

Eighth Air Force Historical Society

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Lt. Col. Roland T. Fisher

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Lt. Col. Roland Fisher at the Old Bold Pilots Luncheon August 12, 2009 with the Samurai Sword he received from Yoshimasa Nakagawa discussed in his August 2, 2008 Speech at the Eighth Air Force Historical Society meeting.

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[Time Elapsed 1:25]

Pre-Speech Discussion

I'm going to be a little different this time. I'm going to surprise them, especially Clint [Gruber]. Years ago when I first got involved with this organization, he was then president. I had known Clint for many years. I had used him when he was in television. I had used him for several programs that I was responsible to handle. So, I knew him very well and his capabilities. Then, I sort of lost track of him and then one day he called me out of the blue and he said, "I want you to come and speak at the Eighth Air Force Historical Society. That was my introduction. That was many years ago. So, I came and gave a talk and joined, naturally, and here I am. I've talked here twice since then. Last time was the one you did [transcribed]. The first time was on my experiences in England. This time, I'm going to tell some other things.

[Time Elapsed 2:42]

Prang

This is one of them. This, to me, is a great story and I'm going to tell it...I'll just give you a quick rundown. We bought that little dog in London just before we came back to the States, half a dozen of us Americans that had served with the British in the night fighters. We bought him in a pet shop and we flew him home. We flew him down through Gibraltar and over to North Africa and across the Atlantic to Brazil and up Central America and into Florida. We kept him in Florida. Then, this fellow, one of our members [John "Mac" MacNicholas], became a Photo Reco [reconnaissance] pilot. That's an F-5, a P-38 version [picture]. He took care of Prang. He was posted to China. So, he left with Prang and went across the United States, across the Pacific to India, and over the hump to China. He kept Prang with him all the time. We'd built a parachute for him. It had a handle. The RAF gave him that official serial number [J-15135]. Mac came home once on leave and brought Prang with him over the hump home to visit his folks and then back to India and back over the hump to China. He kept him there.

After Japan surrendered, Mac flew him back home and took him to his folks' farm in West Virginia where he died of old age. So, that dog had been across three oceans and the highest mountain range in the world and loved it. He was a great little dog.

[Time Elapsed 24:27]

Speech

Roland

Thank you, again, for asking me. It is always a lot of fun to come and be with you guys. After all, I'm one of you. Before I begin, I want to go back to Roland Stewart's disclaimer that he's not the speaker. He may not be the speaker, but we really need to speak about him because I don't think very many in this room know the historical importance of his first name. How many of you know? How many of you studied medieval history and remember Charlemagne? Charles the Great. He was the head honcho of most of medieval Europe at a time when the Saracens, the Muslims, were trying to overrun Europe and they had pretty much conquered Spain. Between Spain and Charlemagne's empire, what now is mostly France, is a range of mountains. Charlemagne had a nephew whose name was Roland. He had a close friend whose name was Oliver. Some great things have been written about Roland and Oliver, among them an epic poem called "Chanson de Roland", the "Song of Roland". I'll bet your mom read that book when you were born and handed you the handle because that's what happened to me. Now, you know how famous we both are.

[Time Elapsed 26:57]

Joining the RAF

I joined the Royal Air Force in June 1941, about six months before Pearl Harbor. I served until December 12, 1942 at which time I transferred in grade to the U.S. Eighth Air Force. At this point, I think it probably is appropriate that I give you a little of the background as to why I joined the Royal Air Force. I've been asked that a lot. I think I'd like to tell you this much about it.

As a boy, growing up in what was very grimy depressed Denver, we didn't have Obama, but we had Franklin Roosevelt coming on to bail us out. That was really a tough time, economically. My chief interest in those years was flying. I avidly read all the pulp magazines about the aces of WWI, Rickenbacker and von Richthofen. I read avidly and followed the exploits of the current aviators like Jimmy Doolittle and Charles Lindbergh who had just flown the Atlantic in 1927. I followed the exploits of the Army pilots flying their Curtiss *Hawks* and their Boeing P-12s and built models of them all. I longed to be one of them, very much. I just was dying to become an aviator. In those years, the U.S. had a very minimal air defense. Our Navy-Air arm was a few carrier planes on, I think, three carriers. Our Army Air Corps was flying obsolete aircraft. At the time that we were in this sad state, Germany and Russia were building immense Air Forces. As history showed, Hitler used one of them pretty effectively. I believed, sooner or later following all these events, that we were going to become involved in the war. I knew I had to be a part of it, but I wanted to do it in the air.

[Time Elapsed 29:27]

Ishihara Color Vision Test

The Navy was out of my reach. It required a Congressional appointment. The Army Air Corps required two years of college or there was a very stiff, written examination that you could take in lieu of the college which I applied for and took and passed. The minimum age, then, to become a flying cadet was nineteen. On my nineteenth birthday, I had already passed this written exam. I went down to the Army reserve doctor in downtown Denver to take my physical. First, everything went great. I could see like an eagle. I could run like a deer. I was a typical nineteen-year-old kid.

Then, one of the nurses brought out this little black book about eight by eight. The title on it was *Ishihara Color Vision Test*. She opened it and she asked me to read the number. In each plate is a bunch of colored dots and a number appears. She asked me to read that number. I read it. She looked very concerned. She flipped the page and asked me to read another one. I read that. She was really concerned. She called over the doctor and mumbled something to him.

So, he took the book and started turning the pages and asked me to read the numbers. I had no problem. I could see numbers and I read them. He had me read about a half a dozen pages and he finally closed the book. He was a nice guy. He put his hand on my shoulder and he said, "Son, I'm sorry. You can't fly. I cannot approve you for flying. You're never going to fly. You're color blind."

"Color blind? What are you talking about? I can see colors."

What I didn't realize was that I saw them relatively dimly, that I could very easily make mistakes, that I could confuse yellow for green which could be dangerous in flying, signals. If I got too far from the source of a color, they all faded into a sort of a non-descript brown.

So, at this point, all my shiny hopes, my hopes and dreams just crashed into little tiny pieces on the floor and I was so despondent. Then, I began to think about it, What can I do? I decided to study color vision. The University of Denver had a medical school at that time. I went down to their library and I got every book I could find and I read about it. I read that it's a genetic trait, that the female carries it and passes it on to her male offspring, that about 15% of all Caucasian males are afflicted with this color deficiency, and the females never have it. They can always see colors clearly. So, I had an idea. I checked out a copy of the *Ishihara* and took it home. My mom and I sat side by side and she read what was supposed to be seen in the plate and I memorized—I saw a number that was incorrect, but she saw the number that was correct. By doing that, I cold-cocked that book. I totally memorize it. It's got about sixty pages in it. I memorized that. In fact, there are two pages that are for illiterates. There isn't even a number, there's a line that wiggles through the set of colored dots. I'm tracing that line right now with my fingers. I memorized its shape.

[Time Elapsed 33:29]

Defense Industry Work

Then, I decided I had to learn to fly some other way. I was on record with the Army cadet program as being unacceptable. So, Denver being so depressed economically, I hitchhiked out to Los Angeles where the defense industry was really livening them up because the war had started in Europe and the aircraft industries were getting a lot of work. I got a job, 75 cents an hour. Wow, I was just rolling in dough.

[Time Elapsed 34:02]

Montebello Airport

I went out to a little airport in East Los Angeles called Montebello and started flying lessons. One of the fun things about this experience was the side experiences that I had when I was learning to fly. This airport was owned by Edgar Bergen. He didn't keep his plane there. He'd just built it and he built a brand-new restaurant. He loved to fly in. He'd have fly-ins with all of his friends. I remember seeing Jimmy Stewart and Wallace Beery and people like that fly in their planes. They'd have these fun get-togethers.

Bergen had hired this really superb, beautiful, blonde waitress to work in the restaurant. I don't know, maybe it was at his instructions, but she had a full-development and he made her wear a rather tight uniform with a big "V". He would land and open the window and Charlie McCarthy would stick his head out and growl, "Bergen, what the hell are we doing in this rotten place, again."

They'd get out and walk into the restaurant and Bergen would always had Charlie in his arm, of course, go down and sit. Of course, Lil, the waitress, would come over with her order pad and Charlie would stick his head over and look down her "V" and she would turn crimson. Those were great experiences.

[Time Elapsed 35:30]

Douglas “Wrong Way” Corrigan

I saw some other interesting people there. There was one young man that used to fly in a Curtiss *Robin*. He was always very neatly dressed. He wore a leather jacket, but his shoes were always shined. He always had a tie on. His hair was always combed. Years later, he hit the news and you'll remember his name. He went to New York and flew across the Atlantic in his Curtiss *Robin* and claimed when he landed in Ireland that his compass had been backward. His name was Douglas Corrigan. I got to know him quite well, not knowing that he was going to be a famous guy.

[Time Elapsed 36:18]

Training in Canada

I worked hard and got my license in February 1941. At that time, there was an organization working around Los Angeles area called the Clayton Knight Committee. They were soliciting pilots for the effort in Great Britain. If you had a commercial [license], you could join and go to Canada and receive a commission in the RCAF and you could join the Ferry Command. Then, your only work was just flying aircraft across the Atlantic to England. If you didn't have that many hours—you had to have at least 85 hours—then you could apply for combat duty in England which I did. I took a flight test. I'd never flown anything heavier than a 50 hp Cub, but I took my flight test in an AT-6. The pilot said, “You just get in and fly it. I'll operate the wheels and the flaps because you're not familiar.”

So, I did. I did a good job. He liked the way I flew it. So, he passed me and they accepted me. They sent me to Tulsa where I had some Advanced Training and got to fly a marvelous airplane called the Spartan *Executive*. It was an airplane way, way ahead of its time. I got a lot of time in AT-6s. All the time, I'm just a civilian, of course, and they're paying me \$50 a month, room and board, to do this. They gave me instrument training in the Link and a live panel in an airplane.

In November 1941, they gave me a handful of money and told me to go to Canada and they'd arrange for a [inaudible] passage across the Atlantic.

While I was in Canada, Pearl Harbor occurred and I don't know what I'm supposed to do. So, I went to the American Embassy and they said, "There's nothing we can do, but let you guys go ahead with your plans because the U.S. is just not ready to bring in qualified people, yet."

[Time Elapsed 38:26]

Pilot Officer in the Royal Air Force Reserve

Air Speed Oxford

Differences Between British and American Airplanes

So, I went on to England and arrived in London. I was commissioned a pilot officer in the Royal Air Force Reserve. I was sent to a base in the Midlands where I was given advanced training. For the first time, I flew twins. It was an aircraft called the *Air Speed Oxford*. It made entirely out of plywood. It was a pretty good airplane. I liked it. Originally, it had been designed as a cargo carrier. It looked like sort of a smaller DC-3 in its design and shape. [Comment from audience: It was originally designed as an executive transport. It was sold in fairly good numbers to Middle Eastern people.] Yes.

Anyway, I enjoyed flying it and I got a lot of experience in it. Some interesting differences in British aircraft and American aircraft, for the first time when I started flying the *Oxford*, I became acquainted with thumb-operated brakes. No toe pedals on any British aircraft. Engines run in the opposite direction to our engines. So, when you give it the go handles, your torque is opposite. I was accustomed, of course, to keeping the aircraft from swerving with the rudder one way, when in England, you do it the opposite way. Everything is backward. They drive on the left side of the road.

[Time Elapsed 40:03]

Compensating for Color Blindness

I did well. By the way, I had continued to pass the color test because every time they trotted out that book, I could read it. But, the problem is, I couldn't tell colors. I realized that. I began to realize a varied pistol shooting a bright flare; I couldn't always tell what color it was. We depended heavily on colored signals, the Aldis lamp for your take-off control, and beacons that were set around the country that flashed a color of the day and code of the day. Having studied color vision and colors as much as I did that time in the University of Denver Medical School, I began to realize that I could tell what a color was without seeing the color. In my battle jacket, I wore two transparent, plastic, heavily-colored plastic sheets: green, starboard; red, port. Whenever I'd see a colored light—a beacon—blinking out in the night, I'd pull out my green one. I'd look at it. If it was a red light, the green transparent plastic would filter out the light. They'd cancel each other because they're opposite in the primary color scale. So, by doing that, by checking the green or the red, I'd look at the light. In a few seconds, I could determine it was either a red light or a green light or, in some cases it was white because the white came through equally in each color sheet. That's the way I struggled through keeping track of what my color signals were when I flew.

[Time Elapsed 42:02]

Bristol *Beaufighter*



Bristol *Beaufighter* from Wikipedia*

I was checked out in *Beaufighters*. This was really a hairy experience in my life because the *Beaufighter* is just a different airplane. In addition to these quirks that all British aircraft have such as thumb-operated air pneumatic brakes, it had some flying characteristics that just were not nice. For example, when you got in it and started up the engines and got ready to take-off, you flew that airplane right from the start. You never quit flying it. If you did, you usually died. A P-70, for example, with a tricycle gear, you could put it on the runway and you could advance the throttles and you could actually take your hands off the wheel and just use the tab as you gain speed and roll the tab back a little bit. A P-70 would just take itself off and fly. [Not a] *Beaufighter*. You flew that baby from the minute you gave it power and you controlled everything that it was about to do. If you didn't, you got in trouble.

So, once you got it in the air, it was really a great aircraft. I brought some printouts. I've got in here pictures of a *Beaufighter* which shows it sitting in repose on the ground. If you look you can see that it has a very short nose and it has these huge Bristol engines that stick out way in front of the pilot. The airplane is at a very steep angle when it's in repose and when you advance the throttles, because of these poor brakes—you had to be very careful that you didn't overuse them or they heated and were ineffective. You had to use a combination of throttle and brake and rudder to keep it straight. You had to use all three. If you were good, you got the tail up and your rudder would take effect. Then, you were using rudder control and you could get it in the air. Once you got a *Beau* in the air, it was really a very good airplane. It was agile, fast, powerful, could take a tremendous amount of damage. With four canon and six forward firing machine guns, it could inflict an enormous amount of damage. One of the most common effects of attacking an enemy fighter in a *Beau* was the damage you would get from the pieces when his airplane ahead of you shattered. It was a risk that you had to take, but it did happen. It'd happen fairly often.

[Time Elapsed 45:42]

Montrose Northern Scotland

RAF Number 13 and 14 Groups

Night Fighting

I flew in Northern Scotland. England, by the way, or Great Britain, I should say, was divided into groups. Their groups are different from ours. In ours, we formed three squadrons to a group and then so many groups to a wing. They did it the opposite. Their squadrons went into wings and then their country was geographically divided into groups. Number 11 Group was the one that was right across the Channel protecting London. Number 10 was Cornwall and the West End. 12 was the Midlands and 13 and 14 were on up into Scotland. I flew most of the time, after I was checked out in the *Beaus* up in 13 and 14 group in Scotland. I was based in a little town called Montrose near Glasgow. It was a lovely place.

I fell in love with Scotland and the Scottish people. They were just great. I was there through the summer and fall of 1942. It was just a perfect time to visit Scotland.

I never really got a chance to tangle hard with the *Jerries*. I was scrambled several times. The procedure that we followed was to take-off in the night and go out to a colored beacon, which is a certain color of the day and a certain code of the day, and circle it. Great Britain had an immense radar protection coverage system. They had the big chain home radar stations that could see the *Jerries* [Germans] when they were taking off from their airfields in France and could plot their incoming moves very accurately. Once a bogey [bogie] got inside the chain home link, then the ground control intercept stations could take over and track him very closely. The procedure was, using our code names—most of the time I was “Smokie One”—GCI would call up and say, “Smokie One, Smokie One, bogey.”

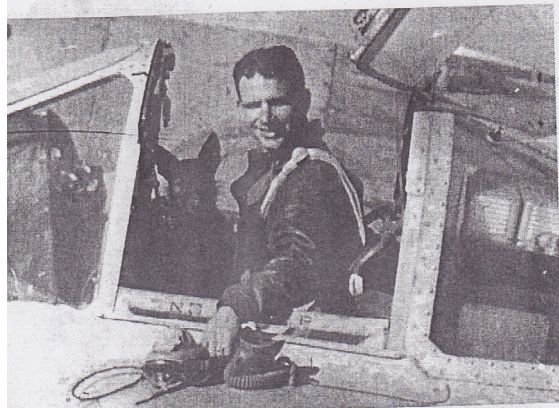
They'd give me directions. Angels and azimuth directions, compass. Angels was the altitude. I'd follow those directions in terms of the elevation and the azimuth. They would attempt to lead you in behind a bandit. When you got within six or eight miles, your own radar that you carried in the aircraft was supposed to be able to track the enemy and your radar operator would give you directions. There was absolutely nothing romantic or thrilling about night fighting. You just sat in a black box with a bunch of instruments in front of you, with your head phones glued to your ears, and you just meticulously did everything everybody told you to. There was none of this “dash” and “swerve” and all of the great things that Yeager and those guys got to do during the daytime. It was just a hard, arduous job, but it was very necessary because the Germans had switched almost exclusively to night bombing and they were doing a lot of damage.

[Time Elapsed 49:11]

United States Night Fighter Squadron

December 1942

That was my life in the RAF until coming into December when I was approached by an American Major. His name was Winston Kratz [Lt. Col. Winston R. Kratz] and he was a personal emissary of [General] “Hap” Arnold. “Hap” decided that the U.S. Air Corps—then it had become the [Army] Air Force—needed a night fighter arm and it was just totally without. He was very much impressed with the British technique. So, he directed Kratz to go over and study all of these different British squadrons. In doing so, Kratz met thirty-two of us Americans who were serving in British night fighter squadrons. Kratz eventually collected all of us together just about the time we transferred in December of 1942 and brought us together and took us to Florida where we set up a night fighter school following the British techniques and using British airborne radar and training new American pilots to follow the British techniques in night fighting.



Top: "Mac" MacNicholas and Prang in F-5 Bottom: Prang's RAF Identity Photo



John MacNicholas and Prang

[Time Elapsed 50:31]

Prang

One of the most fun experiences I had—and I passed out to you a picture of a little dog. His name was Prang. Just after we all transferred, we—these American pilots who were in the British night fighter squadrons—about a half a dozen of us were in London one day and we passed this pet shop and saw this real cute little dog in the window and went in and bought him. We named him “Prang” which is British slang for “crash”. If you “prang” an airplane, you busted it up.

We were still under the management of a British liaison officer because we'd all been trained in British military courtesy and protocol and none of us had really known much about the American military. So, this guy sort of herded us around until we got settled and we were all equipped, now, with American uniforms and American rank. We, in effect, were trained British officers. So, we named Prang. We went to our liaison officer and told him about the little dog and he said, "Well, we think we ought to give it a serial number."

So, they gave him an official RAF serial number which went into the *RAF Gazette* as "Pilot Officer Prang, FU—those letters you know what they stand for—and his serial number [J-15135]. We took his picture in the British liaison officer's office that day. I treasure it to this day.

Let me finish telling you the story about Prang. We took him with us to Florida: Flew him from Britain, Gibraltar, North Africa, across the Atlantic to South America, up to Florida. He stayed with us in Florida—that was in 1943 when we went over there. He stayed with us through the summer of '43. Then, one of our officers—this man that is pictured in the top of the picture is John MacNicholas—decided he wanted to go into photo reco [reconnaissance] work instead of doing night fighting. He managed Prang. He took care of Prang most of the time. So, John took Prang with him when he went to F-5 school, that's P-38 photo reco model. John was posted to India and then China. He took Prang with him across the Himalayas, the hump, to China and Prang stayed with John all through his career in China. Incidentally, by then, I had gone into the Fifth Air Force and the landing in the Philippines was being carried out and they needed all this aerial reconnaissance to spot what the Japanese were doing in the Philippines, before they made the landing at Leyte. John MacNicholas flew most of that photo reco work out of China in his P-38 to photograph the Philippines and went back. There's a picture of him in that F-5 with Prang sitting there.

We'd equipped Prang completely with his own parachute. We strapped it on him. It had a handle on the back so we could just pick him up and put him in the airplane. He was a very good flier. He really loved it. When John had him in China, he got to go home once on leave. So, he flew Prang over the Himalayas home where his folks lived in West Virginia and then flew him back over the hump.

He finished his tour out in China. At the end of the war, over the hump home to West Virginia where Prang died of old age on John's folks' farm. He was a hell of a good flier—not a pilot—but a great flier. One of my favorite people.

[Question: How did he get by on oxygen?] We were very careful that we didn't take him too high. He was ok if you went up to 15,000 feet. John had to work out some sort of a metering thing when he took him over the Himalayas, you go up to 19,000 or 20,000 feet. I don't think he was at great risk, but John had little breathing tubes and he fed oxygen into his nose as he went over those high places. He took good care of him.

[Time Elapsed 55:48]

Meeting Eleanor Roosevelt

I think among those experiences meeting Doug Corrigan, Edgar Bergen, Charlie McCarthy, Prang, one of the outstanding ones I had was meeting Eleanor Roosevelt. When I still was in the RAF, she made a visit and they herded a whole bunch of us Americans who were serving in the RAF down to a base. She came in, flying in Franklin's B-24. He never rode in it. She rode in it in a lot. She showed up and we were all standing at attention and she came down the line. She was a great person, a wonderful person, very impressive. Stopped and asked each of us our names and our hometown and chatted with us a little bit.

The guy standing next to me was a man named Everett Shockey [sp]. He was kind of a nerd. He was not a nice guy. So, she talked to me and then she went next to Ev and asked him where he was from and he said, "I'm from North Dakota and that must be the dirtiest place in the world because I think that's the only place you've never been."

The whole assembly just went into shock. This is to her credit what a gracious person she was. She had a very high-pitched voice and she just cackled with laughter. She thought that was one of the funniest things she ever heard. She threw her hands up. I think, if she hadn't done that, Shockey would've been shot the next morning, but he wasn't.

[Time Elapsed 57:38]

Those are my experiences. They led me to another round out in the Pacific about which I've already told you. I would mention one thing, somebody asked me a little bit ago about a certain model of a *Beaufighter*. Lately, I've been looking up things on Google and you can see just about anything you want to on Google. If you want to find out about a certain airplane—a Spitfire, a B-24, a *Beaufighter*—go to Google. It's incredible what they have lined up. It's really an interesting thing. I've even looked up people that I haven't seen or heard of for years, and they're on there. I'm on there. It was fun.

[Time Elapsed 58:21]

Questions

Bandits on Night Fighting Missions

Clint Gruber: Did you ever get a shot at a bandit on one of those night missions?

Yeah, I got herded in behind a bandit twice, where I got close enough to see him. When you're glued to your instruments, you don't dare look outside until the very right second. Then, we had a series of code words. My radar operator would call out, when he thought that I was getting close enough that I should be able to see, he would call out, "Punch". Then, I had to get myself geared. On his scope when he saw the blip at a certain position, he'd call out, "Judy". At that point, I would look. When you look in the dark, you don't see with your forward vision. Your direct vision is useless. You see only with your peripheral vision. So you see these vague--unless you see the exhaust flare which was very rare because the *Jerries* were very good at masking—at hooding—their exhaust flares. You didn't have much of a chance. If you looked like this, you'd get a dim shape and when you'd get that, you'd pull up with the bow and you'd hit the button. Then, of course, you had all these sixteen guns going off and there's a big flash and you lose him. I got to do that twice. I don't know if I hit him or not. I never got any credit. If you set it on fire, then you know it for sure, but I don't know what I did. I think I hit one of them hard, but I don't know.

[Time Elapsed 100:15]

Difference Between War in Europe and in the South Pacific

Request: Tell us about the transition from *Beaufighters* to whatever you were doing in the South Pacific.

I was sent to the South Pacific with the 418th Night Fighter Squadron. I was the operations officer of the squadron. When we got there, it was a different war. It was totally unlike Europe. In Europe, the theater was compact. There was excellent ground control radar. Out there [in the Pacific], there it was a bunch of little islands in a huge ocean. There was no good ground control. The only radar that was worth a darn was what the Navy had and they were all the time moving their ships around. So, our effort at doing night fighting out there was virtually worthless. The Fifth Air Force decided it was a waste of man and airplane. So, they started using our squadron during the daytime in attacking Japanese antiaircraft stations. This was not good because our guys were not trained for that and we had some horrible losses. We lost six or eight guys almost right away. It was not a very good thing and the Fifth Air Force, just about that time, decided they were going to abandon night fighters.

We were also flying P-70s which was a lousy night fighter. It was a fabulous low-level attack bomber. It was an A-20 that had been modified with guns and carried radar, but it just was a terrible night fighter. It was not fast or nimble enough to keep up with those Japanese planes. So, the whole thing was a wasted effort.

[Time Elapsed 1:01:58]

B-24 Squadron in the Pacific

About that time, I got a call from Fifth Air Force Bomber Command. He asked me to report in and he said, "Your record shows that you have had experience with airborne radar in combat."

I said, "Yes, that's true."

They said, "We have a new squadron of B-24s coming in from Langley Field, Virginia. They're going to be arriving within weeks. We want to assign you to that squadron."

These B-24s were equipped with a brand-new form of radar. It was 10 centimeter, 717 search radar. It was integrated with the Norden bombsight which, as most of you know, actually can control the azimuth of an aircraft. The bombardier can take over the direction of the plane from the pilot. This radar bombsight did exactly the same thing. So, the procedure then was to fly over the ocean in these B-24s carrying this radar. We would sometimes rise to the magnificent altitude of 1500 feet.

I heard that conversation about which can fly the highest [B-24 or B-17]. I'll tell you which one can fly the longest and the farthest. There's no question the B-17 doesn't stand a chance. That's the reason we used B-24s out in the Pacific because we had the range and the reach and could carry a bomb load at the same time.

So, the procedure was to fly at about 1500 feet altitude and just scan the ocean with this sweep radar. If you picked up a target and you'd close in on it, when you got close enough, your bombardier had a sweep radar attached to his bombsight and he could start sweeping. You'd get a blip on the scope—it's a round scope just like on the radars today. You could get a blip. If it was a ship, it actually showed like a ship. It would be a crescent shape. That was how I changed from *Beaufighters* to B-24s. That was the kind of work I did. I already told you my story about that.

[Time Elapsed 1:04:21]

More *Beaufighter's* Details

Stan Richardson: You flew the *Beaufighter* and it probably had the Bristol Pegasus sleeve? [Affirmative response]. How did you like that engine?

It was an excellent engine. It was about 1700 hp and it was dependable, very powerful, very responsive. When you pushed the throttle, it grabbed you. The main problem with the *Beaufighter* was the airframe, not the engines. The engines were excellent. We had occasional losses when an engine would quit on take-off. When that happened in a *Beaufighter*, you were dead, but that was very, very rare. Most of the training accidents in *Beaus* occurred from the thing swinging and getting out of control on take-off.

Question: Were the propellers counter-rotating?

No, British engines run backward to ours. So, your torque response is in the opposite direction. You use the opposite rudder. The only aircraft I ever flew that had counter-rotating was the P-38.

[Time Elapsed 1:05:31]

Avro Anson

Donald Keller: You flew the *Air Speed Oxford*. Did you fly the *Avro Anson*?

Yes, I got a few hours in an old *Anson*. Nice airplane.

[Discussion of a friend from Tacoma of Donald Keller's who is restoring a British-built and Canadian-built *Ansons*.]

[Time Elapsed 1:05:48]

Torpex Bombs

Clint Gruber: On those night missions against the Jap ships, did you carry torpedoes?

No. The only armament we carried was the 500 and a 1,000 pound Torpex bomb. Torpex was a very powerful explosive—a little more powerful than a normal explosive in a bomb. It was also very sensitive. Sometimes, if you were not careful in the way you handled Torpex bombs, they could go off without a fuse. They have been known to do that. We used Torpex because the severity of the explosion was such that, if you dropped it in the water near a ship, the shock would generally do damage to the ship.

[Time Elapsed 1:06:41]

The Spitfires and Hurricanes

Question: You got to fly a *Spitfire*, didn't you?

Yes, that was my reward. The day I checked into my CO when I was in Scotland and he said, "Your orders have come through for transfer. Is there anything you would like? We appreciate your service."

I said, “I’ve always wanted to fly a *Spitfire*. Could I get checked out in one?”

Instead of just letting me fly it, they sent me down to the operational training unit at Rednall and let me go through the training with an entire class just as if I were a brand-new pilot just starting to learn *Spitfires*. I got to go through the whole class. At the end of the class, I went to London and transferred. That was the thrill of my life. That was WOW! You want me to speak “poetry”. The *Spitfire*, that was poetry.

Question: One of your best planes you’ve ever flown, you think?

I think the *Spitfire* was the most rewarding plane that I ever flew because it was so beautiful. It had very few faults in the air. A little stiff on the ailerons at a very a high-speed dive, other than that, you flew a *Spitfire* with your thumb and finger. They had a spade grip instead of a stick. Normally, I had my hand on the throttle and had a hold of the spade grip like this because they were so beautifully sensitive. One of the reasons they were so successful as a fighter is because you could pull that grip back in your gut in a steep turn and keep wrapping it around the pole and instead of stalling like most aircraft would and flipping off in a snap roll, it would just keep juttering around and around the pole. You had to practically kick it into a stall. That’s the reason you could beat the *Jerry* because, with his higher wing loading, he couldn’t turn with you. *Spitfires* and *Hurricanes*, too, could outturn the *Jerry*.

I flew a *Hurricane* and they were not as poetic as the *Spitfire*. They were a nice airplane. That R.J. Mitchell, I think he was more than an airplane designer. He was a poet and the *Spitfire* was his greatest poem.

[Time Elapsed 1:09:14]

Torpex and Night Fighters

Question: What was the difference between the RDX and the Torpex bomb?

I couldn’t answer that chemically. I can only tell you that Torpex, when the explosion occurred, it was a very quick, hard blow and that was the reason we used them against the Japanese ships. The way we would attack a ship passing over it—and sometimes I’d try a skip bomb in which case we’d take the nose fuses out of the bombs and just use a four to five second delay.

Now, it was always a little bit nervous proposition because sometimes the shock of the bomb just hitting the water would cause it to explode. I never had that happen, but it has been known to happen. We dropped bombs accidentally and they've exploded when they hit the water.

[Time Elapsed 1:10:11]

Night Fighters

P-70 and P-61 *Black Widow*

Question: What night fighters were you using in the Pacific?

We had the P-70 which was the A-20 and it was no good. Another one of my great experiences, I have to tell you this, the *Black Widow* was designed pretty much according to the specifications. When we were all serving in these night fighter squadrons in the RAF, we had Northrop engineers come around and talk to us and they asked us if we had anything we wanted in a night fighter, what would we want? After this miserable thing called an airplane that we flew as a *Beaufighter* and all of its unsafe characteristics, we told him we'd like safety. We'd like a good, high-performance aircraft, but we'd like some safety. They did that in the P-61. That was incredibly stable and safe. First of all, it was a trike gear. Its take-offs were snaps.

I've flown them a couple of times. I have the guy that was riding me ask me to do this. I'd taken it off and pulled the gear up and I was flying along. He said, "Now, pull back on one throttle."

Boy, if you did that in most airplanes, you'd go into convulsions. I pulled back on one throttle and it just kind of staggered a little bit and then just kept going straight ahead because it had spoilers and automatically correcting safety devices which made it wonderful. It was so easy to land. We're restoring one in Pennsylvania, right now. It should be ready to fly, soon. That airplane was flown by a guy I knew. It was a brand-new airplane. It had just arrived in New Guinea and he decided to take a couple of nurses for a ride along with the crew. He was horsing around—this was out of the base at Hollandia—there's a huge mountain between the bases and the sea. It's almost a perfect cone. It's covered with heavy rainforest.

Old John was screwing around showing these nurses what a beautiful aircraft—now Mount Cyclops almost always had a cloud shroud. He plows into this cloud and all of a sudden realizes he might hit the mountain. So, he eases back on both the throttles and he just pancaked that airplane down into the rainforest. About twenty years later, we sent a team over and found the air was still in the tires and it was in pretty good shape. So, the Indonesian government helped us bring it out. The Air Force helped us lift it out with helicopters and we brought it to Pennsylvania and is being restored. It should be flying, if not already.

Question: How about the nurses?

Oh, they walked out. They were mad as hell. Nobody was hurt. John just stalled it--this is a tribute to the aircraft—it just pancaked into the rainforest almost just flat down into the trees and damaged one wing a little bit.

Comment: I heard one disadvantage to the *Black Widow* was the placement of the guns. After, like you said, you fired the guns, the pilot was [Inaudible].

A lot of the pilots—that was that overhead turret. You could control that. You had a gunner and he could control the turret or the pilot could control the turret. A lot of our pilots discontinued the gunner to get rid of the weight and discontinued the use of the upper guns because you had all these other guns in the nose and you didn't need them. It was primarily a defensive measure. Northrop tried to build everything into that airplane. They figured that it always could be subject to an attack from the rear and that was the reason for the power turret above. It could cause that problem if you fired the guns over your head. Tracers would cause that.

Question: How about the F-89?

I can't tell you much about it. I never flew one. This is the twin *Mustang*? Oh, [inaudible]. I never got any time in jets. I wasn't exposed to them, just talked to guys that flew them, that's all

[Time Elapsed 1:15:14]

63rd Squadron, 443rd Group in the Pacific

Comment: I talked to Al [inaudible] several years ago and he said he always felt that the 43rd, their results and their losses in combat were due to better training. He felt the 43rd night fighter unit had a lot better training.

You have to distinguish. We “Snoopers” were the 63rd Squadron. That was only one squadron in the 443rd Group. The other squadrons were daytime. Yes, those 63rd pilots were trained originally in Virginia to be part of an antisubmarine. That was when they got the idea because the Japanese were becoming so effective in using their merchant marine and their war vessels in moving troops to counter our military effort that they got the idea we needed to do something to interdict their shipping effort. I don't know who it was—some guy in the upper echelons got the bright idea—this 63rd Atlantic sea search squadron was ideal to send to the Pacific. They picked the thing up lock, stock, and barrel. Those guys were not only trained B-24 crews, but they had all this additional training of going out over the Atlantic and looking for submarines before they were then brought over to the Pacific. So, they arrived as a squadron and they were unique. There was nothing else in the Fifth Air Force like them. So, we began night operations. That was when I transferred from the night fighter squadron into the 63rd. Yes, those guys had a lot of extra training, no question about it.

Comment: There was a second squadron, 868th?

Yes, the 868th was in the Fifteenth Air Force. There were three of them. One was in China. One was in the Fifth Air Force and one in the Thirteenth.

[Time Elapsed 1:17:22]

Losses and Skip Bombing

We did a lot of damage to the Japanese and we had relatively low losses. We lost some. Flying at night, even with radar up in that part of the world, it has its risks. We lost guys due to bad weather mostly. We lost them due to enemy fire.

When you run a bomber over a Japanese ship, whether it's a merchant marine or a war vessel, and you're only 500 feet, you're going to have things done to you. They can almost hit you with their side arms. So, I've been hit a lot. I've had a lot of fire holes in my aircraft, but I never got shot down, fortunately.

Tom Davis: When you did skip bombing, did you ever have one come back up and greet you?

No, we did it very carefully. I did it only twice. It's not a very good experience and it's not a very good way to sink Jap ships. The only reason we did it is if we thought it was going to be a war vessel—a big destroyer or a cruiser—they had such immense fire power. Even a *Corvette* could really throw the lead at you. Under those circumstances we felt that, if we came in low and dropped the bomb and then did a real abrupt turn—being careful you don't hook your wingtip into the water—that you would outfox their antiaircraft and sure enough, both times I did it, all their antiaircraft kept going up like that while I'm turning off over here, but it's a risky thing.

Question: Did you ever get an over-the-shoulder bombing?

No, we either did a direct drop or the skip drop. I never had any problem with a bomb coming back up. I've done practice skip bombings quite a bit and they generally would go into the sea and stay there. A B-24, at the speeds we were flying—we were only doing about 160, 165 mph. Bombs would skip from a B-25 or those other low-level aircraft because they were flying so much faster.

[Time Elapsed 1:20:06]

The *Mosquito* as a Night Fighter

Question: Did the British go to the *Mosquito* as a night fighter during the war?

Oh, yes. They switched almost completely from *Beaus* to *Mosquitos*. That was the twin-engine *Spitfire* of the war. Everybody loved the *Mosquito*, but you had to be one lucky "bloke", as the Brits would say, to get to fly *Mossies*. I would love to have flown one, but I didn't.

[Charlie Gallagher tells of his formation shooting a *Mosquito* down when they were going to Poltava, Russia. "He got in the way. Somebody goofed up."

He said, "I'm a friend. I'm a friend."

Too late, bye.]

The *Mosquito* was made of wood, but it was an interesting aircraft. It could take enormous gunfire damage. Metal aircraft, if a bullet would hit it, it tends to rupture the metal and the metal air speed would cause the metal to peel back. I've seen *Mosquitos* come back with a lot of ground fire holes and they're just holes unless they chopped up a spar or something like that. They could take an enormous amount of punishment.

[Time Elapsed 1:21:33]

Leach Relay

Charles Gallagher: What aircraft company did you go to work for in L.A.?

It was not an aircraft company. It was an outfit called Leach Relay and they built electric relays for the airplanes. I got this job first and I learned from them about this little airport out at Montebello. I made a deal with my boss if I could go to work at 3 o'clock in the morning and get off at noon would that be ok? He said, "Yeah."

All I was doing was just doing a bunch of drafting work. That's how I got started at Montebello because it was close to where their little factory was. They had an interesting history. It was started by a guy named Leach and he had been an electrician's mate in the Navy. He really learned a lot about electrical relays and he was kind of an electrical genius. After the fuss started in Europe and the defense industry needed airplanes, all of a sudden everybody needed electrical relays to operate the guns and starters and the whole works. Leach was supplying them with everything we had. He designed and built all these relays and he had no shop drawings of them. That's why he hired me. He wanted me to make a shop drawing of every relay he had. He had about 500 models. I spent my life with a little ruler a 1/100 of an inch measuring these things and drawing and then getting off at noon and running out and taking a flying lesson. Great life.

[Time Elapsed 1:23:26]

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Photo Information

Bristol *Beaufighter

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bristol Type 156 Beaufighter ExCC.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bristol_Type_156_Beaufighter_ExCC.jpg)

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