

Clinton L. Henderson Oral History Interview

JOHN FARGO: Today is February 11, 2015. My name is John Fargo, and I am a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. Today I am interviewing Clinton Hendrickson concerning --

CLINTON HENDERSON: No, Henderson.

JF: Henderson concerning his experiences during World War II. This interview is being -- is taking place in Mr. Henderson's home in Austin, Texas. This interview is in support of the Educational and Research Center for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II. With that out of the way (laughs) let's get started. Clint, let's discuss a little bit of your early history. When were you born and where?

CH: I was born in Chillicothe, Texas, February 1, 1925.

JF: What was your father's occupation?

CH: Well, my father was most often managing cotton gins for co-ops. And in Snakeville, Texas, he was the manager of the cotton gin, owned the grocery store, and a blacksmith shop. And my grandparents ran the grocery store and another guy [that he knew?] ran the blacksmith shop.

JF: You have any siblings?

CH: I have two brothers, one sister. My sister died about 4, 5 years ago.

JF: Brothers still alive?

CH: Yes.

JF: Good. Where did you go to school?

CH: I started school in Snakeville, Texas, at Lone Star School, and then went there four years, and then my dad moved. We went to some other little place in west Texas where he ran another cotton gin. Went to school there one year. Then we went to Hobbs, New Mexico. He built a bowling alley. When he finished the bowling alley we came to Austin.

JF: I see.

CH: It was about 1936.

JF: Did you go to school in Austin?

CH: And I went to school in Austin, in University Junior High and Austin High School.

JF: I see. Graduated Austin High School?

CH: [Yes?].

JF: You go on to college at all?

CH: I went to the service before I graduated. I went into service, and when I came back out of service, I went back to high school and finished it. Then I went to mortuary science school. I got my funeral director license and embalmer's license, and I stayed in that profession until

1973. And I decided I wanted to change so I managed a little 7-11 store for five years (inaudible). So then I went to work for a print shop. And I was in the shipping department, shipping and delivery department, managing that, for a pretty good sized training firm here in Austin. It was the Whitley Company.

JF: I know them

CH: Yes (laughter).

JF: Did you enlist in the Army Air Force or were you drafted?

CH: I was in the draft.

JF: What year was that?

CH: Nineteen-forty-three.

JF: What were the circumstances there? Did you have any say in how the -- you got into the Air Force as opposed to the regular Army?

CH: I applied for aviation cadet training.

JF: I see.

CH: And, course I'm too naïve to know that I didn't have enough education to be trained as a pilot (laughs).

JF: What were they looking for at that time?

CH: Well you needed some college training to be in pilot training. But I still got into the cadet training program, went through gunnery school.

JF: Oh, you did get into the [flight training?]

CH: Yeah. So I got into the flight crew.

JF: Well, let me ask you, where did you go to basic training?

CH: Wichita Falls. I entered service at Sam Houston, San Antonio, and then went to Wichita Falls for basic.

JF: Was that an Air Force base?

CH: Yes, it is.

JF: Army Air Force base.

CH: Army Air Force.

JF: So how many months were you in basic training?

CH: I was -- well, it was supposed to be 28 days but I had a headache one night and I went to -- took aspirin and they stuck me in the hospital all night and then I had to start over.

JF: Oh, really?

CH: (laughs). I actually had about 30 days of basic. About 36 days of basic. So, I wanted to go buy some aspirin.

(laughs) You don't buy aspirin from them! So, they stuck me in there and took a needle in, about 55 units of penicillin. Spent the night there and the next day, I went back to my outfit. Well, I'm a day behind so I have to start over.

JF: Well, sun of a gun.

CH: So I started over. And so I had about 6 weeks of basic instead of four weeks. And then after basic, I went to Las Vegas Aerial Gunnery School.

JF: Did you choose that or just --

CH: No, they just assigned it.

JF: They just assigned you to that.

CH: I didn't qualify for pilot training or navigator or bombardier, so it was gunnery.

JF: So tell me about the gunnery school. What kind of weapons were you trained in?

CH: Well, we had to learn how to shoot the .45 pistol. Was a Thompson sub-machine gun, a 30-caliber M-1 carbine, 30-caliber and 50-caliber machine guns. And we had a skeet range that we rode on the back of a truck. They had a [rain belt?] on the back of the truck; you just stand in there and they'd run around the track and each station is - - throw a bird in the air and you have to shoot at it with a 12-gauge shotgun.

JF: Birds in the air.

CH: Well these are clay.

JF: Clay birds, OK.

CH: And that was a lot of fun (laughs).

JF: How long was that school?

CH: Oh, about six weeks.

JF: And then what happened?

CH: Then we were assigned to a combat crew, and we went to Ardmore, Oklahoma for combat crew training.

JF: Combat crew training, Ardmore Oklahoma.

CH: Ardmore, Oklahoma.

JF: How long were you there?

CH: So that was -- goodness, about, it must have been about a month, month or six weeks there.

JF: And what did they teach you at that school?

CH: Well, that's where our crew got together and we learned to fly together, work together as a crew.

JF: What kind of aircraft did you have?

CH: B-17.

JF: Oh, the B-17 was there? I see. Was it brand new?

CH: Well, those weren't. The B-17s that they used for training, they weren't all new. Some of them might have been, but --

JF: They were training vehicles.

CH: They were training things, yes.

JF: OK. You were assigned to a crew?

CH: Yes.

JF: Ten-man crew?

CH: It was a 10-man crew; we were assigned to work together, train together.

JF: Really?

CH: After we got overseas, we -- they took one of the Waist Gunners away from us so only a 9-man crew then.

JF: How did you get overseas?

CH: Well, we were fortunate. We got to fly a new plane over.

JF: A brand-new B-17?

CH: A brand-new B-17G.

JF: Wow.

CH: So we were one of the fortunate ones.

JF: So did you stick with that airplane throughout your entire --

CH: Oh no. No, we took that plane over. Landed in Northern Ireland. And then they outfitted for combat there, and they sent us on a train on down to our station where we would be.

JF: That was in England.

CH: Yes, in England.

JF: OK. And that was your base throughout your entire time?

CH: The whole time.

JF: What was the name of that base?

CH: Well, it was Grafton Underwood, Station 106. But it was the 384th Bomb Group. I was in the 545th Bomb Squadron. That's 1st Division, 41st Wing (laughter).

JF: You remember all that!

CH: (laughs) I remember my social -- serial number, too. Never forgot that either.

JF: So, you were at that point, together as a crew, the same people that you had trained with in the states.

CH: Yes.

JF: You flew across the ocean.

CH: Flew an airplane across.

JF: And landed in England, and you stuck together during that whole time.

CH: Whole time, yes.

JF: OK.

CH: One -- Waist Gunner was taken off the crew when we got to our station. They took one Waist Gunner off and put him in a pool. And he later flew with another crew that -- plane got shot down and they were taken prisoner for a while. I don't know how long he was there. I think he got out alive, but I don't know for sure.

JF: So your job on the airplane was what?

CH: I was Ball Turret Gunner.

JF: You fit into that ball turret?

CH: Oh yes. There was more room in there than you would think.

JF: Really? Was there?

CH: Some of these tall tall guys probably wouldn't have fit in there too good. But it was quite a bit of room.

JF: They had enough room to maneuver the guns, obviously.

CH: Oh yes. Well, it moves the turret. When you control the guns you're moving the turret.

JF: OK.

CH: So --

JF: The control -- what did you have? Something like a bar?

CH: Just a regular -- It had a long --

JF: Handles?

CH: Yes.

JF: And that moved the turret in any direction you wanted?

CH: [Seekers?] here. Button to push the triggers, shoot your gun.

JF: Could you shoot down?

CH: Oh yes.

JF: And sideways?

CH: And sideways. Any way you want.

JF: I read somewhere the Ball Turret Gunners weren't allowed to go into the turret until after you were airborne.

CH: Yes, we were supposed to, yes (laughs). I almost talked a pilot into letting me take off and land in it one time, and you know, he said, we'd both get court martialed, we can't do that! (laughs).

JF: How was your crew and your fellow crew members? Were they all pretty friendly at this point?

CH: Oh yes. And I -- I can't remember ever, any of them, having a cross word with each other.

JF: Really?

CH: And I don't think we had too much association with other crews, actually. It was two crews in one hut, but when we were there, we talked, were friendly with them, but we never really got to know them.

JF: I see. So the pilot was the -- what was he, a captain?

CH: He was a captain. Co-pilot was, in our case, was a second lieutenant.

JF: What was your rank at that point?

CH: Staff sergeant.

JF: Staff sergeant, OK. Did you hold that rank throughout the entire tour of duty?

CH: Yes. Well, I was buck sergeant when we went over, but after we got into combat, we were promoted to staff sergeant.

JF: Clint, tell me a little bit about life in England. Did you -- were you able to get around and do any sightseeing?

CH: Oh yes, yes we did. And we had a couple of passes we went to London. And then one R&R time they sent us on for 7 days to a rest camp operated by the Red Cross.

JF: In England?

CH: In England. That was a full schedule. We'd go bike riding, horseback riding, go to the theater. They took us to a stage show. And just ate and ate and ate! (laughs). It was good.

JF: How -- what were the living conditions like at your air base? You lived in huts, you said?

CH: Yes, it was Quonset hut.

JF: Quonset huts.

CH: They were comfortable.

JF: Were they fairly large?

CH: Yes, they were about the size of this room here.

JF: OK. So you had more than one crew.

CH: Two crews in them.

JF: Two crews in one hut, I see. How was the food?

CH: It was, I think, pretty good. I think we were very lucky because we always got to eat in the mess hall; we didn't have to carry cans -- the rations -- with us and eat on the road somewhere (laughs).

JF: Right. So you had a separate mess hall.

CH: We had a mess hall, yes. Regular mess hall for the enlisted men and one for the officers.

JF: Tell me a little bit about the airplane, the B-17.

CH: I think it was the best one ever made.

JF: Really a safe airplane?

CH: Oh yes. We had one, one time, back about middle of November, we had a -- got hit with anti-aircraft fire, and it broke the hub off of one engine, left inboard engine. And it vibrated so bad that it just -- it knocked out our radio, everything. And then another engine stopped working. I don't know what happened to it. The oil pressure went out (inaudible). So we started losing -- falling behind our group; we could stay up, keep up with them. So we finally got rid of our bomb load.

JF: Before you got to the target?

CH: Yes. Yes, we couldn't even make -- well, we unloaded before we got that far because we were losing -- too far behind. And so we finally got rid of that, and we could see our group going away from us. And so then we just headed back like we were supposed to. Tried to follow the route back that we were supposed to come back. And when we got back over France, it was -- we were up about 25,000 feet over Germany. But by the time we got back over France we were down to about 15,000. And -- well, even lower than that, because we started to cross the English Channel. We were supposed to be at 15,000, and we were too low, and a couple of British spitfires came up and met us and they escorted us into their base (laughs). We had no radio control, no contact. Radio operator had to use his signal

light to try to get the message to them that we were in trouble. So they escorted us back to their base, and we were met with armed M.Ps and -- (laughs)

JF: Any trouble landing?

CH: No. Well -- no, he was -- managed to land it all right. Well, I say no trouble; it was hard for the pilot, but we had a good, safe, easy landing.

JF: Were there any casualties on that trip?

CH: Well, [Pollard?] had a little piece of shrapnel in his shoulder, but wasn't real serious.

JF: So he stayed with you?

CH: No, he had to go to the hospital. They sent him to general hospital, and our co-pilot was going to be assigned to our pilot then. And so one of the commanders' officers and our co-pilot came to the crew and said, "Would you fly with me if I'm going to be your chief pilot now?" We said, "Sure."

JF: He asked you that?

CH: Yes, they asked

JF: What if one buddy raised his hand and said, "No I don't think so"?

CH: Well, I don't think we had anybody in there that felt that way. Well, apparently we didn't, because they all agreed immediately -- "oh yeah". So our co-pilot became our chief pilot (inaudible) to November and December.

JF: So you got a new co-pilot in?

CH: Yes.

JF: From [somewhere else?]

CH: I don't even remember who he was. I think we had a different one every time.

JF: Really? Of your 35 missions, and -- I'm correct?

CH: They say I've got credit for 36, but I don't know.

JF: OK, so 36 -- that incident, where you got hit by flak, what mission was that about? Was that early in the --

CH: No, it was in November. It was about -- we didn't have but about 6 or 8 missions left to go.

JF: Oh, is that right? So it was late in the tour?

CH: It was late in our tour.

JF: OK. Any other hairy types of flights that you had during that time?

CH: No, not really. None except just regular anti-aircraft fire we had all the time. That was just normal.

JF: What about the German fighters?

CH: Well, we had a real good escort. We had the P-51 escort most of the time.

JF: Oh, you did have those.

CH: And they took care of all of that. We were a really really fortunate group, when we were there. And before we got

there they'd had a lot of casualties. But we were very very lucky. We had a good [S group?].

JF: So you never fired your 50s at any enemy aircraft?

CH: One time we got -- almost got a chance. We think it was a jet plane that the Germans had spotting. They spotted our attitude and speed and altitude. But he was going across so fast, and he was out of our range for our group.

JF: Son of a gun.

CH: [He was behind us?]

JF: Your group, based upon what I read, received two Distinguished Unit Citations. Do you remember those missions?

CH: No, not sure.

JF: One -- I forget what they were, exactly, but -- What about -- I understand your group was also at Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge?

CH: That was after -- well, the Battle of the Bulge was before we got there.

JF: I see.

CH: Before I got in the group.

CH: But they did have about a thousand-plane raid up to lead into that, before the Normandy thing. But that was before my time.

JF: Before your time. And when did you get to England?

CH: We got there August -- well, July. We flew over July the fourth, and then we were in their base in July.

JF: Was it 1940 --

CH: Their first mission was always the fourth.

JF: Nineteen forty-four?

CH: Forty-four. First mission we flew was August 4, 1944. And the last one's about 19th of December, 1944.

JF: OK. You know, I always wondered: How much time was there between missions?

CH: Well, sometimes we flew two days in a row; sometimes every other day. It was --

JF: No set pattern?

CH: They may have had a pattern, but they don't tell us! (laughs). They didn't tell us about it if they had a pattern. But I know we'd fly maybe today and then tomorrow and one might skip a day or two. And we'd fly again, maybe every other day for a while.

JF: So if July or August was your first mission, when was your last?

CH: It was about, I think about 19th of December. Around the middle of December.

JF: So you were over in England then for about 6 months almost? 5, 6 months?

CH: Yes. July until December, yes.

JF: OK. And you never really had any hairy missions, other than the one you described?

CH: Just the one, and that was the worst one. Yes, I had, in Ardmore, Oklahoma, in that training, we were getting ready to ship out and the pilot came to me and he said could you go take the armors test. I said yes, but that supposed to be Waist Gunner's job. And he said yes, neither one of them can pass the test (laughs) and we've got to have [armored?] gunner; can you go take it? I -- Yeah. So he said go down. It was in Building 10 or something; go down there and take the test. And I went down there. It was easy. I don't know why they couldn't pass it. Maybe they didn't want to. But I went and took the test.

JF: What kind of specialized knowledge did you have to have?

CH: You're supposed to be the one to check all of the guns, make sure they're all working, make sure that the bombs seem to be loaded right. And then on the bomb drop, you're supposed to check, be sure they all drop. And if they didn't you're supposed to have -- mechanically release them. And that's all you had to know, is what to do to do that. And so it wasn't any big problem, I didn't think. So I'll go take the test, but I still want to fly Ball Turret, and he said that's okay.

JF: You requested that, Ball Turret?

CH: Oh yes, yes.

JF: Why?

CH: I liked it. That was ideal. As far as I was concerned, that was the ideal thing.

JF: Really?

CH: The tail gunner -- the bombardier was the nose gunner. And the tail gunner, and then the [upper?] turret gunner was the engineer, crew chief.

JF: What about the two waist gunners?

CH: Well, we only carried one on our missions.

JF: I see.

CH: And they could go to either side. And he's on his feet back there all the day long and I'm sitting comfortable! (laughs). Top turret gunner has a seat to sit on, too.

JF: There was actually a seat there?

CH: Yes, he had a little stool, kind of, stool to sit on. But mine was a real comfortable seat, sitting there, all propped up.

JF: Laid back.

CH: Laid back. That's my guns up here, have to turn the turret. Go down, up.

JF: And you enjoyed the scenery.

CH: Oh yes, you could see everything.

JF: What about the formations going over. Other than your aircraft, what about -- did anybody else have any difficulty with flak, or fighters, German fighters?

CH: Oh there's -- some of them got hit, but during the time I was there we didn't lose a single plane out of our formation that we knew about.

JF: Really?

CH: Some of them may -- when the, when we got banged up so bad, it was reported that we landed at this other base due to bad weather. It wasn't bad weather! (laughs). It was bad conditions of the plane, and I think it must have loosened up a rivet in that thing.

JF: Did they repair it?

CH: I don't think so.

JF: So you got a new airplane.

CH: Well, that was left at a British base; I don't know what happened to it.

JF: But did you get a new airplane?

CH: We flew different ones all the time.

JF: Oh, you did fly different ones? I didn't realize that.

CH: Yes, we didn't -- sometimes we'd fly the same plane two or three times, but not always assigned to the same plane.

JF: So your last mission was in December 1944.

CH: Yes.

JF: It was a good six or seven months before the Germans surrendered, so what did you do from that point on?

CH: Came back to the States and was sent to Santa Ana, California for re-assignment. And I got re-assigned to Laredo Air Force Base to be trained to as a gunnery instructor on B-29. I didn't want to be an instructor, and I didn't want to fly on the 29.

JF: Why?

CH: It was new, it was fast, and it was scary. They were having too many crashes. Pilots didn't know how to fly them. It was too fast for what they were -- the bomber pilots used to 300 miles an hour; now you're going 600 miles an hour.

JF: Yes, big difference.

CH: It was a big difference. So I just didn't feel comfortable flying and didn't want to. So after about 6 weeks in that school, I got re-assigned to Randolph Air Force Base, to Officers' Training Squadron -- supply. I was a supply clerk in the Officers' Training Squadron until I got discharged. It was gravy train (laughs).

JF: What year did you get discharged, or what date?

CH: Nineteen-forty-five.

JF: Do you remember the month?

CH: Oh...October 26.

JF: October '45, OK. And then you came back to Texas.

CH: Yes. Came back to Austin.

JF: What did you do then?

CH: Then I went back to high school to finish my high school training, and while I was there, one of my schoolmates was working at a funeral home south Austin, Art [Welkey?] Funeral Home. And he said I need an ambulance attendant out here. You want to go? You want to work? I said sure. So I went out, took a part time job as an ambulance attendant. Except about two days later, I wasn't an attendant; I was the driver! (laughs). How did that happen? Nobody else here can drive. Well, so I did that for a while and I thought, this is kind of interesting; I think I'd like to go get my license. So I applied to Dallas Institute of Mortuary Science. Went through the school up there.

JF: Where was that?

CH: In Dallas: 3901 Worth Street, Dallas. Yes, I went, and then while I was there I got married to a gal I'd met here in Austin. She was from Virginia, and we knew each other maybe three months before we got married, but the marriage lasted for 56 years.

JF: Really? Was that -- That was after you got out of the army?

CH: Yes. She died 10 years ago. It was a whirlwind romance, but it lasted a long time.

JF: Fifty-six years is a long time. So then you became --

CH: I was a licensed funeral director and embalmer then.

JF: Right here in Austin.

CH: Yes. Yes, I worked one year in Palestine; one year in Houston; about one year in McAllen. Rest of it is all right here in Austin.

JF: And you finally wound up leaving the --

CH: Yes. I got out of that and decided I wanted to do something else. When I started to go back to school after I got out of the army, I wanted to be an architect. But I would have to spend about two more years in high school taking courses that I never had before. So many physics and a lot of math courses that I hadn't had, and chemistry. So I --

JF: You were married at that time, also.

CH: No, not yet.

JF: Oh, not yet.

CH: No, that was in 1946, 1947, went back to school. But I [thought about?] going to Texas before going to architect school, but too many things I didn't have in high school that I would --

JF: Yes, that's a long course of study.

CH: It's a long, hard course. And they weren't graduating very many of them anyway, about 1%, so I'm not that good a student to start with (laughs). I better just leave it alone.

JF: So what did you do then?

CH: Well, I just went on and went to work for the funeral home; got my license there.

JF: Right, after the funeral home.

CH: And after that I -- while I was deciding what I want to do I took a job at 7-11; store manager at 7-11 for about five years. And then I (inaudible) training in high school. I thought, I'd like to get back in training, and so I did.

JF: So you joined Whitley?

CH: That's when I got to Whitley.

JF: How long were you with them?

CH: I started with them in 1978. I graduated -- retired -- in 1991. And I went back to work for them. Worked until 2007.

JF: Wow.

CH: (laughs) So, I'd stayed -- never had retired, I'd have had about 30 years; close.

JF: That's great. OK, Clint, that pretty much concludes our interview unless you want to mention something else about your service.

CH: Well, I don't know if it's anything --

JF: Have you ever kept track of any of your crew members?

CH: One of them came by here to see me one time. It was the navigator. He was from Utah. The pilot was from California. Co-pilot was from Wyoming. Navigator was from Utah. And radio operator was from Saginaw, Michigan. Tail gunner was from Camden, New Jersey. And the top turret gunner was, I think, from Chicago. I think he was from Chicago; can't remember for sure. And then the Waist Gunner, I can never remember where he was from. I don't know if he ever said. But he was Portuguese, or his family was Portuguese; he was part Portuguese, so I don't know where those people were settled. Somewhere up in the Midwest there somewhere. Anyway, I don't remember him ever saying where he was from. They all knew where I was from; I was from Texas, so I was Tex (laughs).

JF: They call you Tex?

CH: Yes. I just realized, just a couple of days ago after I talked to you, I realized, I was about 18 years old, 19. Everybody else on that crew was 30 or 40 years old.

JF: Really?

CH: I never even think about it. I was the only kid on the block.

JF: That's pretty unusual, isn't it?

CH: Yes, I would, I'd think so.

JF: Well, what about the other people in that gunnery school, were they --

CH: A lot of them were young, yes, but not on our crew.

JF: So they were all in their twenties and thirties?

CH: Our top turret gunner was 41, 42. He had worked as crew chief on the ground crew, regular army, for several years. And then he applied for aerial, aerial -- as cadet school. And tail gunner was in his forties and the waist gunner was about 40. The other waist gunner was from Georgia; he was about 25 or 30. And the navigator was about 30. He and the bombardier both were young.

JF: They were both officers, right?

CH: Yes. Pilot wasn't much over 30. I thought, my gosh, I didn't even realize that I was the only kid there. Rest of them was all grown, some of them married.

JF: Man, that's interesting. Anything else?

CH: Well, I had -- we got awarded the European Theater Ribbon with two Bronze Stars. I don't know why -- how we got two Bronze Stars. I got an air medal, Silver Star. I knew about that, how we got that, but ...

JF: Those two stars might be the Distinguished Unit Citations that I referred to earlier.

CH: Maybe so. Might have been.

JF: They were both missions over Germany, and they were within three months, or four months apart. Probably before you got there, or else you would have remembered those, I'm sure.

CH: Yes, I think so. Maybe just because --

JF: But they give those to the entire unit.

CH: The whole unit must have --

JF: Of course, you were part of the unit, so you got --

CH: Part of the unit so that might be the reason. But I know the Air Medal, you get one gold leaf cluster, then two, and then four, and after four they give you a Silver Star. I had that, Silver Star.

JF: So that's based on the number of missions.

CH: Yes.

JF: OK. Well, thanks for sharing.

CH: Glad to.

JF: I certainly want to thank you for your time today and also for your service, Clint.

CH: Well, thank you. I was glad to do it.

END OF AUDIO FILE