

questionable whether we could penetrate it not. We went back to that target more than any other target, and we never had any good results on it because, again, with the high-altitude missions, I think, primarily the problems were twofold--the weather and the jet stream. The jet stream just screwed us up. Nobody believes this, but we had one observation plane that went up there one time on a reconnaissance mission. It flew upwind over Tokyo, and the navigator found himself actually going three miles per hour backwards on a real rough jet stream day. That would have to mean that they were probably flying at a lower speed, too, but that's how strong the thing was. So that will give you an idea, that if you were reversed, how tough it could be.

Marcello: Where was this Musashino factory?

Braden: Right in the heart of Tokyo. Our initial point was always the same. It was Mount Fujiyama, and the route was almost like we had a road map going into the thing. But that was the one we went to most often.

Marcello: Did you have any particular orders about what you were not supposed to bomb? For instance, I do know that the Imperial Palace and that sort of thing was off-limits. Had you been briefed on that sort of thing?

Braden: Yes. Yes, we definitely were told that we didn't bomb the Imperial Palace. Also, if they knew the proximity

of any hospitals or anything like that, they would tell us. But we were trying to do precision bombing.

Marcello: How could you tell? You mentioned you were flying at high altitude; you're in the jet stream. How did you know when you were near the Imperial Palace?

Braden: Well, you knew that what you were trying to hit was not in the vicinity of the Palace, but if you were doing radar bombing, you might hit the outskirts of Tokyo, you know, if you were lucky (chuckle).

Marcello: As time goes on, can you tell any difference in the Japanese resistance that was being put up.

Braden: Oh, yes. I have to tell you about the fire raids.

Marcello: I wanted to ask you about those. Sure, go ahead. Go on and talk about them.

Braden: Well, what happened earlier on was that the fighter attacks got more and more intensive and scarier.

Marcello: Scarier in what sense?

Braden: In that there were more of them--more of them--and that they were desperate. They never hesitated to do this ramming act at the end of it. But we were not hitting the target.

A couple of great things happened. One was that we got two LORAN [Long Range Aid to Navigation] stations. To a navigator that was like God had smiled on you, because in a matter of seconds you could find out exactly where you were on the face of the Earth.

It took all that stress off of you. For fifteen hours I would never stop working. Every thirty minutes I would try to fix where we were. The pilots could go on auto-pilot. When we were flying at night, I had a button that I could use to control the direction of the aircraft within, I think, four degrees--two degrees right, two degrees left--and I'd actually fly the plane on auto-pilot by twisting my little knob. But I was the guy that had to stay awake all the time--work all the time--because, if you ever had a problem, and you didn't know where you were, you were just out of luck. So the LORAN stations were just a tremendous relief for me.

Also, for some reason (chuckle), for daylight high-altitude raids, they picked a rock--it wasn't an island. It was a rock called Sōfu gan, about 100 miles off the coast of Japan. It was a rock about the size of an eighteen-wheel truck, sticking straight up--like they took a truck and stuck it up on its end--sticking up out of the Pacific Ocean 150 miles off the coast of Japan. You had to find that damned thing as a navigator to assemble to go up to this high altitude--20,000 feet, 25,000 feet--to fly over to Japan. So, when we got the LORAN stations, that just became a lot easier.

Another thing that made navigation even possible

over there, I think, was that we did have radar, and we could pick up that chain of islands off of Iwo Jima on up to Japan, and that gave us a high level of confidence.

The first of the fire raids, I think, was on March 9. We had received General Curtis LeMay over there, who was a tough guy. He'd come from the 8th Air Force. He was a brilliant tactician. He said, "We're going to do these fire raids, and you're going in to bomb Tokyo at 5,000 feet!"

Marcello: What was your reaction to that?

Braden: Well, we said, "We're all going to die!" You know, we really thought we were dead men. But that was our job, so (chuckle) there was no other way. "You're going to be dead man, anyway, so, yeah, we'll go." We couldn't imagine what this was going to be like, frankly. I don't even think we knew the kind of bombs that we were carrying. The general run of the crew didn't know about the incendiaries and how they would react to this kind of thing.

Marcello: The same number of planes would take part in these raids.

Braden: Yes. As many planes as we could mount. By this time LeMay had, when he started, maybe 200 planes in his command, and very quickly, by April or so, I think he had 750 planes under his command, something like that.

Marcello: So in other words, you guys are going to be doing the same thing in Japan as the Brits were doing in Europe-- area bombing in other words.

Braden: Yes, right. The way that it was done, the planes took off at two-minute intervals. We flew all by ourselves all the way to Japan, over the target, and back. So here are all these airplanes out there--two minutes apart. They're all going to the same place, and only two minutes apart. That could be scary because we had instances of planes running together over the targets, for example.

Marcello: What time would a typical raid start?

Braden: Well, we would get to Japan, usually, somewhere around 11:00 at night or something like that.

Marcello: I've got to back up a little bit. What time would a raid start beginning from Saipan.

Braden: We would be briefed, probably, I'm going to say, right after lunch or something like that. Then we would take off. It would take us six hours to get there.

Marcello: Would you be in a separate briefing with other navigators?

Braden: Yes.

Marcello: What was the sort of thing that they would talk about in the briefing?

Braden: What kind of weather to expect. Anything that we might expect that would be unusual over the target and that

sort of thing. [What the] certain confidence level [of success] was. What the object of the mission was--what we were trying to do.

The pathfinder crews, which were lead crews--which we later became one of--would take off an hour before us, and they would approach the target at low-altitude, and they would start fires in various parts of the city. Our job--the bulk of the mission--was to come up and then bomb in an opposite direction. The pathfinders were going in a direction opposite to us to confuse the Japanese.

We'd come in, and we had certain assigned targets, but the fire had already been started, and we were low. We just had go through the holocaust that was down there. When we got there, it was every bit as scary as we thought it would be. I won't say it was terrifying, but...

Marcello: How so?

Braden: I guess I say that because I don't get excited very easily. But, you know, my heart was beating, and I had never seen anything like this, I'll tell you. When people ask me about this, I'll tell you how it was like. First of all, you're in an airplane 5,000 feet in the air, and you can smell smoke. I mean, the smoke was so dense that it actually permeated the aircraft. We were flying through clouds of smoke that were so

rough that they were throwing the plane all over the sky. The turbulence was just crazy.

Marcello: This was from the updraft and so on.

Braden: When we started in on the target, we would strap ourselves in just as tight as we could. We were wearing night-vision goggles, which had a red lens in them. The searchlights, which were radar operated, were just all over the sky in this broiling smoke, and you did see some of our aircraft run together and fall apart. There were some night fighters out there, and you didn't know where they were coming from. The flak was ineffective, but, again, it's operating, and we were throwing those tin-foil strips, which we called "rope" or "window."

Marcello: "Chaff." Didn't you also call it "'chaff?"

Braden: Yes. They'd say, "Throw out your 'rope!' Throw out your 'rope!'" The gunners would yell that to each other. Oh, and another thing--we didn't take any ammunition along.

Marcello: That's right, because you could cram on more incendiaries.

Braden: Yes, cram on more bombs (chuckle). So their main job was to throw this stuff out and act as spotters for anything they could see.

I'll tell you a wild story. One airplane that I know of actually turned upside down in this smoke--

that's how turbulent it was, and the guy righted it and got home.

Another plane came home with a Tokyo newspaper in its engine cell, which the air currents had carried up, and the plane had scooped it up out of the sky.

Then the ultimate description of this is that, if you can imagine the city of Dallas, Texas, being totally on fire--it was like looking at the mouth of Hell. I mean, it was just burning. And they were always that way--every one of those fire raids.

Marcello: When do you get a chance to see this? After you were out of the target area, you could can look back at it?

Braden: Yes.

Marcello: What kind of feelings do you have when you see this?

Braden: I didn't have any feelings about that, except that I was glad to get away from it (chuckle). I think maybe that's the reason young men fight wars. You know, I didn't worry about the social implications of it at all. In recent times, there's a great book out now called Flames Over Tokyo, which describes this from [the point of view of] what happened to the people on the ground. I just shook my head and said, "My God! Did we do that?" We killed 84,000 people on that one raid. The only difference between us and the atomic bombers was that it took us 300 planes to do what they did with one plane and one bomb.

Marcello: But these are thoughts afterward. You don't have these thoughts at the time.

Braden: It didn't bother me, except that I was glad to be away from there, hoped that I got home, and then I knew that I'd have to go again. The other thing was that it was a lot easier than the high-altitude raids. It didn't bother me near as much about getting home.

Marcello: It was a lot easier in what way?

Braden: In that we hadn't been shot up by fighters or flak. We came out of those things with an intact aircraft, almost, in every way.

Marcello: Now these raids were obviously taking place mostly at night.

Braden: Yes, almost all of them

Marcello: And I'm assuming the Japanese didn't have very many night fighters.

Braden: No. They didn't have a lot, but they had some of them. And what they had were totally ineffective.

Marcello: You mentioned something earlier that I'd like to pick up on. You mentioned that you're under this terrific amount of tension because you've got to stay alert. You don't have a chance to relax like the other guys. You have "X" amount of fuel. Is there a point there among these thirty-five missions where you say, "I don't know if I can do this again." Obviously, you do it, but...

Braden: No, not for me there wasn't. I will tell you that one thing that we did not have until Curtis LeMay got there--we had no end to this. There was a tour of duty. You know, the 8th Air Force had twenty-five missions. Most of the others had thirty-five. We just wanted to know that there would be an end--if you could survive. Not having a limit to the number of missions kept morale very low. When Curtis LeMay got there, one of the first things he did was to announce that we had a tour assigned of thirty-five missions, and we felt good about that. So I never got to that point.

We had two married men on our crew. Gordon Nedderson was very calm. He didn't ever seem to show any effects of that. Lowell Sharret was the other man who was married. Lowell obviously wanted to get home because he had a wife. The rest of us were just a bunch crazy kids. You know, we would probably have ridden a bomb up there, if we could or if we thought it would do any good.

So I really never got to that point. I just hoped that I could last it out to the end, but I didn't know that that would be possible because there were lots of people all around me that were dying.

Marcello: Do you think about that?

Braden: Then or now?

Marcello: Did you put it in neutral then.

Braden: Oh, it was in neutral. I mean, it was regrettable, but, you see, it's different in the air because, if a guy goes out, he just disappears. He never comes back. You don't see him. There's no blood; there's no guts; there's nothing.

[Tape 2, Side 1]

Marcello: How do you unwind from one of these raids? What do you do once you're back at Saipan? The plane has been safely landed, and all of the debriefing and so on has occurred. How do you unwind? What do you do for relaxation, entertainment, whatever?

Braden: Well, we had a movie every night (chuckle). We had a place called "Goat Gulch," which was literally a gulch that had a lot of fifty-gallon oil drums embedded in the ground there for seats. We had a movie every night. We sat up and looked across at Tinian, and we watched the guys flying off Tinian just about at dusk. We were sitting there waiting for it to get dark enough to show the movie, and they were taking off to lay mines in the Japanese harbors. A lot of them went down on takeoff because they were so heavily laden, and I don't think they enjoyed the same kind of cliff drop that we had on Saipan. Literally, I saw many planes just crash on takeoff from over there. But the movie was the entertainment. The other thing is we had a couple of USO [United Services Organization] shows that

went there. I still remember that Dennis Day came, and he was a marvelous entertainer. I thought of him as a singer on the Jack Benny show, but Dennis Day could do almost anything. He was great!

But the main recreation...we had no duties, except to fly, or officers every once in a while were assigned to a mail censoring detail, and that could be pretty racy duty (laughter). But other than that, we had no assigned duties.

We lived on the edge of a cliff. You went down the cliff, and there was a very short beach, maybe ten feet--white sand--and then the ocean began. Right under the water was a giant reef that went out maybe for twenty or thirty yards. If you fell into it or stepped into it, it would just cut you to ribbons--it was a coral reef. But we'd gone out into the clear water of the ocean where the reef dropped off to the bottom of the ocean, and we had anchored a raft out there--a diving-swimming raft. I had a pair of underwater goggles that I had brought with me for some strange reason, and I liked to swim. We could get on our air mattresses and float out to this raft, and I went swimming a great deal of the time there. I was fascinated by all the...you know, I'd never seen anything except that dirty water at Galveston (chuckle). I couldn't believe that here was an ocean

that was as clear as water in a drinking glass, and all of these beautiful fish were swimming around the reef. So that's what I did for recreation. It was too hot to engage in any kind of sports or anything like that. It was very hot during the day.

Marcello: Did you have any sort of a beer ration?

Braden: Yes. You had one six-pack a week--it was hot--and I never had drunk any beer until I got to Saipan. The first beer I ever drank was hot beer, and when we got refrigeration, finally, I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven. I always enjoyed cold beer (laughter) after that. Officers got two fifths of whiskey a month, which we could purchase. Enlisted men didn't get any whiskey ration. Most of that whiskey, I think, some of them drank it all as soon as they got it. Frankly, we had people that, I think, probably became alcoholics because of their ration. I used mine for trading. There were always these guys that had captured these little snails and made bracelets and all that kind of thing. And the nose art painters used whiskey as a form of trading or barter. So I did have a beer, and after we got the refrigeration, I enjoyed my beer ration (chuckle).

Marcello: Now Saipan was "secured."

Braden: Yes.

Marcello: During your time on there, were there ever any

experiences, that you know of, of Japanese holdouts and so on?

Braden: Yes.

Marcello: And what care did you have to take?

Braden: Well, we all had a sidearm weapon. As a matter of fact, we had one guy in our hut named Leonard, who was from Harlan County, Kentucky. He was a co-pilot, and Leonard, when he got drunk, played with his pistol. So one of our jobs was to go get Leonard's pistol when we saw him drinking down at the officer's club and take all the ammo [ammunition] out and hide it.

But we had one Japanese holdout that ran through our squadron one night. The guy came down to get something to eat. You know, he was hungry--he was starving to death. And it was just like the gunfight at the OK Corral [reference to an episode in Tombstone, Arizona, involving the legendary Wyatt Earp]. He was spotted, and everybody was running out and shooting like crazy and everything. It almost scared the poor guy to death. (Chuckle) He was captured and given some food, and they took him away.

We had one air raid while I was there, which was the last air raid that they had on Saipan. We had these old dugouts [reference to combination drainage ditch and protective revetment] that we'd made outside the Quonset huts, that had sandbags. That was about

the end of that excitement.

We were told not to go into the interior of the island where it was wild and there were jungles and all that because it was dangerous--there were [Japanese] guys up there in those caves. I don't know how many of them there were, but there were some up there, and they were still armed. Like us, they didn't know a lot about what was going on out there (chuckle).

Marcello: You mentioned, on several occasions, Curtis LeMay. What were your thoughts or feelings about him at the time?

Braden: Well, you see, none of us knew Curtis LeMay. He was an outsider that came in. We only knew him by reputation, and that he smoked cigars and had a scowl on his face, and that he was going to send us on these fire raids. And that was very scary. After we started seeing what was happening--"Here's a guy that knows what he's doing"--we felt very good about him. And he'd also given us the relief of knowing how many missions we'd have to fly. Our wing general, General "Rosie" O'Donnell, we knew him. He came there with us. He led the first mission, I think, that the 73rd Wing flew to Japan, along with "Memphis Belle" Morgan, the guy who flew the "Memphis Belle." He was a pilot in our group. He was a major at that time. He was one guy we knew that was famous.

Marcello: What was the nickname that they had for Curtis LeMay?

Do you remember that?

Braden: "Old Iron Pants," I think, was what they called him.

Marcello: I think they called him "Iron Ass" (laughter).

Braden: Something like that, yes.

Marcello: Okay, let's assume that your thirty-five missions are about over. What happens at that point? Describe the last mission. You know this is going to be the thirty-fifth mission. This is the one you really have to get through. Before we get to that point, though, I'd like to talk to you about the importance to the bomber crews of the taking of Iwo Jima.

Braden: On April 7--that number's engraved in my mind--we had our first P-51 fighter escort from Iwo Jima. It was the first time I'd ever been in an aircraft formation where we had fighter escort.

Marcello: By this time Iwo Jima has been taken. They set up fighter strips there. You've got long-range escort--the P-51s.

Braden: Right. You know, Army pilots didn't know as much about navigation as Navy pilots did, so the B-29s flew "mother ships," which navigated them to Japan and then picked them up and brought them back home to their home base on Iwo Jima. But I remember that they came in way high above us, and we came in, and then the fighters came up to get us on April 7.

Marcello: About what raid...what number of mission was this? Do you recall?

Braden: No, I don't. But it was probably about the mid-point. It was a high-altitude mission, and it was...I've looked this up. We had a 101 B-29s on this raid. It was the first time we had the fighter escort. I remember looking out my window and seeing a Japanese Zero go by--I mean, very close--and right on his tail was a P-51, who shot him down. The guy bailed out. That just made me want to cheer. (Chuckle) It just felt so good.

This raid had 101 B-29s, and we shot down 101 Japanese fighters. I had to look this up. Eighty were shot down by the B-29s and twenty-one by the fighters. It totally surprised the Japanese. They hadn't expected this fighter cover. We received, I think, something like eighty-five holes in our aircraft, one of which was twenty-four inches in diameter--right through the rear stabilizer--and we were flying home...oh, also, they shot all our gun control cables in two--right through the middle of the fuselage--just chopped them in two. So we lost our total electronic gun control system. So you can imagine how close up under the wing that we got, during all of these fighter attacks, to our fellow airplanes.

Anyway, we were headed home, and we landed on Iwo

Jima--the first time for us. The island had been declared secure. I think thirty-one planes landed on Iwo Jima that night. We spent two nights there until they came up and got us, and then later they sent somebody up, and they patched the hole and got the thing flyable again. Buckheit and somebody else went up and brought it back home. They had no place for us to stay. The island had barely been secured, and the landing strip was those metal things that they put down.

So we spent the night in our airplane. During the night, we were sitting up there in the "greenhouse" nose talking, and a Japanese patrol came through and set off flares that went up in the sky, and we had a gun fight right out in front us. We'd never seen anything like that. We were so dumb that we just sat there and watched it. You'd have thought that we were watching television.

We met some of the P-51 guys, and we got to see their quarters, which were horrible. They were living in tents, and they had built some wooden bathtubs, and they had hot water that came out of the ground--the water was hot. So they'd come back having been all cramped up in those fighter planes for seven hours, and they'd get in those hot baths, and that would stretch them out and extend them.

But that was the first time I landed on Iwo, and I remember that as being the most Godforsaken place I'd ever seen. There wasn't a blade of grass or a tree. There was nothing, I mean, just total black sand and devastation. You know, the Marines had killed 21,000 Japanese soldiers who were defending that Godforsaken place. So I landed there that time and three other times. Everytime it was in a life-threatening situation. I just think that the Marines saved my life all those times.

Marcello: So, theoretically, had it not been for the taking of Iwo Jima...

Braden: I'd have been dead.

Marcello: ...you could have been dead.

Braden: I don't think that I would have ever survived that because everytime we landed there, it was because we couldn't make it home.

You asked me about my last mission. I will tell you that along toward June, we had begun to call all these things "milk runs" because we had no opposition, and we were dropping leaflets. We'd drop leaflets on fifty-eight smaller Japanese cities of under 100,000 population. The leaflets said, in essence, "We're coming to your city on Sunday, [such-and-such a date], at 3:00 in the afternoon." I mean, you talk about being cocky (chuckle). "And we're going to burn your

city to the ground! Surrender!" They continued to ignore that.

We also flew some missions to Kyushu to bomb a few Japanese airfields up there when our fleet invaded Okinawa and took Okinawa. That was our role there. They were subjected to extreme kamikaze attacks, and we were, too.

Marcello: So you were trying to destroy those airfields from which those kamikazes were coming.

Braden: Yes. Right, that was our mission. So we also got some of our own kamikaze [attacks] on us. By the end of July, every Japanese city over 50,000 population had been severely burned. The six major Japanese industrial cities were, for all purposes, totally destroyed. We had wiped out the navy arsenal in Kure; we had wiped out the Osaka army arsenal; we'd stopped all Japanese coastal shipping; and the Japanese aircraft industry had become totally inoperative. We could have 450-plane raids ourselves and encounter no opposition, yet they continued to fight on.

Now my last mission...you asked me to describe it. We ran short of gas. For what reason, I don't know, except maybe we just didn't have enough, and we decided that we might not make it home. Everybody on the plane had ditched before, and we made up our minds that we would bail out this time because all of us had

experienced death from ditching. We got to Iwo Jima, and the flight engineer was saying, "Buckheit! You've got to land this plane! You've got to land this plane!" And Buckheit said, "No! We're going to be able to make it." So, on taking his word for it, we flew on, and on, and on.

When we got to Saipan, boy, it was really scary! So we called in emergency landing procedures, so they just shoved everybody off and let us come in. We came in and landed on the runway. We were about halfway down the runway in our landing, and guess what happened. All four engines sputtered and went dead--totally out of gasoline. (Chuckle) They had to send a tractor out to pull this aircraft and put it on its hardstand. My emotion...I got out and kissed the ground because that was number thirty-five and that was it.

Marcello: What kind of a party was there that night?

Braden: Well, we had no party. We just felt good. We had nothing to have a party with (laughter). It was just a good feeling.

Marcello: So far as you know, that plane was not really shot up in any way. It was just a matter of being low on fuel.

Braden: No, just fuel. You know, I think we had about enough fuel to go another 200 miles--that was about how close they calculated that. So, if you had something that

consumed more, you had a problem.

Marcello: What date was that when you you flew that last mission?

Braden: Let me see if I've got it down here somewhere [shuffling through notes]. August 11, 1945. Everybody on our crew completed their missions, except Dean Cornwell, who was the bombardier on the A-32. The reason was that, from time-to-time, you'd have people that we called "sand-baggers." These were group officers who would fly to get in flight time and, also, to have the experience that they were supposed to have. So we wound up on a mission that had thirteen men on board, and Cornwell said, "I don't want to fly on a plane that has thirteen men on it." So they said, "Okay." So Dean was one mission behind us. So everybody was through, except Cornwell, with their thirty-five missions, and we all flew home on a forwarded [returning] aircraft. We flew an airplane home with different people. We didn't come home together. The sad ending of the story is that when Cornwell did finish another mission, and they sent him home, he flew a forwarded airplane home with a Captain Moore, in our squadron. Captain Moore got, I think...well, he got to the location of one of the picket boats between Hawaii and San Francisco, and he had to ditch that aircraft. Cornwell was killed in that ditching. Captain Moore was rescued by the picket

boat. So Dean didn't make it back.

Marcello: What rank were you at the time that you got back to the States?

Braden: I was a first lieutenant. All the officers by that time were first lieutenants, except Buckheit, who was a captain.

Marcello: When did you get out of the service?

Braden: I think two days after I got back (chuckle). Let's see if I've got it down here somewhere [shuffling through papers]. Yes. On August 11, I was on my last mission. On August 15, all hostilities ceased. I flew home on the "War Weary," and late in the evening of August 31 we arrived with this "War Weary"--and I do mean weary--because we'd had...

Marcello: Is "War Weary" a name that's given to a plane?

Braden: Yes. It's just ready to come home. It's worn out. I'll tell you how weary it was. We lost an engine between Saipan and Kwajalein and had to have a new engine put in at Kwajalein. We lost an engine between Kwajalein and Oahu and had to have a new engine in at Oahu (laughter). We lost another between there and San Francisco, so by the time we got to Tinker Field in Oklahoma, we had three new engines in the aircraft.

We arrived in there, and it had just been a marvelous experience for me. I sat up in the nose of that "greenhouse" and did pilotage, you know, the

ground and where I was on the map. I just couldn't get used to seeing all this land. We flew right over the Grand Canyon and got to Tinker Field, Oklahoma, about 12:00 midnight, and they asked me where I wanted to go. I said, "I want to go to Dallas, Texas." I was sitting there having a cup of coffee, and a bunch of guys walked in and said, "Hey! Are you the guy that wants to go to Dallas?" I said, "Yeah!" "Come on! You've got a C-47!"

So at 2:00 in the morning, September 1, I guess it was then, I got home. I went home and grabbed my mom and dad and said, "Hello." I got in my car and drove to Arlington and woke up my girl, who I was engaged to and I'm now married to. It'll be fifty years next year. I woke her up. I was home, and I reported in at San Antonio on September 3. Two days later, I was gone--out of the Army. I have to tell you this. I had grown up in the service.

Marcello: I'm sure.

Braden: You know, that was my life. All of a sudden, ZIP!--I'm out (chuckle). And it was a strange feeling--strange feeling.

Marcello: Did you have any problems readjusting to the "real world?"

Braden: No. If I had been a pilot, I would have stayed in the service--I liked it that much. But I don't know.

Somehow at that tender age, approaching twenty-one, I was smart enough to know that navigators weren't going to be needed, that there wasn't a career there for me as a navigator. I never had met a navigator who was more than a major, anyway. I had even thought about the commercial possibilities of flying on Pan American, which at that time was still doing overseas civilian flights.

I decided that that wouldn't work for me, so I looked around for a career that would not involve the higher mathematics of engineering, which I hadn't liked. I got into calculus, and I didn't like that. But I liked to draw, so I said, "Well, I'll be an architect. They just have to add and subtract and understand a little trigonometry, and they draw all the time." So that's when I went back to school and became an architect. I practiced for forty-two years, and here I am (chuckle).

Marcello: Well, Mr. Braden, I think that's a pretty good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for taking time to talk with me. You've said a lot of interesting and really important things, and I'm sure that researchers are going to appreciate your comments.

Braden: Well, thank you. Thank you. I enjoyed doing it.

[Tape turned off briefly]

Marcello: After I closed the interview, you mentioned that there

was something else that we probably need to get on tape. Again, it's your story, so whatever you want to put on, relate this one to me.

Braden: I did not witness this, but it happened to my group, and I have a picture of it to prove it. We had a gunnery sergeant whose name was James Krantz, who was a waist-gunner in the 497th and who constantly worried about the pressurization of the aircraft. Well, if one of those aircraft ever de-pressurized, it's SWOOSH!-- the air goes out of it, and it can just take anything out through any opening that's convenient to it. He worried about that blister that he sat in--this big Plexiglas window--so he devised a strap out of some pistol belts or parachute straps or something that and anchored himself to the plane. He snapped it on to his parachute harness. So he's sitting there at 29,000 feet over Nagoya, when a fighter shot out the blister and de-pressurized his plane. He was flung outside the plane as he thought he would be, and he hung out there--dangling by this strap at 29,000 feet--for ten minutes. He lost consciousness after three minutes because of lack of oxygen. The airplane commander was dropping the plane. The co-pilot came back, and he and another gunner hauled James back in and put an oxygen mask on his face. He revived and completed his tour. The picture is of James Krantz hanging out the side of

this B-29 (chuckle), and it's in several books. It's a remarkable thing to see.

Marcello: I was going to ask you something else, too, since I have some tape here. What did you have to do to abort a mission? I mean, how serious does it have to be to abort a mission?

Braden: Well, you aborted a mission if you had lost an engine on the way to the target, which happened to us, I think, two or three times. What you did was drop your bombs in the ocean and come home on three engines.

Marcello: You never come back with a load of bombs or any bombs.

Braden: No. No, you can't land with all those bombs on board. You just might drop them out of the bomb bay. The shackles weren't that good.

There was never any problem about flying a B-29 on three engines or two engines, if they're on opposite sides. I had an occasion one time flying back from a mission to Kyushu, where a man had lost two engines on one side, and he was trying to fly the airplane. He could not hold course or altitude, and we were having to fly so slow to keep...you know, he was flying so slow. We would have to do "dog legs" out and come back, and we had done this for a long time. All of a sudden, somebody said, "Hey! There's something down there in the water." While we were out and back on the "dog leg," he had gone in the water. There was nothing

we could do, except note his position and turn it in. I don't whether they survived or anything else, but I did see that happen.

Marcello: Once again, when you aborted a mission, would there be some sort of a debriefing to make sure that you had a darned good reason for aborting?

Braden: Oh, sure. But they understood. I mean, we had so many engine problems that that was not uncommon for it to happen.

Marcello: Okay. Now, unless you have anything further to say, we can end it. But if you do, we still have more tape.

Braden: I'll tell you how bad it was. On the first mission that was flown to Japan, twenty-four of some seventy-five planes that they took up never made it to the target. I don't know that it was all engine trouble or all abortings, but twenty-four of them never got to the target.

Marcello: My notes indicate that at one point, the abort rate was about 21 percent.

Braden: Yes. And it was all engine problems. I think cooling was the main problem, as I understood it. Later in life, when I read about how bad the engines really were (laughter), I think I would have been a lot more scared than I was.

Marcello: Okay. Well, that's a pretty good place to end this interview. Once more, I want to thank you for

participating.

Braden: It's been fun.