

This interview is being conducted on Friday, July 8, 2016 at the home of Bert McKimson. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Bert McKimson, who served in the Army Air Force and is a veteran of World War II. Bert flew a photo reconnaissance plane over Okinawa during the war. He learned of the Veterans History project through me and has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans History Project. Here is his story:

When and where were you born?

Sheldon, Illinois – September 26, 1921.

What did your parents do?

My father was a farmer; my mother was the farmer's wife.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

I had two sisters and three brothers.

Did any of your brothers go into the military?

Yes – all my brothers went into the military.

Were they all in World War II? Were they your age?

They were younger than me. They were drafted.

What did you do before entering the service?

I was on the farm – I was a farmer till my brother got out of high school. Then he took my place as a farmer and I came to Chicago for a job. My brother took over my farm work helping my Dad, and I came to Chicago to seek my fortune.

Okay, so what did you do in Chicago?

I was supposed to have a job. When I got there, with another guy, and he was supposed to have a job for me, but when we got there he didn't have it so we ended up at the airport. So I got a job cleaning airplanes.

Where – at Midway?

Yes. American Airlines.

Oh, American Airlines, okay. So how long did you last there?

About six months. Then I went to the place next door – was Eastern Airlines – as an apprentice mechanic.

Okay. Did you go to any school beyond high school?

No. I couldn't afford it.

Okay. So how long were you at Eastern?

I was at Eastern till my 21st birthday then I went in to enlist.

So then you enlisted – why did you enlist in the service?

I enlisted in the Air Force because I wanted to learn to fly.

Okay, that's a good reason. Did you go with anybody else or on your own?

No, that was on my own.

So you went to a recruiting office, near Midway, do you remember?

No, I went downtown on my 21st birthday because I didn't have to have my parents' permission that way.

Right, right. So you enlisted and you chose the Air Force because you wanted to learn how to fly.

Right.

So how did you actually depart for training camp and where did you go?

First of all, to get into the Air Force you had to have two years of college or pass the test. I didn't have the two years of college, so I took the test and I failed.

I see.

But you could take it a month later, so I studied up on what I missed and I took the test again and passed.

So you retested and you passed.

Yeah, one month later.

So where did they send you then?

Shepherd Field, Texas.

And how did you get to Shepherd Field, by train, by bus?

Train.

And how were your early days of training – how was basic training?

That was a month there and then we were supposed to go to pre-flight school, but they were filled up. So they took the whole class and sent them to college.

Oh.

So I got a semester of college.

How nice!

At Arkansas State. The whole class went to different places; I went there.

And what did you study at Arkansas State?

Just what they, partly Army training and then regular college courses.

That was nice.

Yeah.

So how long was that – six months?

About two months – one semester.

But you had your uniform, you were actually in the Air Force and you were a college student.

Yes.

Where did you live in Arkansas? Were you on a base in Arkansas?

We lived in dorms when in school – just like we were college students.

Really? That's interesting – in the dorms – okay.

The whole class.

How many men was that, would you say.

I don't know how many men; in our group there was probably 200.

Wow~! And they all went to different colleges.

Yes, some of them even went to Northwestern.

No kidding! That's interesting.

They didn't want to lose us; they wanted to keep us, you know, because –

But the war was on - they didn't teach you –

They had enough –

That was 1942 you said you went in –

About a year after the war started when I got in.

When the semester was over, then what happened?

Then we went to pre-flight (school) in California.

Where in California – an Air Force Base in California?

In the middle, I can't remember.

How long did pre-flight school last?

That lasted one month.

And then what happened?

Then you go to primary, which was, that was in California too.

Was that considered specialized training?

That's when you start flying.

And was classroom teaching involved in that as well as flying?

There was classroom, yeah, and learning to fly.

So did you ever actually solo a plane?

Not yet; I took pre-instruction flights and then I was playing basketball and I wrenched my knee and had to go in the hospital, so I was pushed back a class.

Okay.

So from then on it was – you go to primary, then you go to basic and advanced, and then you graduate as a pilot.

Okay, and how long did all that take?

Well, once you start, it's a month in each place – it's about five months till you get your wings.

So you got your wings then?

Yes.

Once you got your wings, where did they send you?

I got my wings, let's see, Arizona. I stayed there. Once you get your wings you decide what kind of plane you want to fly – bombers or fighters.

Okay.

And I put down I wanted multi-engine fighter. They only had one multi-engine fighter and that's a P-38.

And did they give that to you? Did you fly that plane?

Yeah, you can fly while you're there.

And where did you serve? Where did they finally send you?

They didn't send me anywhere yet. I had to decide what I wanted to do. And I told them I wanted to fly a P-38. So they sent me to Photographic School; so I didn't have any guns; I had cameras.

Okay, a camera plane.

So that's how I went through the war.

So where did you fly the plane?

Well, in training I was in California, then we got shipped out. When we go shipped overseas we went to Hawaii first.

How did you get there? What kind of a ship – one of those liberty ships?

Yeah, yeah.

Was it very crowded?

It was, but for Officers –

Oh, you were an officer, you came in as a 2d Lieutenant?

Yeah. After I graduated from Flight School you were made a Lieutenant.

So you went on a liberty ship to Hawaii – what did you do in Hawaii – did you fly around there?

Well, before – we stayed there probably, oh, I don't know, I'd say three months – but we were just waiting; we were scheduled to go to Okinawa – when they got a place for us to land there – and it seemed to me about three months.

So you saw Pearl Harbor right after the war – how it looked.

Yeah.

What base did you stay in Hawaii, do you remember?

We stayed in some dorms from schools.

Oh, so you didn't really stay at an Air Force base.

We were just waiting for the Okinawa Campaign.

Let's get back to getting to Hawaii – any details of the trip over – how was the water – how was the food on the ship?

We flew airplanes from Hawaii –

I know, but before you got to Hawaii –when you were going to Hawaii from the states.

Well, that was on the boat.

Right. How was that trip –

Good.

Do you remember? I mean were there rough seas, hard conditions –

Oh, not going, coming back, when the war was over. Coming back it was rough seas.

Going over was no problem.

Okay. How about the food on board ship; how did you find it?

That was good.

No problem, huh? And how did you sleep; were you in hammocks?

No, we had –

Oh, you were an officer.

We were officers so we had rooms, yeah.

You had a private room or did you share?

I think we had two in a room, if I remember right.

So when you left Hawaii you actually flew your planes to Okinawa.

I flew the P-38 to Okinawa.

What were your duties on Okinawa? Did you fly missions and take pictures?

Yeah, that was my job; take pictures of targets they're going to bomb and then in a day or two take pictures of after the bombs.

Before and after, huh?

Yeah.

So how many of these trips did you make, roughly, while you were there? You were there for two years flying?

No, no, there six months.

Only six months?

The war ended.

Oh, the war ended – so you were just six months in Okinawa.

Yeah. I almost missed it.

So did you see any action when you were taking camera pictures – did you get shot at or anything?

Well, I was 20,000 feet up so I could see puffs of smoke when they were shooting at me.

But you never got shot, did you?

No; never got shot. Yeah, it was towards the end.

Is a P-38 a solo plane or was there somebody else with you?

No, closed.

All by yourself?

Yeah.

And how long were you flying at one time – you went out and came back – how long did that take?

Well, anywhere from half an hour to six hours.

Really? You could fly six hours on your own.

Yeah, you had to have drop tanks – hang on two extra tanks and when you're through you drop them if you need to; if you don't need to you just bring 'em back.

Wow – interesting – I didn't know that.

Yeah.

Did you witness any destruction - well, yes, you did; you took the pictures of it, like after bombings. Where –

I didn't take pictures after our missions – well, there was a whole squad; there were twenty of us – twenty airplanes. And we all were on assignment; when you go, you go out by yourself. Sometimes if it's a place – an area you've never been before, they might send two pilots together.

What was your squadron – like the 25th or –

The 28th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron.

And were you a part of any other bigger group in the Air Force like –

Yeah, we've been – I was in the 7th Air Force, 8th Air Force and 9th Air Force – they took the whole squadron wherever they needed them. We took pictures for all of them.

So at different times you were part of the 7th Air Force, 8th and 9th.

The 8th was in Europe – 7th was Okinawa -- inaudible

And where was the 9th.

The 8th was in Europe; when they finished Europe, they finished that war first, then the 8th came out there and I was in the 8th for awhile. It didn't really matter; I never knew – we were just a squadron by ourselves, and we were available, whoever wanted us.

How did you get to be 1st Lieutenant – just after a certain amount of time you got your other ranking?

Yeah, yeah, you had to complete flight school. If you graduated from flight school, you graduated as a Lieutenant.

But you were a 2nd lieutenant and you ended up being a 1st lieutenant; that's a step higher.

Yeah, after a year or so –

Just for time spent and flights made you got to be 1st lieutenant.

Yeah. Yeah.

How did you like all that? Were you happy with your choice?

I loved it!

How about friendships formed and camaraderie of service – did you meet a lot of guys – are you still in touch with any of those men?

No, not any more.

Like who was your best friend? Who did you meet over there – someone you hung around with a lot?

I was roommate with one guy – when the war was over we flew our airplanes out to the junkyard; he got killed; his airplane caught on fire –

What was his name? Who was he?

I can't remember his name right now; he was my roommate.

What do you mean you threw them in the junkyard – what did you do with the plane?

I don't know; I guess they scrapped them.

Where did you take them to be scrapped?

We just flew them over to where they were gonna scarp 'em –

Where was that?

It was near the coastline; right next to the ocean.

Maybe they figured the planes had enough mileage and did their job –

Well, they probably used them for parts, you know –

Yeah, cannibalized them – wow!

While you were in the service, how were your communications from home?

How did you stay in touch with family and friends?

My mother; she would write.

You weren't married then, were you?

No, I wasn't married.

So you wrote letters?

Yeah.

But you didn't make telephone calls or anything?

No, no.

How about packages – did your mother send you cookies and things like that?

Uh, I think she did once in awhile.

How long would you say it took for a letter to get to Okinawa from home?

I can't remember; probably a week or ten days.

I'm just curious about the mail.

I know it wasn't very fast.

While you were there flying your missions, what were your off-duty pursuits?

On Okinawa?

Yes.

There wasn't much to do there.

I mean was there sports; did the guys play baseball, basketball, team sports?

No, we didn't have room to play baseball. No basketball

Did you play cards?

Played a little cards.

What entertainment did they bring in, movies for you to see or anything?

Occasionally, maybe once a month or so.

But there was no organized sports?

Actually once the war was over, I think maybe two months, and we were on our way home.

Two months after the war ended?

Yeah.

How did you get back home – by what means?

We came by boat all the way.

Was it a liberty boat again?

Yeah?

So how was that trip? You said that one was bad.

Yeah, that one – we came through a storm.

So how was it? Describe it.

It was exciting.

Was the boat really listing a lot?

Yeah. yeah

Did they tell you to stay in quarters – couldn't come out on the deck?

Yeah.

How about eating – did the men get sick to their stomach?

Yeah, we were officers; we were on the deck. The guys in the hold; the enlisted men – they had plenty of trouble. But we made it; we did come through a storm.

How long did that take, from Okinawa back to the states – where did you go to New York?

No, San Francisco.

How long was that whole trip.

I think it was about two weeks.

Was there a thousand men on that ship?

Yeah, a lot of men, but we had officers' quarters; I felt sorry for the guys who were down in the hold.

So you were on Okinawa when the war ended, right?

Yeah.

After you got to San Francisco, how were you discharged?

I can't remember now; I know when I got to Chicago – I don't know if I was discharged here or not.

Well, how did you get from San Francisco to here?

Train.

That took a while too.

Yeah; everything was by train then.

Or bus – a lot of guys went by bus.

How was your reception by family and friends. Did they pick you up at the train station? How did you get home?

My family was farmers –

That's right; they weren't here; they were in Sheldon, Illinois.

Yeah, so the train brought me back to Chicago, and then I had to make my own way to Sheldon.

What did you do as soon as you got home – did you go to Sheldon first?

Yeah, yeah, I went to Sheldon.

And then what did you do – what were your plans after you got out?

Let's see, my first, I just went to Sheldon for maybe a month; then I went back to Chicago to look for a job.

Did you go back to the same job at American Airlines – did they hold it for you?

No, I didn't want to go back.

Okay, so what did you do?

I seen an ad in the paper for a guy who had a spraying service – aerial spraying service, and who wanted to sell his airplane. So I went to look at it and I bought it.

Oh, and where was this –

Total business, airplane and loading pumps – and all the equipment I needed to start was a truck, so I had to buy a truck. Well, I started out with a trailer, put it on the back of the car and carried water in it.

And where was this – where did you do aerial spraying?

In southern, well it started out with neighbors of my dad's farm and then it advanced to – I flew out of an airport in Indiana – Lake Village Airport – and made that my home and

flew in that area. Then somehow I got connected with Kentucky, spraying tobacco, so I did that probably for ten years; the season only lasts a couple of months for spraying.

So you had your own business – was there a name to this business?

I had my own business – AirSpray Company.

So you were an independent contractor; you ran your own company and took care of all the jobs yourself.

Yeah, well, there wasn't that much; you usually work through a dealer and they got the jobs; the dealer paid me.

And you liked that – you continued doing that?

Yeah, yeah, it was good. All I had to worry about was keeping the airplane flying.

How long did you do that – was it your job for the rest of your life?

No, no, 'cuz that only lasted about three months for the summer, and then I started doing constructions, doing everything, room additions –

Did you work for an actual construction company?

No, well, I did for one year; I learned the basics –

And you went on your own.

First built a room on the back of my house, and then when I got that done a neighbor wanted me to do their house, and then another neighbor – that's how it started. I had enough to do –

Word of mouth – so that's what you did. When did you meet your wife?

I got married one year after I came out of service.

And she was okay with all your flying around an all that?

Oh, yeah, she was very good, very reasonable.

What was your wife's name?

Mary.

So your adjustment to civilian life went pretty well – you adapted pretty well to coming back home.

Oh yeah, yeah.

No problems.

No problems.

Have you had any contact with fellow veterans over the years?

No.

You don't go to any reunions or anything like that?

No, no.

Are you a member of any veteran's organization?

Like our Carillon VFW Post here?

I'm a member of a post in Hometown, Illinois. I'm a life member, yeah.

Well, you could go over to our Post, they have a monthly meeting, you know.

I know; I know.

How do you think that your war time experience – your military experience affected your life?

It helped a lot. It made my occupation. – the flying that I did; the plane, probably worth about \$80,000.

Sure, sure. So you were very satisfied with your choice.

Yeah, yeah.

What life lessons have you learned from military service? I'm sure it helped you with all your businesses going forward – being on time, responsibility, like that –

Yeah, I suppose it had some effect, yeah.

I mean you got a lot of discipline in the service and it carries forward as you go through life.

Yeah, yeah.

Your whole military experience was a positive thing, I would say, for you.

Yeah, yeah. I know how it feels to be in war, of course, by the time I got in – our enemy was pretty well beaten down, so , but I still got shots coming at me, you know.

Well, how did you feel about being in the war – in Okinawa?

As long as I got to fly the plane, I felt that's what I went in for, to learn to fly.

Did you see any dead bodies – residents who lived there that got shot, or anything like that?

No, no.

So you weren't in actual combat of any kind when you were in the service?

I was close to combat; I was 20,000 feet in the air looking down.

Right. You weren't in the infantry – hand to hand combat.

No, I wasn't around – ground forces.

You didn't see a lot of that kind of combat.

No, no.

You just took picture before and after.

Yes.

Okay, well, that's pretty interesting. I'm glad that –

Oh, yeah, I wouldn't miss that for anything; it was rough but – inaudible

Well, you guys did a great job; look at how many men went in 9-10 million – I was just a little kid myself –

I would have never got an education like that if I didn't go in –

Right, but you already had your high school education when you went in –

Yeah, I had high school –

High school diploma; that's interesting. A lot of men didn't have that in the second world war; they didn't even have a grade school education – from what I have found out.

Yeah. I wanted to go to college, but we were farmers – big family on a farm –

Well, you did okay for yourself; really good.

Yeah, I can't complain.

Very good. I think that we're done – unless there's anything else that you'd like to add. Wait a minute – we didn't talk about any medals or honors that you received – Good Conduct Medal and stuff.

Well, I got a medal for – you got a medal if you complete five missions – so I got a medal and I got a – what do you call it – for your medal; it shows you had another five missions – with an acorn.

With an acorn, have to look it up. Okay, any other medals, honors or recognitions that you got?

No.

You came out with a good conduct and regular discharge.

Yeah, honorable discharge.

Okay, so you spent four years in the war but you got a lot for it. You sacrificed your time but you got an education and traveled the world that you wouldn't otherwise see. While you were in the service did you go on any R&R to different places?

No.

All right. Thank you very much for this interview and thank you for your service to our country. I appreciate it.

Yeah.

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