

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

Thomas M. Lawson

Army Air Force

Yukon, Oklahoma

November 18, 2014

My name is Richard Misenhimer, today is November 18, 2014. I am interviewing Mr. Thomas M. Lawson by telephone. His phone number is 405-792-2360. His cell phone is 432-557-0640. His address is 4215 Marina Drive, Yukon, Oklahoma, 73099. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Nimitz Education and Research Center, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Mr. Lawson, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Lawson:

I was just a young man 18 years old. Everybody was in the service.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the first thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the museum to make sure this is okay with you.

"Agreement read."

Is that okay with you?

Mr. Lawson:

Yeah, that's alright with me.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the next thing I need to do is get an alternative contact. We find out that sometimes several years down the road we try to get back in contact with a veteran, he has moved or something, so do you have a son or a daughter or someone we can contact if we needed to, to find you?

Mr. Lawson:

My daughter's name is Kathy Crout. Her phone number is 405-376-3809.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, what is your birthdate?

Mr. Lawson:

It's December 27, 1924

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where were you born?

Mr. Lawson:

Pierre, South Dakota.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What were your mother and father's first names?

Mr. Lawson:

My father was James.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And your mother's first name?

Mr. Lawson:

Her name was Beatrice. They were from Michigan and dad came from Ireland.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Lawson:

Yes, there was six in our family, four sisters and one brother. There were six kids, including myself. I'm about mid-way down, I have a twin sister. We've only lost the oldest one, she's passed on, but there's still five of us still kicking.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was your brother in World War II?

Mr. Lawson:

Yes, he was. My sister was in World War II, she was a nurse, a Lieutenant, and a nurse. She was mostly in hospitals stateside, she served. And my brother, went in before, well then he's older than I am, he went in the service in 1941 and was a meteorologist. He was a Lieutenant and he stayed in for the Korean war, too. So he was just doing meteorology work in the Air Force, you know. He's in assisted living now, he lost his wife. He's doing fine, the rest of the family is fine, the other sisters are well, my wife's well and been married for 63 years.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you grew up during the depression, how did the depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Lawson:

I graduated when I came back, had three years of college before I went in the service. I came back and finished college in '49, got out in '46, and ended up I was a mechanical engineer. Worked for an oil field supply company and moved into sales and management and stayed there thirty-one years. And then I went consultant and worked for a couple of other companies. I stayed in the oil patch fifty-five years. I finally gave up when I was about 80, I think I got out of the oil patch. My dad worked for the USGS. He was working up there in Pierre, South Dakota, but you know it wasn't big salary, but at least we had food on the table, but we had to help a lot of people. And I can remember, you know, a lot of our friends—we'd take food down to them. Everybody shared and worked. I can remember in the little old town of Blackwell we lived a long way from the railroad tracks, but evidently they'd mark your house. They'd come down there and my mother would take and give a little work, kind of menial work just to keep their pride and then feed them and then they'd leave and tell somebody else about it,

I guess. Anyway we moved around the country an awful lot since my dad was surveying we lived in a lot of places. We just settled in Blackwell where I went to high school. My mother bought six sets of books, three times in one year, for different moves. She said well we can't do that, we've got to stay—when you're mapping you get to move about every 50-60 days, we couldn't depend on all that driving, you know. We just stayed—found a place in Blackwell and we just went to school there. We'd see our dad at Christmas and summertime. And occasionally if he went to Louisiana in the winter and then he was going to be there all winter, we'd close down the house and go to Louisiana. I ended up graduating in 1941 from Blackwell High School and I was sixteen, and you know sixteen and a half since school was out in May. I went to college a year and a half and then I quit and worked for my dad. And then I finally was going to join the Marines and my mother talked, apparently said, "Well if he goes in now he's going to be a dead Marine, let him get back to school until he's eighteen." So I went back to school and that's when I joined the Air Force. I think I was inducted in August of 1943 and I didn't report to service until October of '43. I already had couple of years of ROTC so basic training was just a lot of fun. I'd already been through all of the commands and knew all that from ROTC. After basic training, in Wichita Falls, Texas, I went to—I signed up for cadet training and went to San Antonio where there was a pilot training only, they called it. And if you washed out of it—well you didn't get a chance to go to bombardier school or navigation school, you just washed out. I spent about four months in San Antonio, going to school and cadets. And then I went to primary and in Oklahoma and about half ready to graduate and kind of washed out about half of our class. We were with a lot of cadets that just got out of West Point and they already had their commission, you know it takes about two years to get a pilot license. They didn't want to serve active duty, so they just signed up for Air Force. That was when it was

Army Air Force, it was a separate unit, you know. And when I went from there they sent me to radio school up at Sioux Falls, South Dakota and that lasted about another six months. That was, you know codes and radio repair work and you know how to navigate by radio beams and all that sort of stuff. Finished radio school and then when you're on B-17s the radio operator, if the waist gunner got shot you had to go in and take his place. So we went to gunnery school along with the guys from the radio school and we went to gunnery school out in Yuma, Arizona. Lived in tents for about another four or five months. And then we went from Yuma, Arizona to Panama City. And all this time you're flying and you get in your flying phase, four hours, you had to fly four hours a month, your flying phase. We went to Panama City, Florida and that was just a vacation, you just sit down there in the sun and we flew what we call—just getting our flying time in. We'd fly out and look for submarines and fly back, in both B-24s and B-17s. That lasted about a month. They were just fattening you up for the kill, because that's where you went. The next move was you were supposed to get your flying with the bomb group. The next move was to Lincoln, Nebraska to be assigned to a bomb group. Well then the war ended in Germany in May of '45. So then they were concentrating on Japan and by that time they had a lot of 17s and 24s already in the Pacific and they knew they had to use B-29s to bomb Japan because they'd go a longer range. So they sent the people that didn't have much service time, by then I already had about twenty-eight months in, and they sent those guys to B-29 school and then they left me there to deactivate that Lincoln Army Air Force base. And I went as an NCO administrative, just doing typing and paper work really. When the Japanese surrendered about three or four months later, let's see that was May, June, July, August, I think they surrendered in September of ...,

Mr. Misenhimer:

August 15, '45, when they surrendered.

Mr. Lawson:

'45 was it?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, '45.

Mr. Lawson.

And so after they surrendered, we deactivated the base, they did that for four more months. Then they sent me to Lowry Field out there in Denver. Got my discharge papers and I was discharged in the month of March, 1946.

Mr. Misenhimer:

March the 7th. Did you go in in August or October?

Mr. Lawson:

I was inducted in August of '43, but they didn't call me in, I didn't go in/report until October of '43. That's when I went to Wichita Falls, Texas to basic training.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What all did you do in basic training?

Mr. Lawson:

They just marched you and fed you, worked in KP, and you couldn't get off base. I went in weighing about..., that tells you about how the depression days were. When I went in the service I was about 5' 9" and 133 pounds and when I got through basic training, eating and exercising and working for three or four months, I weighed 155. And then I pretty well kept that weight all the way through service. Here I'm going to be 90 in a month and I'm weighing the same thing, I weigh about 155 or 160. I shrunk a little bit, I'm about 5' 8" now. But other than

that I'm in pretty good health.

Mr. Misenhimer:

In your basic training were they pretty rough on you?

Mr. Lawson:

Oh no, no, no. You just—was like I said, I had two years of college ROTC so I kind of knew all the rules. You had to memorize the orders, you know, and all that sort of stuff. You couldn't leave the base until you knew the orders, of course I knew the orders when I went in. So mine was just fine and I was kind of a platoon leader, I knew how to..., my left from my right (laughter). Marched back and forth every place you went, you marched with your platoon, up early and exercised.

Mr. Misenhimer:

In basic training, did you have any kind of weapons training?

Mr. Lawson:

They gave me rifle training and bayonet training and climbing ropes. They didn't..., in that early part of the war wasn't like the Marines, you know you crawl under wires and stuff like that. But they didn't do that, you see you just had to go through the obstacles course. And then you know, you got up the morning early—you ate, you exercised and then you marched and then you marched again, then you exercise and then you do two mile hikes, three mile hikes, sometimes it's just a ten mile hike.

Mr. Misenhimer:

After basic training where did you go?

Mr. Lawson:

Well I went to basic training, then I went to San Antonio, Texas and Randolph Field, I think it

was. And that's where they gave you cadet training and you learned to identify bombers and you learned..., you had to do certain math and you had to pass certain mental tests. Then they decided..., of course I was already signed up for pilot training only, see they normally see what your good at and they send you to bombardier school and navigation school. When I signed up it was pilot training only, unfortunately they didn't really need any more pilots after the European war ended. All my people that were in my class, I contacted the ones I knew, but I washed out and that was a real disappointment, first disappointment I ever had in my life. Anyway, they got their commission but they didn't ever get to fly after it, you know because the war was over by the time they got their commission.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then you went to gunnery school?

Mr. Lawson:

Yeah, we went to gunnery school after the radio school.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tell me about the gunnery school, what all happened there?

Mr. Lawson:

When I washed out of pilot training, after we were flying about the second phase of airplanes, I went to radio school six months, Morse code and that sort of stuff, and codes and learned how to repair radios and be a radio operator on a B-17 or B-24. Sat there right behind the little room there, on the 17 it's right behind where the pilot was. You had to walk through the bomb bay to get to the gunner, the waist gunner. And they taught you how to jump out of an airplane and we didn't actually jump out of airplanes, they get you up on a big tower and release you and the chute went down and you were falling. And you just

learned to fall and tumble you know, instead of landing hard you just roll and hit the ground and roll. And that's been very useful in my life, you know if you fall now days I just fold, get up in a ball and roll, and that's saved you in broken arms and legs. Then after gunnery school that's when I went to Panama City. The gunnery school was there in Yuma and it was hard, you flew every day and fighters would come in with a big sock, target. And you had .50 caliber machine guns and we were shooting bullets at those targets and they were coded with different colors you know, red, green, whatever. So you knew what airplane was hitting the target. They'd come in, the fighters would come in, and pulling those tow targets and your B-17 was just flying straight, you know you got tired of shooting at the targets and you'd start shooting at the cable trying to break the cable and set the target free (laughter). When we were in Florida, like I said Panama City, we just sat on the beach and they even furnished us food and things and they just fatten you up to send you overseas. And we still got our flight time in cause we flew out into the ocean and did a little..., wasn't air sea rescue, it's really just looking for submarines. Supposedly we just got our four hours in and come on back. And then that's when we went to Lincoln, Nebraska and they gave you all your shots to go overseas and you were going to get assigned to a bomb crew. Well once you were assigned to a bomb crew then you have to have another two months training to get acquainted with the crew you would, you know before they assigned you for overseas position. So like I said that's when the war ended and that's when they just sent me and they called it an NCO administrative job or something, but basically it was just mail to be forwarded and people would leave without their laundry and we were sending this on to the people; I did this and that and about four months they closed that base down. And when they closed it down then I was sent out to Denver and Fort Logan and got a discharge. They gave me \$200 going away pay. I went

back home and signed up for college. That's how..., it was in March when I got out and I went back home and I'd already gone to that little junior college close to my house. So I went back to them in March and said, "Hey can I get in this late?" "No," she said. My brother got me a job working for an engineer for fifty cents an hour, civil engineer since I was a friend and a civil engineer. And I worked oh, oh at least forty hours to get my \$20. And my buddies that were in the Army they would join in the 52/20 club which the government—they give you \$20 a week for 52 weeks, they helped you before you found a job, you know. Oh they'd sit there and drink beer and get their \$20. So I signed up to go to school and get my \$75 a month because I already had two years of college and they wanted to send me about four years more of college if I wanted it, so I did that. I went down to the little old junior college and I took aeronautics and I signed up for pilot training down there and I got up every morning flew a little old J-3 Cub and got my pilot's license then. So I learned to fly anyway. But those days you fly and you just kind of follow the instruments, those planes you didn't have a whole lot of electronics, you know. And later on after I retired in '65 from my job, my first job, I went to work for another company and I decided I'm going to go back renew my license. And I bought me an airplane and I enjoyed flying around the country. Kind of a fun, just loved flying but I didn't get to do it in the service, so I did it after I got out. But anyway, they were good to me and I ended up with a bad ear ache; couldn't fly high altitude in those non-pressurized planes, I got an infection in my ear and that's how I lost this hearing in my right ear. And they didn't do much just come around and whisper, "Can you hear that?" "No." After I got out I lived next door to somebody that worked with the VA. He said, "Tom you've got all your service records, that loss of hearing you probably get a little bit of disability." So I said, "Well why don't you do it for me," so he did. Started out 5% and as it got worse it got up probably to 40. Get a little compensation from the

government right now.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you took that pilot training in the Air Force, did you actually ever solo then?

Mr. Lawson:

Yeah, you solo, but what happened, well I didn't tell you, he claimed I was going to crash an airplane. I didn't crash it. I was coming down and they give you a test plot, anyway you know you have to find a ..., they'd pull the throttle on you and say okay your engine failed—where you gonna go, you know? So you find a field to go in. I spotted one, but by the time I got down there cows were running in front of me. So like I said, they found any excuse they could to wash you out. Anyway I got washed out of that, that was a big disappointment. That's why I went ahead and got my pilot's license, I guess it was a challenge. I knew I could do it—if they just give me a little time.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you were doing that training in the Air Force what kind of plane did you fly?

Mr. Lawson:

Well flew an airplane 'cause well you know you put a lot of hours in the airplane, but it didn't bother you to go up high altitude or anything. Well I didn't get a pilot's license in the Air Force, I had to get that in civilian life.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I know, but in the Air Force you did fly a plane though, right?

Mr. Lawson:

Flew in PT-19s.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And you did solo, right?

Mr. Lawson:

Oh no, no, no. I didn't solo in 19's, but I put about, I think we had 35 hours or something like that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

In April of '45 President Roosevelt died, did you hear about that?

Mr. Lawson:

When he died we used to sit and listen to ..., well you know when we were kids we'd sit and listen to those fireside chats with Roosevelt all the time. I remember in '41 when the Japanese attacked we all just sit and listen to the radio Sunday morning. Oh yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

May the 8th of '45 Germany surrendered, did you have any kind of a celebration then?

Mr. Lawson:

I was in Lincoln, Nebraska when the war in Europe ended and then I was still in Lincoln, Nebraska when the Japanese surrendered. That was my last station. But I say that, but they kept me there since I knew how to type and do administrative work. And so they kept me there four months before they let me go. Some of the others they let go right away.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When Germany surrendered did you have any kind of celebration or anything?

Mr. Lawson:

When I got out of the base everybody went to town and hugging the girls and drinking. Oh yeah, it was a big, big deal. It wasn't like New York City, like you see today. But they had a celebration and I don't believe they had, we didn't have much of a parade. It was just everybody

hollering and whooping it up and congratulating everybody and it was a big deal, you know. Everybody knew what they were getting into with Japan, there was going to be a dead man's cementary. So we were glad that was over with.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was that when Germany surrendered or when Japan surrendered?

Mr. Lawson:

Well we were celebrating when Germany surrendered. Seemed like when Japan surrendered we were all..., I was living in the YMCA, they gave me an allowance to live in town because they closed down some of the barracks and food deal. So I was living in town working on the base there doing paperwork. I was still in Lincoln but I was living off base because they were closing down the barracks. But I was handling the administration on some of the people and all that for the officers and helping close out the paperwork. So I got an allowance but I lived in town, but lived at the YMCA. But if I remember they didn't really have much celebration. On the Japanese deal it was, you know such a devastating situation that you saw from the news and all, that I don't think people really wanted to celebrate it. They were glad it was over with, but I don't remember any big celebration when Japan surrendered. We had a big celebration when the European war was over, but I don't remember a lot of parades and stuff like that when the Japanese surrendered. Later when I got discharged they started having the parades when the generals came back and people were off loading from ships. And I think that's when they started having the parades. I don't recall any big celebration on the Japanese surrender and like I said there wasn't a whole lot of parades going on when the Germans surrendered. There was just a lot of people congratulating and happy and downtown and excited about getting ready to go home and all that other stuff.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever see any USO shows anytime?

Mr. Lawson:

When we were in Yuma, Arizona you know you're not too far from Palm Springs and you're not too far from L.A. and you had Bob Hope and you had all those guys coming out and doing the USO shows. We had one about every other week there in Yuma on the weekends. Jerry Lewis and that bunch, they were good, and that's about where I saw most of my USO shows was at Yuma when I was there when they came right out of California. They had training for overseas work but we couldn't get off base up there in gunnery school. Yuma was a pretty small town anyway. The only thing they had there then was, it was dry country, now they've got water and they grow a lot of vegetables. Go to town and all they ever had was that Yuma prison, history on the Yuma prison. But yeah they treated us right. We had a lot of entertainment everywhere we went and you know on base we had a lot of movies. And occasionally you saw some movies, but they didn't mean that much to me then, really.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross?

Mr. Lawson:

Occasionally on the trains when we were moving around the country. They had..., handing out donuts and stuff to you.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What else do you recall from your time in World War II?

Mr. Lawson:

Oh I can't remember a whole lot, we...,

Mrs. Lawson:

He's got a call, he's gotta take this call, so can he call you right back?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Anything else you recall from your time in World War II?

Mr. Lawson:

I don't really remember specifics..., I pretty much told you about all what my memories are on. I kind of lost track of all of my friends, most of them have died. But we had a good time, you know we, everybody was from different parts of the country. You enjoy meeting some people and you know you get closer to some than you did others. You learned a little bit about life, you know when you're so young and you're not as close to home and you're in different parts of the United States. People think a little different back east, in the big city. So you learn a little bit about that and it helps you as you grew up and visited those cities. Lot of them a little colder culture, the cultures a little different. But it was a good time and I..., and any war you have in the future it's going to have to be the young people to fight it. Because so many of these wars are so silly any more that you gotta be..., if your mature and intelligent you gotta think well its kind of silly to put your life on the line for this problem you know.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you kept up with anybody you were in the service with?

Mr. Lawson:

It must have been more just for a while, but you know they get busy in life and when I got through college and started working well then you start getting distance from them and you're making so many new friends in business that you didn't try to keep track of the other ones. Didn't have anybody from your hometown that was in your group so you really didn't identify

with those. But like I said, it was a good time and I was glad to have been there. I was, like most kids, a little disappointed that you didn't get to go into service. But after you mature..., you didn't get to see combat, you know you train for all that and you didn't get to use it.

But the good Lord had his hands on me. So you just take life as it comes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well thank you again for your time today and for your service to our country.

Mr. Lawson:

Well thank you for your hospitality about it all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Ok, thank you. Goodbye.

Transcribed by:

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