THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

The Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview With
Travis I. Smith, Jr.
Wharton, TX
February 12, 2015
41st Fighter Squadron
35th Fighter Group
5th Fighter Command
5th Air Force
Pacific

My name is Richard Misenhimer: Today is February 12, 2015. I am interviewing Mr. Travis I. Smith, Jr., by telephone. His phone number is 979-532-3853. His address is 1403 Linwood Drive, Wharton, TX 77488. 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:

Travis, 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. Smith:

Well, this is a pleasure.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, what is your middle initial?

Mr. Smith:

"I"

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, the first thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the museum to make sure this is OK with you. So let me read this to you. (agreement read) Is that OK with you?

Mr. Smith:

Yes, sir.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the next thing I'd like 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's moved or something. So do you have a son or daughter or some one we could contact if we needed to?

Mr. Smith:

I have a daughter who lives here in town, yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What is her name?

Mr. Smith:

Nancy Ondrias.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you have a phone number for her?

Mr. Smith:

979-533-3159.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you have an address?

Mr. Smith:

No, I don't.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's fine. The phone number is the main thing.

Mr. Smith:

They're on a route and I don't know what it is.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's fine. Hopefully we'll never need it but you never know. What is your birth date?

Mr. Smith:

March 30, 1923.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where were you born?

Mr. Smith:

Dallas.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What were your mother's and father's first names?

Mr. Smith:

My daddy's name was Travis, I'm a Junior and my mother's name was Ella Beth but she went by Beth.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Smith:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, you grew up during the Depression. How did the Depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Smith:

That's really all I knew. I don't know that it affected me as compared to what was before. We lived in Dallas. We lived there five years and then we moved to Yoakum and were there about a year and all of the railroads left Yoakum so we picked up and came to Wharton. My dad had a tire store in Yoakum and that's what he moved to Wharton.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was he able to do OK during the Depression?

Mr. Smith:

Well, the Depression started about that time, 1928 or 1929. In 1932 was when they say, but 1929

was the Crash. As I say, I was just beginning to realize things that were happening that would affect us, so I don't say we had good times but being a small merchant you know it did impact, sure.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you able to have a garden or anything like that?

Mr. Smith:

No. Neither one of them were agricultural.

Mr. Misenhimer:

OK, no garden, no chickens, nothing like that.

Mr. Smith:

None of that, no, we lived in town. At that time Wharton was three or four thousand population.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Where did you go to high school?

Mr. Smith:

I went to high school in Wharton. All of my schools were in Wharton.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Smith:

1940.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you do when you graduated?

Mr. Smith:

I went to college at Sul Ross College in Alpine.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How long were you there?

Mr. Smith:

I was there two years.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What were you studying?

Mr. Smith:

I think they called it liberal arts. I had no idea what I wanted to do.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, on December 7, 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Do you recall hearing about that?

Mr. Smith:

Oh, yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How did you hear and where were you?

Mr. Smith:

I had been, it was on a Sunday and I had been to a movie. Don't ask me what the movie was but we got out, I don't know, in the middle of the afternoon and my roommate was in a little military garden that they had at the college and we ran into his instructor who at that time told us that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I'm sure we were like everybody else, where the hell's Pearl Harbor? But that was when we first heard abou. it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you heard that, how did you think that would affect you?

Mr. Smith:

I couldn't say exactly what I thought but I knew there would be a drastic effect on me. I had started thinking of taking a flying course that the government instituted. They called it the CPT, Civilian Pilot Training course. I was sort of in the middle of that and I'd always wanted to get in the Air Force so I figured that's what I'd do.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You were eighteen when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Mr. Smith:

Yes, and at that time you had to be nineteen to get in the Air Force as a pilot.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So when did you join the Air Force?

Mr. Smith:

Joined the Air Force in September of 1942.

Mr. Misenhimer:

OK, do you have a date?

Mr. Smith:

September 22.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's close enough. You went into the Air Force?

Mr. Smith:

Not immediately. I had been to the recruiting office and at the time I enlisted, everybody in that enlistment group, what did they call it, college deferment. For one semester. Not wanting to go back to Sul Ross because it was so darn poor out there, I went to A&M and at that time I took the deferment and then started trying to see if they couldn't speed it up but that never came about, so

we, the group of us at A&M, had done the same thing that I did. We were called up in February of 1943. That's when that semester was over.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was that the Air Force then?

Mr. Smith:

Yeah. I became a Private in the Air Force although I'd gotten the Air Cadet classification but we were brought in as Privates. Went to Wichita Falls at Sheppard Field for basic training.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You went through basic training. What all happened at that basic training?

Mr. Smith:

There was a lot of marching and a lot of people related it to boot camp but it wasn't that bad you know. Not any hazing or rough stuff. We just went through the whole process of learning to march and obey orders and I'm sure we went to classes but I don't know what. I do remember we were in the gas chamber several times.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any kind of weapons training?

Mr. Smith:

We learned how to present arms, you know, in marching but we didn't shoot anything.

Mr. Misenhimer:

About how long was that?

Mr. Smith:

We were there for about three months. It wasn't very extensive.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Smith:

Then we were sent to a brand-new program, another college thing. This was a CTD, a college training detachment. We were sent to the University of Arkansas. We were there for three or four months. Took classes, actually college classes, geometry and weather, math and history type classes. I don't know if they did this to everybody in the flying program so if they really wanted us to get that type education. But that wasn't bad duty at all. Arkansas is a beautiful place, Fayetteville. This was a way to occupy a surplus of cadets.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you stay in there?

Mr. Smith:

First month we lived in the basement of a gym because we were the first class. Then by that time they had built some barracks. We lived in the barracks.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the food there?

Mr. Smith:

I'm sure it was good but I couldn't give you a clue. I don't even know where we ate. That memory is gone.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Smith:

One thing they stressed there was physical education. We did a lot of running, lot of obstacle

course work, and we had intermural touch football teams. I'm sure we had some military training also but I don't recall that. Then at the last part of it, we got in ten hours of flying. Since I'd already got my pilot's license, it was just repetitive type thing.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, you got your private license when?

Mr. Smith:

Well, I got it in the program at Sul Ross, the Civil Pilot Training.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you took your training at Sul Ross, what kind of plane did you fly there?

Mr. Smith:

I flew an Aeronica, little two-place job like the Piper Cub.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Aeronica Champ?

Mr. Smith:

Yeah, must have been the Champ. It was tandem, back to back.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, that's the Champ, right.

Mr. Smith:

Yes. Then several of us, I think we flew Pipers. I mean in Arkansas.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So you had to do the same thing over that you'd already done.

Mr. Smith:

Yeah. It doesn't hurt. When you're flying, you can't get too much. In flying, the more hours you

have, the longer you're going to live. On my first solo, at Sul Ross of all things, I ground-looped that sucker. The instructor said I had an ongoing problem of using enough right rudder. Finally solved that at Primary.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now, tell me about your flying training there in the Air Force.

Mr. Smith:

Well, from Arkansas we went to San Antonio to Lackland and the first part of tests for classification and we went through a bunch of psychological testing and physical training and it was there that they tested you to become an air crew member. They washed out a lot of kids there. Then once you were being air crew worthy, then they tried to classify you as a pilot or navigator or bombardier. All of these were with the idea of going through and getting your commission, you know, in your specialty, getting your wings in other words. From classification we went across the road into pre-flight. We had already been, from classification they separated as pilots and navigators and bombardiers. Fortunately I got what I wanted which was to be a pilot. At pre-flight we got into more detailed studies there, basic engines, aerodynamics, weather, identification, airplane identification, and shipping identification and code. I think we had to do eight words a minute.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Of the Morse code?

Mr. Smith:

Yeah. I finally got it but like a lot of things if you concentrated too hard, you kind of overshot it. I know if you looked at these little hologram pictures, you'd seen, then if you flexed your eyes, then all of a sudden the picture pops out. That was the way code was with me, one day it clicked.

From there, from pre-flight then, we were designated as pilots and were sent to our first primary school. The group I was in, we went to Cimarron Field which was at Union, Oklahoma. That is about five miles from Oklahoma City, south of Oklahoma City. Then we flew the PT-19 which was a Fairchild with an in-line engine, had a couple hundred horsepower, I would think. We got in about 70 or 80 hours. Our instructor was a civilian pilot named Edwin Sparks, crusty old guy. Of course all of the test pilots were military and we lived in ...I think they had three different classes there at one time. I've forgotten. In other words, when you came in you were newbies but that's what you were and you had to run everywhere and hold your arms out and play like you were an airplane and all of that. Finally got out of that category and pretty soon you were an upperclassman. But at primary you really learned the basics of flying and even though I had my license they sort of tore it down and you started all over. You had to learn the Air Force way. By that time you're flying at a thousand feet and turn it 360 degrees and try to come around and get a bump in your prop wash coming around. That was basic acrobatics, rolls and just mainly barrel rolls, chandelles, loops and things like that. Got in 70 or 80 hours. Then there again we lost quite a few out of that bunch who washed out. Then from there I went to Independence, Kansas. All of this was in the central training command which was headquartered at Randolph Field, San Antonio. At Independence, we then flew 40 and 50 hours in our planes and we were getting into the bigger stuff. Acrobatics increased, did cross country, and night flying as I recall it. I had one unique thing: most of the basic training planes were the old worthless PT-13. They called them the Vibrators.

Mr. Misenhimer:

The Vultee Vibrator?

Mr. Smith:

Yes. They was Vultee Consolidated. What we flew in, in basic was the BT-14 which was an American plane and it was just a smaller AT-6. Then there was one base in the country that had any left. At Randolph all of the guys that flew earlier had flown the BT-9. The 14 was a little bigger version of the 9. But as opposed to the Vibrator, the 13, the 13 had quite a wide landing gear. The BT-14 had quite a narrow landing gear and the whole crew in charge of the base loved those airplanes and if you, you could ground loop them but if you got a wingtip or anything, you were out of there. So I say this, we learned how to land the narrow landing gears or we were gone. From there we went to advanced where we flew the AT-6s. That was at Eagle Pass, the 6s. Most of the other men had flown the BT-13 at their basic, they all had a heck of a time converting to the narrow landing gears of the 6. But as I say, having flown the BT-14 we didn't have that problem figuring it out. At advanced we got into acrobatics. I think we did some loose formation flying. We did cross country, we did night landings and take offs and at auxiliary fields. Did night cross country and instruments. It was instruments that all of the instrument planes were BT-13s so I did get to fly it a little bit. At each one of these we got 70 or 80 hours. We normally lasted around two months. Then in May of 1944 that's when we graduated and got our wings at Eagle Pass.

Mr. Misenhimer:

May of 1944?

Mr. Smith:

Yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you commissioned a Second Lieutenant?

Mr. Smith:

As a matter of fact I was commissioned a Flight Officer. That was the thing. They were trying to emulate the British. Their Air Force at one time had Flight Sergeants. They did away with the Flight Sergeants but then they said "We're getting way too many commissioned officers" so they instituted a program of Flight Officers program.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What insignia did a Flight Officer wear?

Mr. Smith:

We had a gold bar with a little blue line across the middle.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the pay of a Flight Officer compared to a Second Lieutenant?

Mr. Smith:

It was basically the same and when you went overseas you got an extra stipend that the officers didn't get so you actually made more money than they did. But it was a little blow to the ego. One of the ways they were determined, one of the clerks in the office at Eagle Pass told me that they picked the graduating guys and there were some two hundred of us and every sixth guy was named a Flight Officer. I know some of the biggest screw-ups got their commission and I know some of the best pilots and best guys I knew got Flight Officer. But what did, it kept me back a year from the commission cycle and years later I stayed in the Reserves and years later I missed being up for Bird Colonel by a week and a half because of that. Not that I would have made Bird but chances were I would have. As it was I retired as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Smith:

From Eagle Pass we went to Robbins Field, Kansas at Winfield, Kansas, forty miles south of Wichita. At Wichita you know they built, Boeing had a big plant there. They built the B-29s there. North American had a P-51 plant there. It was a booming town. There we flew two different types of airplanes. We flew the P-40 and after we graduated at Eagle Pass we got in ten hours of P-40 time. That was individual time to get familiar with the airplane. That had roughly 1200 horsepower. The other airplane we flew was the P-47, the Thunderbolt. There was a salt flat in northwestern Oklahoma and they made a gunnery range out of it. We would fly the P-40 over the salt flats. We would practice our low altitude navigation, a couple hundred feet. It was 150 miles away and there we did dive-bombing and target strafing. I would say we put in at least 40 hours doing that, flying the P-40. I lost two very good friends at that stage of our training. One had engine trouble and made it back to the base but on his final approach his engine quit on him and his nose was down and he stalled out. The other one flew in dive-bombing over the salt flats, failed to pull out in time. Got target fixation I guess. Then our P-47s, that was quite a drastic change from the P-40 which was in line, to the 47. The P-40 weighed about 7,000 pounds and the 47 weighed 13, 000. It was a big airplane but it was a beautiful thing to fly. It was easy to land, easy to take off. There we got into fighter tactics, very close formations and then the finger four formation that the Germans used. The British finally accepted it in 1944. You're familiar with that, right?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh, yes, I'm familiar with that, right.

Mr. Smith:

You've got the leader and the wingman and then on the other side you have the element leader and his wingman.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Right, right.

Mr. Smith:

Fly element basically. We did lots of aerial combat using that formation. Then we also got a lot of high altitude interception. The B-29s were hitting their stride and they made a lot of cross country over or in the vicinity of our airbase and we would intercept them on the way out or on the way in. Gave everybody practice. We did aerial gunnery down at Galveston at Schoales Field which is the Galveston airport. From there we flew aerial gunnery. Targets were pulled by B-26s, twin-engine bombers and they were crewed by WASPs, girl pilots and after getting out of there, then we went to Harding Field which was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We were staged out of there. We got there in like November 1944 and they started going out and the first batch went to England and then another batch, there were probably a hundred of us pilots, ready for overseas shipment and the final bunch, there were 26 of us left and three of them went to Italy and six of us went to the Pacific. We left for, we were sent to Hamilton Field out in California. From there we got in C-87, which was a converted B-24 and it had twelve or fourteen airline type seats in them and we flew from there to, the first flight was from California to Hickam Field in Hawaii. Then we flew down to a field in Tarawa, you know, where they did that bad, bloody landing and then from there we went to Los Negros, north of New Guinea and from there into the far western tip of New Guinea to the island of Biak. That was sort of a reception center. From Biak we went back to eastern New Guinea and we started flying P-47s on training missions. That was where we got our first combat because by that time we had bypassed a lot of Jap areas but they were still the force so that's where we would go on training missions and drop live bombs and shoot whatever was down in the jungle. Didn't get shot at. We were there about a month I guess, all

told. Then in February of 1945 we went up to the Philippines.

Around February of 1945, February or March. We went to Luzon. You know the initial landing was at Leyte and when I got there, Manila had just been cleared, had just been taken. They flew off of a little strip called, Nangolpan. I flew I think one mission in a P-47 and the reason they had trained in 47s and were still there was that our squadron was a P-47 squadron. They had been P-39s. The Bell Airacobra in early New Guinea days, and then they converted to P-47s. But just as I got there, they began converting to the P-51s. At about that same time we moved and ended up at Clark Field which was outside of Manila. We started flying missions, the Japs were building up northern part of Luzon and that was part of the Philippines and there was pretty intensive land fighting up there and it was mountainous so it was slow going and a lot of the roads had a lot of s-turns in them and that made a lot of ambushes on each turn so each Jap position had to be hit with bombs and strafed, which is what we did. We made flights up to Formosa which is Taiwan now and there we escorted bombers, B-25s and B-24s. Did some bombing and strafing, but not much. Then we went out as escort for submarines and for planes from air search rescue. Okinawa was invaded…Iwo Jima was in February of 1945 and then Okinawa was invaded in April.

Mr. Misenhimer:

April 1 of 1945 was Okinawa.

Mr. Smith:

We got there just as it was being secured. We were the 5th Air Force unit to get there to Okinawa. They had two main fields, one was Kadena and the other was Yontan and that was the main base. They added Kadena later but we flew off Yontan for a while. The capital of Okinawa was Naha, right at the southern tip. About 20 miles from Naha there was a little area that the Japs had put up a small fighter base called Machanita. That's where our camp was, right on the beach.

The strip was about a half mile up the bluff which overlooked the East China Sea. They had a 30-mile drive up the Yontan until we got Machanita finished and then we started flying off of it. We did no ground support in Okinawa but we had a lot of flights up to Kyushu, Japan, the southern island. We'd bomb and strafe bases up there and we did fighter sweeps and escorted B-25s and B-24s. Did missions to Shanghai, China, to Korea and then missions that again were escorts for air/sea rescue, give them air cover. Did 56-57 combat missions all together that included fighter sweeps and after that the war was over. My squadron moved up to Japan in October of 1945, I think it was October or November. But in the meantime it was typhoon season and we had two or three really fierce typhoons. Last one, one of the ones that took a lot of the Navy planes or ships. In the last one I ended up in a jeep wreck and was in the hospital a couple of months and in the meantime by the time I got out my squadron had moved on to Japan.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What happened to you?

Mr. Smith:

Got in a jeep wreck. Broke my shoulder and cut my head. I finally got up there and I was there for Christmas. It was late November or December of 1945. Became part of the occupation. Did some flying but not that much and anything I did do…at that time the squadron, at that time I was assigned to the 5th Air Force and then that broke down into the 5th Fighters Command. In the 5th Fighter Command there were five or six fighter groups and I was assigned to the 35th Fighter Group which was probably the second oldest group in the 5th Air Force. They assigned our little group to the 41st fighter squadron.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What squadron was that?

Mr. Smith:

41st.

Mr. Misenhimer:

41st, OK.

Mr. Smith:

Yeah, four-one. They had the 39th, the 40th and 41st squadrons in the 35th group. Like I say that whole group was one of the older groups in the 5th Air Force.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When did you get assigned to that 41st fighter squadron?

Mr. Smith:

It was in early 1945.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Early 1945, OK. Is that the only one you were in over there?

Mr. Smith:

Only one? Yes. The 41st.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You were in that the whole time, OK. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Mr. Smith:

While we were in Japan by that time they had sent so many guys home and were reorganizing and a lot of guys were trying to decide whether to stay in or get home or whatever so the squadrons were pretty much merged into one group and they still had our designation but all activities were done as group activities. So we had a lot of group formations which would entail 18 to 24 planes. We did a lot of formation flying in that category. Four abreast, boring holes in

the air. In February 1946 I got my orders to go home. I applied to go home. The Colonel wanted me to stay and I said I better go home. Got home and went to Fort Sam and got discharged, joined the Reserves, came home and messed around for three months, four months and ended up at the University of Texas in September 1946 with a tennis scholarship. Got in 1946 and graduated in August 1948.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then what happened?

Mr. Smith:

Well, a friend of mine on the tennis team was from Corpus and you might be aware of the Weil family. They have a grocery company but they service a lot of the ships that came into the harbor. Anyway we went into the advertising business, inadvisably I would say, and lasted four or five or six months and decided we'd break up the partnership because we weren't doing very good. Got a job with a Corpus company but they, are you aware of the Flato Company there?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, I am.

Mr. Smith:

Well, it was with the Flato. They had a big hardware, wholesale and retail. They had opened eight stores in Houston. They were like Litchenstein Stores except they didn't have clothing, just hardware. I was in the advertising department there for four years and ended up advertising manager. In the meantime the Flato Company had dealers and it just so happened that my dad was one of the dealers in Wharton. So I decided well, since I'm in the business and he was wanting to probably get out. He'd been in it a long time. We moved to Wharton in 1951. Went

into the business and retired and we shut the business down in 1993. That's pretty much it. 42 years later.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What date did you leave to go to Hawaii? Roughly.

Mr. Smith:

Roughly February of 1945. We just stopped there for about three hours. So they could refuel and get some sandwiches and stuff on and we got in and headed out for Tarawa. The Pacific Ocean is a big dude.

Mr. Misenhimer:

OK. It sure is, right. When you were down there in New Guinea or wherever, did you ever have any dogfights with the Japanese airplanes?

Mr. Smith:

I did not. In fact I never had any, period. The Japs had pretty well moved out. They had areas that were encapsulated like Weewak. We used to go to Weewak but there were forty thousand Japs there. They had those little enclaves all up and down New Guinea where they just bypassed them. The Air Force was gone by then.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So you never had any aerial combat then?

Mr. Smith:

I had no aerial combat. I saw some but when we got to Japan we did fighter sweeps and we'd go up the east side and one of the other squadrons would go up the west side. Seemed like every time the other squadron, even if we reversed the missions, we never did meet them and some of

the other guys did. But they were obviously holding back for the invasion that they knew was going to come.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What would you consider your most frightening time over there?

Mr. Smith:

In the Philippines at Clark Field I was taking off and when I started to turn, I found my aileron controls were frozen. I had to do turns with the rudder. I made a 180 and landed downwind. I hit a bump on takeoff and my seat went down and rested on the control column for the ailerons. In flying, on Okinawa they were in the process of getting the airfield as I say, an airstrip, which was previously a Japanese strip and made it longer and a little bit wider and they did a lot of dynamiting. There were Japs hiding in all of the little caves around there. Okinawa was just a honeycomb of caves. All of the burials, many of them are done in caves. There were lots of places for them to hide. The dynamiting would drive them out of the caves and we were just down the bluff and our camp was on the bay, I mean on the beach. Water wasn't twenty or thirty feet away. They would come through our camp and go out into the water. I don't know if they could swim over to China but that's what they'd do and in some instances they all had knives and machetes. If they were apprehended, our tents were probably three feet off the ground, so they could go by and kick you or something like that. We could hear sand crabs out in what we called the ding weed, the brush. You always figured here comes a Jap through. It happened some but not in our area, not in our squadron. But I've got pictures of some of them that did make the water and were apprehended out in the water and we all got up and shot at them. That's when a couple of guys went out and brought three bodies of them in.

Flying was I think the biggest fear was…well every take off was hairy as we had a lot of fuel and bombs and stuff. If you lost an engine you had a big problem. The fear of engine quitting over water. We lost some guys doing that where they turned around and came back but never made it. Even though there was air/sea rescue there I'd say they didn't get half of them. So if you read the book or saw the movie "Unbroken" you know that's what you were going to end up on a raft or something.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Was your plane ever hit by ground fire?

Mr. Smith:

I missed that, too. We were shot at quite a bit, particularly in the Philippines where we would linger over an area so the Japs had plenty of time to get ready. They had I'm sure they had 40 mm pom-pom anti-aircraft and then they had the heavy machine guns and rifles so we lost some guys in the squadron but not my airplane.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the morale in your outfit?

Mr. Smith:

It was excellent. One guy that sort of got upset but in fact he was one of them who was lost coming back from Shanghai but by and large was good. We moved into, when we got the squadron down to a tent and then whoever was in that tent became your best buddies. Had some great guys, friendships that lasted a long time. But morale was excellent.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you think of the officers you had over you?

Mr. Smith:

I thought everybody was first class. Last squadron commander, only thing he did that was a little crazy was when they dropped the bomb on Nagasaki, a day and a half later we flew a mission over there and he wanted to sightsee so we got down to six thousand feet and leisurely circled Nagasaki. Of course it was still dusty and murky in the air and I'm sure there was lots of radiation in it. Nobody ever that I know of, it didn't hurt anybody. That didn't show very good judgment but everybody was great.

Mr. Misenhimer:

On April 12, 1945 President Roosevelt died. Did you all hear about that?

Mr. Smith:

We heard about it. I think it had no effect on our performance at all. Just something, just another casualty. Looked at it that way. I never was a particular fan of him but that didn't…to change the subject, he was the leader.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes, and nobody knew who Truman was.

Mr. Smith:

Not really. I can't say that I did. So when Roosevelt ran in 1944 for his fourth term and in 1944 I was busy trying to get my wings and learn what I was going to have to learn. I don't know really that we kept abreast of things that were happening in the military either. We were just pretty concentrating on getting our wings and then flying.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now on May 8, 1945 Germany surrendered. Did you all hear about that?

Mr. Smith:

Yeah. There again we had our own war to fight and it was just another event in the war. We didn't shoot the guns or anything like that. That came after the Japs quit.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When Japan surrendered on August 15, did you have a celebration then?

Mr. Smith:

We did. We were on Okinawa and as I say, we were right on the beach of the East China Sea. That's the side that most of the landings occurred when they landed on Okinawa and there were a lot of ships out in the water. It wasn't a harbor, it was just a long beach and everybody started shooting, you know. We had an ack-ack battery near us and they started shooting and we got our pistols and started shooting. Then pretty soon the Navy started shooting. Unfortunately all that stuff had to come down. We ended up in the foxholes. Had a couple of guys hit, enlisted men.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I understand there were twenty-five people killed at Okinawa with falling shrapnel.

Mr. Smith:

I wouldn't have doubted it. I have a picture that the Stars and Stripes published and it's just a line of white streaks going in the air, all over the whole thing. That was quite an exhibition. Another notable item were those typhoons that we had. Of course, I'm used to the hurricanes down here, been through a bunch of them. To my way of thinking they don't hold a candle to a typhoon. We were right on the beach. You would have thought that a major typhoon would have swept us clear out to sea but what saved us, there was a coral reef that was right off the beach and it went out about a half a mile or so into the China Sea so we never got the storm surge that would have gotten us. But the night of the big one, it blew everything away. The wind gauge broke at 160 or 170 mph and then it got worse from then. We ended up spending the night in a six by six or

whatever one of those small Army trucks, you know that had the canvas over them. There were eight or ten of us piled in one of those things in the back. Next day everything was gone. I wondered about my airplane so I went up to the beach and they had lashed five hundred pound bombs, a couple of them, under each wing. Other than being sandblasted, it survived. But the typhoons were something else.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Of the three airplanes you flew, the P-40 and the P-47 and the P-51, which did you like best of those?

Mr. Smith:

I'd have to say the P-51 although the P-47 was really hard to beat. In air combat I would much rather have had the P-51. After the war we did a lot of dogfighting with all of the planes, the Marines and other Air Force types, the 38s. The 51 couldn't always out turn them but if you got in trouble, you know, theoretically, and they were getting ready to out turn you, you could always split us and get the hell out of there and there was no way they were going to catch you. They had such acceleration.

Mr. Misenhimer:

The 51 had longer range, too, didn't it?

Mr. Smith:

Yes, it did but strange to say, just before I joined my squadron in late 1944, they had moved all the way across New Guinea to the western tip of New Guinea and I can't remember the name of the little island, but they got B-24 missions over to Sumatra, Balik Papan, where the big oil place was.

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's on Borneo.

Mr. Smith:

On Borneo, right. There used to be B-24 missions and the Japs were quite active and shot several of them down. So they started figuring out how to get fighter escorts. I'm sure you've heard the story of Lindbergh being in that area. He came over as a representative of I think Lockheed and flew with a couple of the Lockheed groups, the P-38 groups, and he flew combat missions with them and he always came back. Everybody was sweating gas but he still had half a tank, so to speak. So he showed them his flying techniques in order to get more mileage. It involved a high manifold pressure, low rpm in the prop and a low gas mixture. So with that, my squadron flew from the tip of New Guinea over to Borneo and back escorting the B-24s. They did it two or three times in a row, a nine to nine and a half hour mission. They had a ten or fifteen minute dogfight over the target. So you know to say that the 51 had more mileage, you're not saying they did but the 47 could have been adapted, even in Europe, for the Marines. But for some reason the information Lindbergh gave them in the Pacific never made it to Europe. We tried to adapt what he said with the mixtures and everything but the makeup of the Rolls Royce engine, it tended to foul up the plugs. So it would start running rough after about thirty minutes of that kind of settings, so every thirty minutes we would have to firewall the plane and the squadron commander would do it as a squadron and we would burn it out for about thirty seconds, clean the plugs and then go back to our economy cruise. It used a little bit more gas than you would.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I understand that Lindbergh trained P-38 pilots and almost doubled their range.

Mr. Smith:

That's what he did, yes. It would be the same basic changes that we used. Specially the ones over to Borneo.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever hear Tokyo Rose on the radio?

Mr. Smith:

Yes, I did. We enjoyed her music.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I hear she played good music.

Mr. Smith:

In fact when we got to Okinawa, she greeted us, named the 35th Fighter Group. "We're sorry but we're going to decimate you" or something like that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

It was amazing the things she knew.

Mr. Smith:

Yeah. Never knew how she got the information but we had just landed. We landed on Yontan and at night she greeted us.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you crossed the equator, did you have any kind of ceremony or anything?

Mr. Smith:

No. We were on that darned B-24.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, you were flying.

Mr. Smith:

Yeah, we flew. I'm not sure where we crossed it. Is Tarawa still north of it? Probably after we left Tarawa we crossed it. It was 36 hours to get from California to Biak which was the western part of New Guinea.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What ribbons and medals did you get?

Mr. Smith:

I got the Pacific Theater ribbon.

Mr. Misenhimer:

The Asiatic/Pacific they called it.

Mr. Smith:

Yes, got the ribbon with eight battle stars. They were New Guinea. I got one for the Bismarck Archipelago fight even though I wasn't there by that time. The Philippine Liberation, the Offensive against Japan, Offensive against China, the Shanghai mission. I had eight battle stars and the Air Medal. Some of those I just passed through the area. We did fly missions in the Bismarck area when that was still going.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you got out of the service did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life?

Mr. Smith:

Only in my language. I let it slip a little bit at the dinner table a couple of time. But no, I knew I got shot at and went through all of that flying fighter planes. Got some ear problems, sinus. I'm afraid the kids nowadays, I don't know how to describe it. I don't say we were tougher but we didn't have all of the amenities that they have. In that respect we didn't have that many things

taken away from us. We wrote letters and we may hear back in three or four weeks. Now they have cell phones and can tell their families what they are doing. When you take all of that away, I don't know, I have thoughts about that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

During World War II, what was the highest rank you got to?

Mr. Smith:

Second Lieutenant.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You went from Flight Officer to Second Lieutenant.

Mr. Smith:

Yeah. As I say, it took me a whole year to get that back.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you got out, did you use your G.I. Bill for anything?

Mr. Smith:

I did. I used it to go to school. I got my degree at UT, two and a half years. Most of my stuff transferred from Sul Ross to A&M before flight training and then I changed majors at UT. I used it to take instructor flying lessons but I never completed it. I wished I had used it to take piano lessons but I didn't.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you had any reunions?

Mr. Smith:

Oh, yeah. Our first reunion was 1988 which was quite late in the scheme of things. That was 44 or 43 years later. I kept looking for them. Never occurred to me to start one myself. But in 1988

we met, twelve of us met, at Orlando, Florida. I happened to be the youngest one there and I didn't...there was a guy there in the squadron when I was there but I didn't know him. He was an old-timer and left pretty quick. So everything they had to say, it was all news to me. Then the word got out and we started looking for people and we had our last reunion in 2007. The one in 2006 was quite unique. Over the years we met in Orlando, San Antonio, San Francisco, Colorado Springs, St. Louis twice, Oklahoma City. It was a problem finding somebody in each of those areas who would take that responsibility. Because you had to line up hotels, had to have something to do during the day and then you had to have one or two major events. So tried to get them set where bases or important facilities were. In 2006 we had what we thought was going to be our final reunion and sometime in the middle 1990, they activated some training squadrons. That particular one that was in Columbus, Mississippi, they activated the thing and they said now we can give you a number designation or a list of World War II type squadrons if you want to take on their persona. The one in Columbus, Mississippi chose the 41st Fighter Squadron and our emblem was a flying buzz saw. It was a buzz saw blade with wings and it's gone through the statute and everything to get it. They liked that so that's what they chose for their squadron insignia and took on the name 41st Fighter Squadron with all of its warts and everything that went with it. They found out that this was supposed to be our last reunion and they got hold of our people to be and said "Let us host the thing for you." That was just a real wonderful experience because they went out in the town and Columbus, Mississippi, maybe twenty to twenty-five thousand people and got the people all involved and dealerships provided cars and they hosted several events. They were really treated royally out at the base. That was quite an honor and quite an experience. As it turned out, we ended up with one more the next year in St. Louis and I always hoped that the Columbus people didn't hear about it because they thought

theirs was the last. During that time we grew from twelve guys and I think we had four wives that came with them which for the men maybe fifteen or twenty people. Some of the bigger reunions we had fifty or sixty with wives and the children started coming too. That's what keeping them all going now with the children and grandchildren.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you get home from World War II with any souvenirs?

Mr. Smith:

I came back with a Japanese flag I bought and a real pretty kimono. I bought it for my mother and she said, "Oh, how lovely" and put it on the table so I picked it up and when I got married I gave it to my wife and she said "Oh, how lovely" and put it on the table. I didn't get a response out of that. I did bring home some Japanese flight instruments and a Japanese E6B computer which had Japanese on the face of it. At Clark Field they had begun to accumulate Japanese planes that had been captured and crashed. They had a test facility there. Had all of this stuff just laying around so we went and got pictures and got that stuff. No samurai or anything like that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross?

Mr. Smith:

Only at Nadzab, New Guinea which was where we went when we started flying in New Guinea. Had a Red Cross place and it was a training facility so it wasn't real combat although we flew a few combat missions from there. Everything I had with the Red Cross was very favorable. Other places I don't recall. Nobody in Okinawa. I am sure they were in the area but apparently they felt that was sufficient, they didn't need it. We never did see them. Every now and then I hear something bad about them but I don't think it happened in our outfit.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What year did you retire?

Mr. Smith:

1973.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What rank did you have then?

Mr. Smith:

Lieutenant Colonel.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well that's all the questions I have unless you have something else.

Mr. Smith:

No. As I said about the Depression, I guess we were in one but I didn't realize it. I knew I wanted a bicycle and it took three years to get that. Maybe that was because of the Depression. My dad worked back then, little business in a little town when things were bad. Of course that was a farm community at that time basically and back then I might not have got my prices but they needed tires so we worked things out. We didn't have all that much anyway.

Mr. Misenhimer:

All right. Well, Travis, I want to thank you again for your time today and for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Smith:

Well, thank you. Let me ask you: You say you're a native of Alice?

Mr. Misenhimer:

That's correct.

End of Interview

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