

8th Air Force Historical Society

2015

Interviewee: Don Keller

Interviewer: Bert Campbell

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[Total Interview Time 42 minutes]

[*Reviewed and corrected by Don Keller]

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Don Keller

Part 1

[Time 27 minutes]

His Interest in Aircraft and Aviation; 8th AFHS

Bert Campbell:

What got you started with your interest in aircraft?

Don Keller:

Back in 1967 I was in a seminary school in Santa Barbara, California. I was walking across the ball field and I heard this sound. I'd never heard anything like it before. So I stopped and I listened to it. The more I heard it the closer it got and it really caught my interest. It was two B-17s flying low and slow over the top of the school. They were fighting a fire out at Goleta up in the mountains up above and they were coming back to reload and then head out and make another drop again to fight the fire. Ever since just hearing that sound and watching those two airplanes in formation and all, that was it. I just had to go ahead and start learning more about them and about B-17s. I started out with Caidin's book and whatever I could find to read about them, and meeting crewmen. I've actually traced both crews of both tankers down and had them sign my book.

Bert Campbell:

Interesting. There is something unique about multiple radial engines all running at the same speed. It is a sound that is unique onto its own.

Don Keller:

Yes. There was a 306th flight engineer, Dell Reed, that told me when the engines are in sync there's no sound like it. It's a symphony and he said they're actually playing music. In the time I've spent flying long distances in the B-17 and all it's true.

Bert Campbell:

Yes, very true. So you basically got started into, shall we say aviation, through the Borate bombers or whatever you want to call them, the forest fighting tankers?

Don Keller:

That was my first exposure to it, yes. Then I'd say I started finding books that I could read about them. In those days, there wasn't much out about tankers. You could start reading about the 8th Air Force and movies like *Twelve O' Clock High* and the books and everything else.

Bert Campbell:

When did you then get associated with the Oregon Chapter of the 8th Air Force Historical Society?

Don Keller:

Probably after about their fourth or fifth meeting, somewhere in there. I went to one of the meetings and Fred Paul, who was the chairman, came and talked to me about helping him locate speakers. After about the second meeting or so, all of a sudden Fred would just go, "Okay, you find the speakers and I'll approve them."

Don Keller:

I've been working with the 8th AFHS, Oregon Chapter ever since setting up speakers and tracking them down.

Bert Campbell:

Voluntary slavery. [Laughter]

Tucson, Arizona; Chico, California

Working for Aero Union Corporation

Bert Campbell:

Then through over the years you got to know different people in the aviation industry. You worked for Aero Tanker or something like that down in California?

Don Keller:

Actually, my wife and I were just dating. We went down to an air show in California and we stopped over in Chico, California and I met with Dick Foy who was one of the founders of Aero Union Corporation. He was sitting there and he looked at me and he goes, "You do all this stuff for free on your own?"

I go, "Yeah."

He goes, "Well, let's see what you'll do for pay."

He handed me a job application, so I filled it out and sent it in and a few weeks after that they contacted me and said, "If you want a job, you've got it. In two weeks you've got to be in Tucson, Arizona."

Don Keller:

So I went down to Tucson. They'd just acquired Desert Air Parts and I took over as the Yard and Office Manager directly underneath the General Manager.

Bert Campbell:

Pima Air Museum is down there. Is that in any way, shape or form connected with them?

Don Keller:

No. At that time, Davis-Monthan [Air Force Base], they would take the aircraft and parts and everything and surplus them out at Davis-Monthan. Of course, being Arizona, it's a wonderful place for all the guys to retire. It was natural that they'd start an air museum down there. That's actually somewhat how the Pima Air Museum started. And a lot of the feeder businesses like Desert Air Parts would be around. They'd go in, buy inventories from the Air Force at Davis-Monthan, then resell it to other operators, the parts to support the aircraft, and things like that.

Bert Campbell:

How long did you work down there?

Don Keller:

I was supposed to be down there as a lifetime career. At a little over five months, they came down and said, "You know what? We weren't honest with you. We actually didn't buy the company. We only took a lease option. We decided not to buy the company, but since we've got you down here and you're 1500 miles away from home, we'll bring you back to Chico and you can come work at the main base back there."

Don Keller:

So they let that company go. I went with them to Chico and spent three years there at Chico. So that was six months in Tucson and then almost four years in Chico, California working for Aero Union.

Portland, Oregon

Tammie's Hobbies

Bert Campbell:

Then did you move back to Portland?

Don Keller:

Yes. I came back. Again, my wife and I came home for Christmas vacation. I stopped in and talked to my former boss at Tammie's Hobbies and his wife and they said, "Well, why don't you come back and work for us?"

So they brought me back up to Tammie's in 1987.

Air Depot

<http://www.b-17airdepot.com/>

**Collecting Airplane Parts and WWII Memorabilia; “Mae West”; Bert Campbell’s Father
Bert Campbell:**

When did you then start Air Depot?

Don Keller:

Back in the late 1970s when I started—well, even before that, mostly in the ‘70s I started buying and dragging parts home. I moved in with my best friend, Mel Bean, in Aloha in 1980 and we made an arrangement. He got the garage since he was into hotrods. I took the spare bedroom and started dragging home airplane parts. One day he looked in there and he said, “What are you going to do with all this stuff?”

I said, “I don’t know, but it’s just too cool to let go.”

He said, “Why don’t you contact some of these guys that are still flying and restoring these airplanes and see if you can start selling this stuff?”

That was basically the start of Air Depot. I took a trip up with another close friend of mine to Fairchild Air Force Base for their open house and while there I stopped in a surplus store in Spokane and I asked the young lady that worked there and she said, “What are you looking for?”

I said, “I’m looking for old WWII items.”

She said, “We don’t stock any of that junk.”

Don Keller:

I knew there was something really good there. You can just tell there's something around. So I'm walking down one of the aisles and a man came up to me. He says, "You're looking for the old WWII surplus, aren't you?"

I said, "Yeah."

He goes, "Well, that's my era. I've got some 'Mae Wests'."

"I'd love to see them."

He took me back and he actually showed me his stash. I think we bought about forty or fifty original B-3, B-4, and B-5 "Mae Wests". Some were still brand new in the wrapper. They were so bright when you looked at them it almost hurt your eyes. So I bought the entire inventory. That basically started and was how I went on to Air Depot on my own because that was our first major item that we really marketed, these brand-new, beautiful "Mae Wests". We sold those to museums. The Tuskegee Airmen display at The Museum of Flight, that's one of ours. We sold quite a few to the makers of the movie *Memphis Belle* for props, and we worked with them and the film companies on supplying a lot of their flight gear and aircraft parts and props.

Bert Campbell:

When my dad was in the 8th Air Force, he had a "Mae West" early on. This was checked out to him and it was one of the soft ones not the hard, stiff ones. So instead of turning that in after each mission, he would rat hole that thing and the next mission he had his "Mae West" and he took care of it for all but three or four missions that he flew.

Bert Campbell:

On his last mission, he went in and he turned in his “Mae West” and his parachute and he pulled a rip cord on the parachute and kept the “D” ring and reached over there and pulled the lanyards on the CO2 cartridges on the “Mae West” and it inflated and then just promptly deflated. It wouldn’t hold air. Obviously, he didn’t need it. He didn’t know, so no harm no foul.

Don Keller:

That’s one thing in collecting these parts and all. It’s been a lot of fun. I’ve enjoyed it. I worked with a lot of restorations, but people always ask me, “Well, how’d you get started in this?”

Well, I came because of the aircraft, but I stayed because of the people. I’ve just met some incredible people. Like with these “Mae Wests”, there were brand-new ones and there were surplus ones. The ones that I kept for myself actually weren’t the brand-new perfect ones. There were some that had the pilot’s name on it. One B-5 that I picked up is marked “Larson Air Force Base, Moses Lake, Washington”. So it’s the ones like that that had the personal attachment. Kind of like we mentioned with your dad, it’s that personal attachment to it. That’s why I’ve kept a lot of these things over the years.

Bert Campbell:

Yes. You run into interesting things as you travel through life.

B-17 Cockpit Display

Includes Tammie's Hobbies; Bob Sturges; *Memphis Belle* Movie

Bert Campbell:

So after you moved back up here and you started collecting military memorabilia, when did you start seriously looking into things like building this cockpit and stuff like that? Is that just something that happened?

Don Keller:

No. It's been kind of a long process and along the way there's a lot of problems and things you run into. For instance, at one point in Chico at that time at Aero Union, if you were interested in aircraft then there must be something wrong with you. I could never quite figure that out working for an aviation company. You were very suspect. I was very down at one point. I figured, "Hey, that's it. I'm done. I'm going to get rid of this, and bag the stuff. I'm done."

And I was out walking through the old airport area down below where the original motor pool was there at Chico Army Air Base and I tripped. Being clumsy is nothing new for me, but I knew I tripped on something and I went back and looked. Sure enough, I found a Studebaker data plate for a R-1820-97 sticking out of the ground. That's what I tripped on. I thought, "Okay, well, maybe the Lord's not quite ready for me to quit right now."

So I went ahead and held on to that data plate. In fact, I still have it. (That's what you'll see on the video.) And I kept working with it.

Don Keller:

I'd moved back to Tammie's in Beaverton and I went back to working with a lot of the guys I'd known over the years. One of them was *Bruce Orriss from Los Angeles who's done movie work for many years. He contacted me. We'd done work on *Memphis Belle*, *The Taken*, *Tuskegee Airmen*, the P-38 series with Jeff Ethell. So we've done a lot of different projects with them and he contacted me to come up with parts for *Memphis Belle*, so we went ahead and had found quite a few items from him because—speaking of people, one of my favorite and absolute all-time favorite people is still Bob Sturges. I met Bob in the very early '70s as a kid that basically thought he knew everything and knew absolutely nothing and Bob treated everybody with respect. His enthusiasm for aviation was incredible. His knowledge is just unmatched. I've met very few people that know as much about aviation as Bob did. Bob kind of took me under his wing. Bob also was the founder of Columbia Airmotive. He founded Columbia Airmotive in 1946. One of the things he did was to bring back seventeen boxcar loads of B-17 parts from Kingman, Arizona from the scrapyards.

Bert Campbell:

Seventeen boxcars?

Don Keller:

Seventeen boxcar loads full and Bob was a wonderful businessman. I learned a lot about business from him and at Tammie's Hobbies from Duane. One of things I learned from Bob was when you want to do something always there's a way. You just have to think about it.

Don Keller:

And he was trying to figure out how to pay *the freight for seventeen boxcar loads back from Kingman because *money from selling the airplane parts aren't going to pay for the freight. He'd already worked out with the guys that he'd have one year to pay for all the parts. True to his word, he showed up on the date exactly and handed them a check for the entire amount which totally amazed them because they said, "Nobody in this business pays cash and they never pay on time."

One of the ways he found to finance bringing all those parts back, he noticed how construction, the G.I. Bill for housing, was going crazy up here. So he went ahead and went to one of the local companies down there that had flagstones and he made arrangement with them and sold them enough flagstones from Arizona in the bottom third of those boxcars—the rest of the car was filled with airplane parts—that by the time the seventeen boxcars got up here, the freight was already paid.

Now at one time they had every house, barn, garage that you can imagine in the Troutdale and Metro area around there filled with airplane parts. It's kind of like we are. We've got stuff stashed anywhere I can find that people allow me.

Bert Campbell:

If there's a will, there's a way. [Agreement] And If somebody's a scrounge, he'll find the parts.

Don Keller:

Oh yeah. So we did a lot of that work with Bruce. They told us what they were looking for for the movie. We had flight boots. We had "Mae Wests". We had the flare pistols and units and all kinds of airplane parts including the cockpit parts, the assembly pieces. Bruce set up for us to go to the premier with Bob Sturges and I loved sitting and watching him. For a while when the movie first came out my brother would not watch it with me. He said, "I'm so tired of hearing, 'Hey, look, there's our flight boots. Hey, look, there's our 'Mae West'."

And he says, "I don't want to hear what you sold to them."

It was *great sitting next to Bob and listening to his talk about parts, and this and that and hearing Bob notice things that only somebody who was a Boeing Factory Rep in the war would know like, "Those cables aren't swedged the way we did over there."

There were things he'd pick out and notice right away. We did a lot of work with Bruce and it was a lot of fun. When they closed up production, they contacted us and wanted to know if there were any parts in there that we wanted to *buy."

Well, I looked down the list at what they and they had the original for filming three panel blanks to do the main instrument panel of the B-17. So I contacted them and said, "Yeah, I'd kind of like to have those."

So I worked it out and purchased it from them. They were just the blanks. I got them and started working with Bob and everybody else said, fine, go ahead and fill it up with instruments and all that.

Another good friend of mine, Jim Brickey, *built the framework. We started doing gun shows. We did one gun show out in the Expo Center. Some man came walking around. He looked at it and he'd go, "Yeah, it's okay, but it's not complete.

I asked him, "Well, what do we need? What is incomplete? What's missing?"

He says, "You've got to have a throttle quadrant. It's to sit right there in your arm chair and watch Twelve O'clock High" going brrrm playing with the throttles."

I said, "Yes, everybody's got one of those in their living room.

He said, "I do."

I said, "Oh."

It took six months and with the help of another good friend of mine, Jeff Endicott, we were able to talk him out of that throttle quadrant. It was located in a winery up on Mount Hood. And it turns out many, many years ago he worked with Bob Sturges also and it came out of the Coast Guard B-17 that overshot the runway at Lake Washington and went down in the water. Bob picked it up and scrapped it out and had this man working for Bob said, "I'll be happy to do it, but that's going to be my pay. I want that throttle quadrant."

*So that's the quadrant that we have in our cockpit. And it also kind of fits in too because one of the things we started doing is, if we'd find parts that the other people could use, for instance, as Sentimental Journey, Memphis, Belle, Liberty Belle, Aluminum Overcast, 909.

Don Keller:

We'll take the parts that we have that are good cores and trade *the parts to them for run out cores, red tagged instruments that can't be rebuilt. So it gives them something they can use and it keeps their cost down so they can keep going, but it gives us the panel that not only is the B-17 part but actually came out of various B-17s. There's a good part of this cockpit we can actually tell you exactly what B-17 it came out of, whether it was an original or rudder pedals out of the factory, or out of the Ardmore, Oklahoma crash. The quadrant, of course, out of a Coast Guard B-17 out of Lake Washington. We can just basically track down most of the parts. Now, some of them it came to the point where you can't find these parts and we'd actually manufacture them.

Bert Campbell:

So all of the, like for the instruments, they're all proper instruments, but they may not be flight worthy?

Don Keller:

There are some flight worthy instruments that are in it. They were yellow tagged originally. Now, of course, the FAA requires re-certified. So we do have some in there yet that still are the original yellow tag from that. In fact, I've got some spares. At one time, Bob Sturges was supplying spares for all the B-17s in the world that were flying and I have a couple of instruments that are in there that still have Columbia Airmotive B-17 Spares tags on them. Just a tribute to Bob and Dave and *Jeff at Columbia Airmotive.

Don Keller:

The most of the stuff we had, we'd work with those guys. We'd find usable parts for them. Another thing we've done if you notice in the cockpit, everything is "not" as a friend of mine used to say, "kosher". For them, they want all the instruments exactly the same color. If you use a black light, they have them all glow exactly the same color. We went for a little bit different feel because ours was dedicated to the Veterans. When we got the quadrant and the instrument panel from the gentleman, we started taking them to air shows which was fun. We had a lot of fun doing that. And we also started taking them to reunions and we'd go up and we'd set the instrument panel up on a table. We'd put the quadrant right in front of it. Then we'd go and put a chair on each side of it and people loved it. They'd come up and look at it and go, "Can we touch it?"

I said, "Well, it's here is for you. We do this for you Veterans. It's just part of the debt that we owe you for your service. Have fun with it."

And it wouldn't be very long and you'd look down and the pilot would go drag his copilot over there or a copilot would grab his pilot and they'd be sitting there and talking over old missions and discussing things and everything else. They were just having a ball with it. We'd go 'til 2 o'clock in the morning. We'd come back and do it again the next night. So that's really the reason. It's for the Veterans.

Bert Campbell:

When did you actually start the actual assembly and when did you finish? I realize it's a work in progress, but when did you finish where it was a viable exhibit?

Don Keller:

Well, it started out basically as a viable exhibit right from the start. We started doing the instrument panel and the throttle quadrant. We went Pearson Air Museum had it on display for a while. We'd take it around to many air shows and things, but we got to realizing if we're going to be able to do that we need to be a little more mobile. So another great friend of mine, Ben Howser, came up with the idea of mounting it all on a trailer. He and Gene Keller went ahead and helped build this trailer and the framework and all. I worked with some good friends of mine, some people at Boeing, that were able to come up with drawings for me. I had another friend from the forest service who went through and reduced all the drawings to where a layman like myself could understand them and then we turned them all over to Gene and Ben. They made the cockpit from there. It's all done to original prints and drawings. After that, like I say, it's been on display at the Pearson Air Museum. The WAAAM Museum [Western Antique Aeroplane & Automobile Museum] in Hood River has asked to have us come up and display out there. We've done the Hillsboro air show [Oregon International Air Show] with the 8th Air Force Historical Society of Oregon I believe four or five times now that we've worked with the air show for them and also had it on display.

Bert Campbell:

What would you say the first date that you took probably your throttle quadrant? How far back would that go?

Don Keller:

Let's see. We started with the panel. We did the movie in '89. Probably about '91 or '92 was the first show we did with the instrument panel itself.

Bert Campbell:

And then this thing has just grown since then.

Don Keller:

It's blossomed from there ever since. And part of the idea of doing it with the Veterans, again, another gun show; we had a man that came out. He looked at it and he goes, "It's not right."

He had the table right behind us. He came back, "Nah, I don't know. No, that's still wrong."

He went back to his table. This man was a Class 3 arms dealer. He had Uzis and Thompsons. So he was not the kind of man I was going to start an argument with. He came out and he looked around again and he goes, "You know, I apologize. It's right."

I said, "Well, thank you. I appreciate that. What was wrong when you kept looking at it?"

He goes, "I came out and looked at it and it didn't look like our airplanes."

I said, "Oh really? What kind of airplanes did you have?"

He says, "PBs."

Don Keller:

The minute he told me that I realized that he was in the Navy and those were the B17s in the Coast Guard and the Navy: PB-1Gs and PB-1Ws. And I got started talking with him. Of course, the '50s in B-17s—as you mentioned I started originally with WWII and all—but I'd always gravitated more to the '50s, the guys after WWII because they're really kind of the unsung people: the guys doing the long patrols, the air-sea rescue missions *and the air tanker crews. So that's always been a real driving part of my interest also. The panel is set to where we really could when we need to, be able to switch it over for that at any time and be able to show it as a Coast Guard airplane or even an air tanker or whatever from there. By doing the shows like that, we're able to give them more of a feeling of what it was like. We've actually had people come our whose relatives were involved with the B-17s and they wanted to be able to use that as a way of getting some kind of a connection to their relatives.

Bert Campbell:

So this thing has been in motion for twenty-plus years and you are able to go from one basic aircraft to the next to the next and the next all built on a B-17 frame. [Agreement] That's good.

Don Keller:

Yes. It's been a very large segment. They actually have cockpit fests in England. They've tried doing it here and so far they haven't gotten much traction on it yet, but in England people will show up in well-built, complete cockpits. Some will do it from scratch. Most try to do it with *actual aircraft. At one point, we actually had a DC-3 that we were putting together a complete cockpit for traveling display with. *The big shows are there in England. The closest you've got here in the United States are several museum's that have done what they call "open cockpit day" and they'll open the cockpits of the airplanes and let people actually get in and see the cockpits.

Another friend of mine, Ben Howser, has done several cockpits. Ben has our original B-17 framework. When we got this new one with the extended frame. He took the original and he's been building that up. He's also done an Avro Anson and several other cockpits on his own such as the AT-11. Frederick Johnsen has a beautiful B-24/PB4Y that he has done like Ben with his Avro nose and Fred with his PB4Y *have actual aircraft, where ours we came up to that point and we started looking at it, but number one was the cost and number two was the availability was very daunting. The reason we went with the one we have now is this is actually based on the WWII training cockpits that they came up with. Boeing, Lockheed, and Douglas got together with the Army, Boeing, of course, leading the way on it because the Army did not want to tie up complete airplanes just for training. So they would actually design mockups such as this one right here. There's one at Boeing like this. There's one at Kingman, Arizona and Las Vegas Army Air Field had one also.

Don Keller:

Many of the air fields actually had them there and they could use this as a training tool for the WASPs, for the Flight Engineers, for the pilot and co-pilot trainees without tying up a complete aircraft. Some of the ones, for instance, at Boeing would actually be tied to engines. *They could actually run the engines, so it would not only test engines at the same time, but they could also give the crews training in setting it up and working with them. They also had ones like this at Amarillo, Texas that was set up for mechanics and for the training.

Bert Campbell:

So the trainees in the military actually had some—without using an aircraft—some serious hands-on training then.

Don Keller:

[Agreement]

Part 2

[15 minutes]

Future for the Cockpit

Revisions; Education; Keeping Veterans' Memories Alive; Coast Guard

Bert Campbell:

Where do you foresee this going with the cockpit? What are your desires to do in reference to any association with aviation?

Don Keller:

Current plans are to continue to keep working on it. We'll be doing some more things like, for instance, the boots for the control columns. We're going to work with someone and have those made up. When we do, we'll have extras made up for the B-17s that are still coming up yet. So there's still some parts that we're going to make that we'll be able to use and help those ones that are still being restored and make parts available for them. If we can, the long range goal at this point we're still looking at is trying to enclose the cockpit so that it actually does look like a B-17 fuselage. We do have the windscreen and the windscreen glass to put in it. We've got plans and drawings to put the skin and all around it. We're just trying to work out now, first of all, the availability and second the place to be able to do the work. The biggest obstacle right now are, for instance, the seats. When you're looking for just the basic bucket for a B-17 is \$1000 each. So we're doing many things right now trying to see about having those reproduced or finding some other way to do it.

Don Keller:

There's about seven B-17s right now that are either being restored or actually built from the ground up, almost, restoration from crashes and all. We're trying to work with them also and see about parts at that point because that's going to cut the cost of everything down if we do it that way. Once we do have the *cockpit finished, whether we stay at the stage we're at now or we do enclose it. The Western Antique Aeroplane & Automobile Museum in Hood River has asked us to go ahead and put that on display with them. They do their final show at the end of the summer. We'd put it up with them and leave it in there and they could display it there in the museum. We would pull it out in the spring again and do air shows and put it back in with them. So there's several groups like that we've talked to about long-term loans. Reunions basically now are at the point now with the Veterans reaching the ages they are and difficulty in traveling, we're not doing as many of the reunions.

Bert Campbell:

So that won't happen.

Don Keller:

We're not doing as many of the reunions. We still go to them yet and work with people.

We're now working with the sons and daughters of the Veterans.

Bert Campbell:

Second generation

Don Keller:

Second generation and we're even into third generations now. We're doing that also with the touring B-17s, the B-24 from Collings, and all that. We go out and meet with them, work with them, and work with the people because part of the problem they're having is trying to find a relevance of WWII to modern day and even to their lives. For some, it's trying to get a connection to a grandfather or a father that they never knew. We show them what their position was like and what daily life was like for them, very similar to what the barnstorming aircraft are doing right now too. They're doing the same history tours. We're also working with the younger generations because they really don't have a relation. One of the reasons we started doing the air shows even before we did the cockpit is that, I was out at one of the Hillsboro air shows and somebody came through and was looking and goes, "What's the big deal? The airplanes, they're pressurized and this or that? Yeah, somebody's shooting at you. What's the big deal?"

So I took them over and showed them the aircraft and showed them how they had to be on oxygen. They were working in temperatures anywhere from 20 to 40 below zero.

Bert Campbell:

And lower [Agreement]

Don Keller:

And it gave *them some kind of relevance and the people were just amazed. So that's really how we started doing the air show work. That's kind of led into a side thing for Air Depot, the educational side of it. We work with schools and try to help that scope because people can't find the relevance to it. The modern generations that are coming in now, they don't actually see the hardware anymore. They're working online. They're working through their computer. They're doing computer games and simulations. I was doing a fair mission in Hillsboro with a Washington County sergeant. As we were standing there waiting he goes, "Oh, you like old airplanes. You'll never guess what I just saw."

"What did you see?"

"We went to the Hillsboro air show and some guy actually had a B-17 cockpit out there. My grandson and I, we sat there and we do the B-17 flight simulators on the computers and he was having a ball because he could actually see what it looked like, not just on the computer screen but to actually touch it and it was real to him then. It wasn't just on the screen like that."

He said, "Have you ever seen that?"

I said, "Yeah."

He goes, "When?"

I said, "When I went home and put it in my garage that night."

So it's bridging a gap. If we're going to go ahead and keep this history alive—and again it's not the airplanes we're keeping alive, it's not the history we're keeping alive—we're keeping alive that connection, the history of the Veterans, the people that built the airplanes, that flew them, that fought in them, that died in them, repaired them. Without that, really all we're doing is showing an object.

Bert Campbell:

Without what they did, our nation and our society would not be what we are today.

Don Keller:

Yes and people don't realize how close, at times, it came to where just basically a turn of one event, one thing that happened, you know, is the difference between victory and disaster. Keeping these people's memories alive is what's really important.

Another project we've done is having panels, pieces of the aircraft, that we've had the Veterans sign. Unfortunately for us, very fortunately for them, they've now gone on to their reward, but these panels still show that link. They show these people and what aircraft they flew and who their friends were and what they did. Many organizations like our Oregon 8th Air Force Chapter and the national down in Georgia, the guys that do the barnstorming, the Collings Foundation, the Liberty Foundation, these people don't get rich doing this. Yes, they do have a substantial backing and all to work with it, but they're not getting rich doing what they're doing. They're doing it because it is for the Veterans. Yes, it is a business and, yes, it does have to turn a profit. There are realities to life just as there were in WWII, but they do it for the same reason we do what we do, they're doing it for the Veterans. They're doing it for the families, the second generation, the third generations.

I had a young lady that I met at Madras Air Show when I was working with the Madras Museum. Her father was a radio operator in Navy B-17s. When the people from the Madras Museum heard about it, they actually shut down the tours, closed off the airplane, and took her up there personally and gave her time with the radio so that she could go ahead and have one more final connection to her dad. She remembers as a little girl that she'd sit there in the window and wait for him to come home from his missions. She said, "I'd wait and watch him coming up the walkway. If he was coming up kind of quiet and looking at the ground and just being kind of lost in thought, I'd run out and I'd greet him and I'd give him an extra hug and kiss."

I said, "So why the extra hug and kiss?"

She said, "Because if he came home all happy and everything was fine, that meant that they'd found the people they were looking for: the fishermen, the lost Navy crewmen, whoever they were out there looking for for search and rescue. If he came home quiet, that means they were unable to find them. And he took that as his personal duty to find these people and to rescue them. So I knew when he came home in that quiet, sullen mood that he needed that extra hug and kiss because he wasn't able to go out and bring somebody home that night."

Bert Campbell:

That's what a lot of today's Coast Guard does. Those guys, you need to take your hat off to them. They should not be cutting funding for the Coast Guard and stuff like that. They may be a military organization, but they are very, very important to the safety of the public.

Don Keller:

When we started putting this together and I came up with the throttle quadrant I told you about, several parts also came out of the sister ship to that. That was 253. The sister ship to it is 254 and it's down at the Pima Air Museum. One of our members, Bill Frostick, helped restore that airplane for the 390th Bomb Group down there. And I wanted to learn more about the Coast Guard B-17s and all, so I started researching. I came up with a Coast Guardsman who was a retired Rear Admiral. He spent most of his career with that airplane during his early Coast Guard career. He told me their missions sometimes would be 17 and 18 hours in a B-17. That was not that unusual for a Liberator. For a B-17, that's really stretching the range and that's eight hours out into the middle of the ocean and back. He told me they went on several rescue missions in that airplane where they were able to go out and give aid to the crews so that the surface vessels could get out there and rescue these guys.

Bert Campbell:

Yes. We owe a lot to our military. I have to say that pretty much covers everything, don't you?

Don Keller:

It pretty much does.

The B-17

Bert Campbell:

Throw something in there if you've got any comments.

Don Keller:

Earlier we talked about the fact that people asked why I do this and I came because of the airplanes and I stayed because of the people. It's easy to understand why as far as the people go. The quality of the people I've met and the people I've worked with and all are just phenomenal. God's blessed me very heavily with being able to meet these Veterans whether they were Navy, Coast Guard, 8th Air Force, later United States Air Force, whichever. The various Veterans I've worked with when doing these projects have been wonderful. The other thing about it is the attraction to originally the aircraft is this airplane, a lot of people talk about compared to today's airplanes or even later airplanes it wasn't very good. Well, the B-17 was a 1930s design. 1935 would be the first flight for the B-17, model 299. It represented leaps and bounds ahead of the technology then. And in the WWII the tremendous technology due to the war in necessity it was bypassed. But even at that, this airplane was designed to last no more than six to ten missions. We still are flying those aircraft. Right now they're doing works in the barnstorming and air shows and things like that, but they're still flying eighty years after the first flight of the B-17, an airplane that was only supposed to last six to ten missions.

Bert Campbell:

I heard five was an average life expectancy particularly early on.

Don Keller:

Some of the earlier manufacturers such as Jack and Heintz, they actually were called in by the military to quit putting such heavy time devoted into building the product because they were building an airplane to last six years and it was not going to last six missions. So there was the quality that went into the aircraft, the tremendous designs, the changes and constant developments that this airplane was going through.

Bert Campbell:

Charles Lindbergh worked for Ford Motor Company at Willow Run manufacturing B-24s. He was constantly complaining that we needed to put more quality into these planes. The thing's only supposed to last five mission. You can't hold it against Lindbergh because he was used to flying, at that time, state-of-the-art aircraft that were hand built, you know, one or two total.

Don Keller:

Well, the B-17 had many redundant systems to them, but it was also said that it was a pilot's airplane. It was very, very forgiving. In fact, the nickname for it was the "four-engine Piper Cub".

One of the pilots used to say, "The problem isn't trying to take off in a B-17, it's trying to get the doggone thing to land because it does not want to quit flying with that big heavy wing that had the massive lift to it."

There have been aircraft where they've actually had control cables shot out where they've gone back and jerry-rigged the cables and bring the airplane back.

Don Keller:

It came back under tremendous damage in circumstances that modern aircraft now—

Bert Campbell:

You couldn't do it.

Don Keller:

—couldn't do it.

Bert Campbell:

We're fly by wire now and you can't crawl out of the pilot's seat and wander back through that aircraft.

Don Keller:

Yes. I was very fortunate in 1985 to fly with David Tallichet. I met him back down in California at Chino and we flew up from there to the 50th anniversary of *the B-17 at Boeing Field, King County International Airport in Seattle. Everyone got their chance to fly. It came my time to fly, I started flying just above Redding and flying long and, boy, I'm just doing the best I can. The pilot, he's sitting there. He's reading his charts and checking his maps and this and that and figuring out everything. Suddenly, I hear this voice behind me going, "You know, for somebody who's supposed to be having fun you're white knuckling. You're way too tense."

I looked over and it was Dave Tallichet, the owner who was a B-17 pilot in the 100th Bomb Group. He said, "Pick a point on the nose and then pick a point on the horizon and fly to it. Don't worry about the altimeter and all these other things. If you just kind of glance at them from time to time and make sure everything's still where it's supposed to be, you'll be fine and you'll start having fun."

Don Keller:

And I did. I mean I relaxed immediately and I had a ball. I flew it almost to Albany.

Bert Campbell:

That's a long flight.

Don Keller:

It was a long flight and it was a kick. It was so much fun flying that airplane. And it's like he said it really is a pilot's airplane.

Bert Campbell:

Yes. Do you think that's about good enough?

Don Keller:

Yes

Bert Campbell:

Let's call it good.

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