

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
HAROLD C. BROWN
Pilot, U. S. Army Air Corps, World War II

2004

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Brown, Harold C., (1924-), Oral History Interview, 2004
User copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Harold Brown, a Madison (Wisconsin) native, discusses his fighter pilot service with the U.S. Army Air Corps in World War II. He talks about his youth lying on the Madison Capital Square grounds on hot summer nights and Pearl Harbor Day. Brown discusses his basic training in San Antonio (Texas) and his training as a P-51 Mustang pilot in Tampa (Florida). He talks about arriving in England in March 1943 as an 8th Air Force replacement pilot on P-47 aircraft. Brown recalls the story of a prostitute giving him a “lucky” rag doll in London before his first combat mission in May 1943 that he kept the past sixty years. He discusses flying sixty-seven missions during the war and one incident of throwing eggs at pilots in his Quonset hut which led to the flight surgeon sending him to a rest home for seven days. Brown talks about becoming a “dedicated killer” and the required fighter mission hours before a pilot could return home. Brown describes some missions during which he witnessed friends shot down and the effects that had on him. He recounts the scene flying over Omaha Beach on D-Day. Brown recalls being one of only three of twenty-four fighter pilots from his squadron to return home. He details the horror of strafing German trucks, tanks, and airfields. He talks about having PTSD since Desert Storm, recalling strafing trains near a school yard, and his questioning of God. Brown discusses advanced training fighter tactics and staying in the Air Force Reserve after the war. He talks about commanding eighty-four men at Rock County Airport in the Reserves during the Cold War training for a nuclear attack. Brown talks about getting ten-percent disability and being a retired officer. He tells of giving credit to those who died in the war and Martin Coffey’s family legacy. He states he worked for forty years at Mautz Paint and belongs to the VFW, DAV and Reserve Officers Association. He concludes by mentioning combat incidents of his now-dead fighter pilot friends and reads a letter written to his mother while in combat.

Biographical Sketch

Brown (1924-) served with the 8th Air Force during World War II. He flew sixty-seven combat missions before returning to the United States. Brown worked with Mautz Paints in Wisconsin after the war and retired from the Air Force Reserves.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, 2004.
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, 2004.
Transcript edited by Daniel Birk & John McNally, 2007

Interview Transcript

John: This is John Driscoll, and today is June 21, 2004. And this is an oral history interview with Harold C. Brown. And we are at the Veterans Museum, in Madison. Did I say today is June 21? And Harold is a veteran of the United States Army Air Force. Was that it?

Harold: Army Air Corps.

John: Okay. And to start, Harold, first, thanks for agreeing to the interview, and why don't we start at the beginning. Where were you born? And when?

Harold: Okay, I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, here, on Lake Street. Off of West Washington Avenue, on June 6, 1924. My mother and father were nineteen. And after I was born that year, they moved to Wooster, Ohio, where I lived until I was five years old. And then we went to Buffalo, and my father worked as a sales manager for Sherwins Paint Company. But they were divorced when I was ten years old, so I came here to Madison to live with my mother, who lived here because her mother lived here. And when I was twelve, I moved back with my father until he died when I was sixteen years old. So after I buried my father, in Paw Paw, Illinois, I returned to Madison with my mother and my sister, who was five years younger. And we lived at 318 East Mifflin Street, and I went to Central High here, which is right off the square, which, of course, is gone now. But I graduated in 1942.

John: If we can back up, would you repeat the story about on hot nights.

Harold: Right. Yes, I remember. I am looking out the window at the Vets Museum now and I am looking at the square. I remember when we lived on Mifflin Street, it was before air conditioning; on a very hot night you would lay on the sheets and just sweat. So my mother and my sister and I would take our blankets, sometimes, and go sleep on the grass, and many, many other people did. On the square. Which, of course, I would be afraid to do today, but people did it in those days. It was very safe. When you were five years old in Madison, the mothers would bring you to the capital up here, and show you which door to exit, in case you were lost in Madison. Then they would teach you the way home from that exit door. So, after that, after we learned, us kids would go down to Vilas Park and fish for bluegills. We'd wander all over, and it was safe. Children could walk around in those days. When we wanted to go home, no matter where you were in Madison, you could see the capital, so you would go to the Capital and find your way home from there. Well, I always wanted to be a fighter pilot, from the time that I saw a movie called *Wings*. You had to be a college graduate to be a pilot, to get into the Army Air Corps. So, I thought I would never make it. So, when the war did start, I had mixed emotions. I was sorry for the war, but they changed the rules and all you had to be was a high school graduate. So that made me very

happy.

John: I didn't know that.

Harold: Right. And I remember Pearl Harbor Day. My uncle, Bud, and I were on the southwestern corner of Madison, here, and we were hunting rabbits. There was six inches of snow on the ground and it was a Sunday morning. And we were hunting rabbits and we heard on the radio that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. So, of course, we went home and I was a senior at that time. I had to wait until I graduated in June in 1942 to enlist. Well, I have flat feet. And only one in 120 men could pass the physical to become a pilot. And flat feet would rule you out. So I held my arches up. I wanted it so badly. And then, so that I didn't fail the written test, it was at the library on the square here. I seated myself between two University of Wisconsin graduates, and if I didn't know the answer, I looked at theirs and if they agreed, I wrote that down. So, by hook or crook, I was going to be a fighter pilot. So, I did get in and went down to San Antonio, Texas to begin with. And from there, shuffled to other bases until finally in January, I graduated as a single engine pilot. I was then sent to Tampa, Florida, to learn to fly the P-51 Mustang. For three months, I was there. In March, my best friends, Martin Coffey, who was twenty-four (remember, now, I was nineteen) and John Phelan, who was about twenty-two, and Peters, who was, I think he was about twenty-one, we were sent to Taunton, Massachusetts, and put on a boat and sent to England as replacement pilots. The 8th Air Force was losing, started to begin to lose pilots. And not many people know, but out of all the soldiers killed in all the services in World War II, one out of every six was in the 8th Air Force.

John: That is what I understand.

Harold: Right. And, so, they were losing. We were replacement pilots. And so we were sent to a P-47 base. Colonel Duncan ran it. Because, they said, he was screaming for replacement pilots. We had to re-train in the P-47. And then, I remember, the colonel called me into his office, Colonel Duncan. And he said, "Well, on May 21, you are going to start in combat on your first mission. That's a week from now. So, what I want to do, I want to give you a three day pass to go to London." He wrote me a three day pass, so I went to London. Well, I got to London, and I toured it. Did the usual things. And then the last day I was there, that last night, I was on Bond Street in London and the air raid sirens sounded. I'd never seen any German bombers so I was standing on the street, waiting for these bombers to come over to watch. And a young girl, about twenty, came up to me, red-head, and she says, "Yank, you can't stay out here. You'll be killed." So she took me into a bank, and we went downstairs. We sat against the wall until the all-clear sirens sounded. Well, as we were leaving the bank, I told her that I thanked her very much for thinking of me. She was very kind to do so. And then she says, "Well, you can stay with me in my apartment for a fiver, if you wish, Yank." And then I realized a fiver is five pounds, which at that time was twenty dollars. I

realized then that she was a prostitute. Well, I had spent my last years at Central High, but in those days, as I remember, there was only one girl at Central High that had a bad reputation.

John: Oh, okay.

Harold: And if you were seen with that girl, no other girl would date you. So, all of a sudden, I started to think well you know, I am going to start combat in about four days. Most pilots never got by twelve missions.

John: That was it?

Harold: After twelve missions, most of them were gone. So, I thought, you know, I've never experienced love and I think that I will do it. So I told her, that would be fine. So we went up to her apartment. She made me a nice tomato sandwich. They didn't have much meat over there. And she was very kind to me. A very kind girl. And I remember going to sleep in her arms.

John: Oh, that's a great story.

Harold: Yea. And the next morning I woke up, and I got dressed to leave. And as I put my blouse, my jacket on, she noticed that my wings didn't have a piece of blue felt behind it. So she says, "You are not flying combat." And I said, no. Once you started to fly combat, they put a piece of blue felt behind your wings so you could see someone and know if they were in combat or not.

John: I've never heard that. Yeah, okay.

Harold: Yea. And I said, "No, but I start the 21st." And she said, "Just a minute." So she went to the bedroom and she came back with a Raggedy Anne Doll. Now, this has been in my dresser for sixty years, and up until two weeks ago, no one had touched this doll except for Irene, this prostitute, and my wife, who I told about this.

John: Sure, okay.

Harold: And she took this doll, and she wrote on the face, "Irene," her name. And she wrote, "Happy landings."

John: Isn't that something?

Harold: And she said, "You keep this with you, and you'll never get shot down. You will survive."

John: Isn't that remarkable?

Harold: Yea. So I kept this doll in my dresser next to my cot and I never got shot down. At least over, I made it back to England and crash landed three times.

John: Okay.

Harold: But I have kept this doll until two weeks ago when I told my friends at the VA about it. It had never been touched by anyone except Irene, myself, and my wife. And so, I would like to give you this when I die. I have told my wife about it already.

John: Okay. That's a remarkable story.

Harold: And lots of pilots did that. Some would not change their socks. They, I mean, they would wear the same socks they always wore on a mission. They thought if they changed the socks, it would be bad luck. And, of course, my wife says, now don't forget it was the Lord that saved you.

John: Yes.

Harold: At that time I was a Christian Scientist. I am now a Lutheran. But there was three times where I thought that I would not live the next minute out. There was no way I could survive and I never prayed to God to save me. All I did was, "Dear God, don't let it hurt. Don't let it hurt." I didn't want it to hurt. So that is the story of the doll.

John: What a remarkable story. The P-47 was a hard airplane to fly, wasn't it?

Harold: It was, compared to a Mustang. A Mustang was just like a sports car, where a Thunderbolt was heavy. It was seven tons and it was, you might call it a little bit slushy. It didn't respond as quickly to the controls. But I remember when I got on the base, and I remember a reunion I went to about ten years ago. One of the crew chiefs said, "You know, I remember a young fellow, nineteen, and him standing in front of a Thunderbolt at our base, and saying, 'I'm not going to fly that stupid barrel of bolts.'" And he said, "He was a young fellow. And he says, 'I remember him just about a month later standing in front of his Thunderbolt, all shot to pieces, full of holes and the whole works. And his face was ashen white, and all he could say was, 'Thank God I was in a Thunderbolt.'" They could take punishment. They would come back with a cylinder knocked out. They would come back, one of the fellows, with a piece of a tree six inches in diameter and eight feet long stuck in his wing because we flew so low. We flew absolutely real low. So that is how I got into the Air Force. I ended up with sixty-seven missions.

John: Wow.

Harold: I ended up with sixty-seven.

John: And twelve was the average?

Harold: Twelve was the average for a fighter pilot to live. And, let's see, where is it. It's in this book here. I had sixty-four missions in. I had sixty-four missions in and then I was sent to a rest home in England. And the rest home was a manor, an English manor. The lord was off to war but the ladyship ran the manor and there was about twenty of us there. And as soon as you got there the Red Cross gave you civilian clothes. You didn't know who was a general and who was a sergeant. We stayed there for a week and were treated royally. I often wonder why I was sent to the rest home. But at a reunion, I talked to the flight surgeon and I said, "Why did you send me to the rest home?" And he said, "You don't know why?" I said, "No, I don't remember. Why? Why was it?" He said, "Well, Rafferty came over, running, to my Quonset hut one night, and he says, 'You better get over to my barracks.'" My Quonset hut with eight pilots in it. "'Brown has gone crazy.' So I went over there, and you had gotten a hold of a bunch, a dozen eggs, and you were throwing eggs at everyone, and saying, 'Bombs away!' So I gave you a shot and put you to sleep. And that is why I sent you." Well, I flew some more missions then, three more missions. And I had sixty-seven in. And then my squadron commander and the flight surgeon came over to my Quonset hut one night, and they sat on the edge of my bed. And I'll just read you out of this, *Close Calls by the Squadron Commander*. He says, "There was some nice rewards in squadron leadership. One day in the early fall of 1944 Colonel Rimmerman told me that I could rotate three pilots to the States, even though they had not finished their tour of duty." I actually had three more to go. "Apparently extra replacement pilots had arrived. I got together with our flight surgeon, Doc Capanelli, and we decided quickly on two who should go. 'For the third,' I said, 'how about Harry Brown?' Doc said, 'I was hoping you would say that.' Harry was a mild mannered, tall, slim Midwestern who had arrived at the squadron just prior to the invasion. Almost everyone who became good friends with him got shot down in the heavy fighting of the early low level attacks the squadrons engaged in. One pal, and that one pal was John Phelan - he was flying my wing - and two days before, Coffey and I went over with, we were strafing tanks and he got hit and crashed in the woods and was killed. That night, while Phelan and I were putting his stuff together to send home to his wife and a son that he had never seen, that was born while we were on the ship, and he started to sob. And I said, "Come on, let's go over to the Officers' Club and get a drink." We did. Well, two days later, we were strafing German troops near Rouen, France. And there was eleven of us. And seventy-two of the Luftwaffe's best, Ju-26's - the Abbeville Kids - yellow nose - dropped out of the clouds on us and they knocked six of us down, out of the eleven.

John: Oh, wow.

Harold: But Phelan was my wing man, and he kept with me during the dog fights, and all of a sudden, I looked and he was on fire, at eight hundred feet next to me, and he says, "Goodbye, Harry." And he crashed. And that's what it says: "One pal had even said, 'Goodbye, Harry,' on the way down to his death. All this had accumulated with him until he was convinced he would never survive, although his performance was fine. The two of us just decided that if anyone deserved a break, it was him. We went over to his Nissen hut and sat on the next bunk to his, and told him to pack up. That he was going home. He just looked at us in blank amazement, uncomprehendingly. Finally, it sank in, and he realized he would be going home alive. And we all felt good about it." So that is how I got home.

John: What a great story.

Harold: So that is in this book here, see.

John: Seventy missions?

Harold: Sixty-seven, I had.

John: And seventy was a tour?

Harold: Actually, you had to get 270 hours in, and I was just short about five or six hours. But when I went over there, when I got there, they had two hundred hours was the tour of a fighter pilot. And then they were losing some fighter pilots, so they decided, "Let's go to 300." They went to 300 and all of a sudden the pencil scratchers figured that 300 nobody would survive. So they lowered it to 270. And, as I say, out of the twenty-four in my squadron, three of us made it. And, you know, there weren't that many fighter pilots. The 8th Air Force had fourteen fighter groups. And you were supposed to be able to put forty-eight airplanes in the air, three squadrons of sixteen planes each. So, to do that, you were assigned seventy-two pilots, and as one would get shot down, they had a replacement pool up in England, and they would send you another replacement. So, if you multiply the fourteen by seventy-two, you only come out with a little over a thousand fighter pilots. So that's all there was. You know. Yea. That's all there was. There was a lot of bombers, you know. And ten in each bomber. And when they went down, they lost a lot.

John: You were mostly close air support?

Harold: Yes.

John: As opposed to escorting bombers.

Harold: Yes.

John: Okay.

Harold: On June 5th, before D-Day, we were over Killem, and also B-26s were sent over, and others, to bomb that area. And we were bombing and strafing. And we didn't know it but it was a diversionary actions, we know now. To make them think we are going to land at Calais rather than Omaha. Well, I remember coming back that evening and seeing all the ships, hundreds of ships leaving England. And we looked down, and we saw those ships, and immediately our Colonel Duncan - that is the thing - in the Air Force, your commander leads you. He is the first down, see. He deserves a lot of credit. He doesn't stay back. And he says, "If anyone opens his mouth, I guarantee I will kill him upon landing." He was afraid someone would say, "Look at all the ships!" and give something away.

John: Yea.

Harold: So we landed, and as soon as we landed, our crew chiefs told us that D-Day was on, and they were, we were to go back to our bunks and then go to the mess hall and get a sandwich, and be at briefing at midnight. So, we had no sleep. At midnight, we were briefing, and the pilots were there, and they had a big map on the wall with all the yarns all over the place. And our job was to go over Omaha Beach at 3,000 feet and circle it, so that if enemy fighters came in to strafe the beach, we'd shoot them down. And then there was other groups that would be at 5,000, 8,000, 12,000, they were just stacked all over that. And so finally it was ten after one, I remember it was raining pitchforks. None of us had ever taken off in the rain in the daytime in formation. Now we were going to have to take off in the pouring rain at night, and we thought we would all be killed. Well, Colonel Duncan saw that we were worried. So, it was ten after one. He put his finger on the map at Cherbourg and he said, "It's ten after one. Ten minutes ago, our paratroopers jumped, and we're going to take off if it snows." And we were going to take off at three thirteen. We were to start taxiing out and line up two by two behind each other, all forty-eight, so you take off and get in a formation, in the pitch black. And it was raining so hard you couldn't see the taxi strip. So the crew chief laid on the wing, hung on a machine gun sticking out from the wing, and directed each pilot with his flash light. If he went to the left, you would turn to the left. And they finally got us all lined up. We thought we were going to be killed. Well, five minutes before three thirteen, the rain quit, the moon came out, and we got off.

John: Oh.

Harold: But 15 miles away, it was still raining and they lost twelve out of forty-eight of the Mustangs taking off.

John: Oh, man.

Harold: And at that time, there was six thousand planes in the air over England. And all the search lights in England - the ones they had used for anti-aircraft - all of them, were just going back and forth pointing the way to the beachhead. And I remember looking over, from here to the other side of the street there, was a B-24. We went right through a formation of B-24s. When we got over the beach at four fifteen, then at six thirty, I thought, gee, I got a top show. Here I am three thousand feet over the beach. I could see the ships starting to come in the daylight, and all of a sudden a blanket of fire from the ships to the shore, and then from the shore to the ships. And then I saw the landing barges. They let go, I think about six miles out, or something. And they had quite a ride in. And I thought I was going to see the whole works right here. Well, just before the landing craft pulled into the beach, a cloud cover came up at 2,000 feet, and I never saw anything. Which I am glad I didn't, because it was a slaughter. I'm glad I didn't see it. Well, then what we did, we went back to base, we came back at ten thirty and flew that pattern again. And then we came back at night, and that's when I killed my first people. Ah, we were to start strafing Germans coming toward the beach in the evening. I saw four trucks with about twenty soldiers each, and a staff car, so I went down and I strafed them all, and I killed them. And as I passed over, after strafing, I thought, I'll go back and see what I did. And I thought if I go back and see men twisting and turning on the ground, I'll never be able to do it again. So I didn't go back. And when you strafe with eight .50 caliber machine guns and hit a truck, all you see is the pile of dust. Because you are firing thirty-two hundred rounds a minute, each gun. Each gun, eight of them, is firing four hundred rounds. And we had about thirty-five, thirty-two hundred rounds in our wings. So you could only fire for thirty seconds. But all it took for a truck was brrrr! One burst, and that was it.

John: How did you find targets? Did you have a controller down on the ground?

Harold: No. We flew and looked for them. As I say, that is the time I became a dedicated killer. I was a killer. And that is how you win wars. The one who wins is the one who kills the most of the enemy. That is how you win a war. And so, what we did after that, we went back three times the next day. It's in my diary. I don't know how we'd land after dark. We'd just go back and forth. Load up more ammunition, and go over and strafe Germans again. But, you know, it is a horrible thing, and it never bothered me too much, but you were a hunter, like you were hunting. And you would fly and what we would do, we would fly over spread out in line, and then we saw something, we'd report it in. Then we'd go down and strafe them. So, we were looking for all the, we were just looking for German trucks and German soldiers, and tanks, and then we would strafe airfields. I know I hit one airfield, and I got it in my diary; I hit the barracks and killed everybody in the barracks.

John: Oh, wow.

Harold: That's the trouble. You are killing so many people, you know? And it didn't bother me until Desert Storm. And I always thought about my friends that were killed. I would start reading my diary on May 21, and then I'd start getting drunk.

John: Oh, wow.

Harold: I'd quit twenty years ago, drinking, because I could see that I was going to lose my wife. So I quit. But I would be drunk for about two weeks. I'd read those missions. And, but it wasn't, and all I thought about was my friends that were all killed.

John: Sure. Sure.

Harold: After those three were dead, I never made friends again. Because, if you don't know then. They's say, "John got shot down." "Who in the hell is John?"

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: Let me turn this.

Harold: About D-Day. I forgot about D-Day, in the rain, while we were briefing, they were painting the black and white stripes on our airplanes. I think now, you've got a Mustang downstairs with the black and white stripes.

John: Yea.

Harold: That was one of the well-kept secrets until D-Day. In fact, Blassingham, who was our supply sergeant, he wondered why he had all these gallons of black and white paint. Until D-Day. And it was decided that, from the time we landed on June the 5th until we took off the next morning, these lines would be painted on. And they told us at briefing, that the Germans had many of our planes that had crashed in Europe. And they had them flying. They were flying them. And they expected some of those to come in. Like a bomber would come in and drop bombs on the beach, a B-17 or a B-24. So if we saw any planes, even if they were American, that didn't have the stripes, we were to shoot them down.

John: Okay. I've seen it.

Harold: That's the reason. And our poor crew chiefs, they painted them on wrong. Instead of putting white and black, or black and white, they did it in the opposite way. They had to take it all off and start all over.

John: I've seen that.

Harold: Yea, that was the reason.

John: How long could a P-47 stay up?

Harold: Well, about four hours, unless you had a belly tank. And we had belly tanks that would hold, I think, about a hundred and sixty-five gallons. And a lot of them were made out of fiber, glass fiber. So, if we went on a mission, sometimes, and we knew we wouldn't have to use all that gasoline, we would pick out some target on the ground, and then you would drop it, and the guy that followed behind you, he would shoot it. And the incendiary bullets would catch that gas on fire. But I don't know if it did any good, you know. But it never affected me, the people I killed. I mean, until Desert Storm. And then, since I am retired Air Force, I get *The Air Force Times* every week to keep up. And after the first Desert Storm, why, on that week that it ended, it said that the A-10 pilots, and we did have A-10s out here, that the A-10 pilots were coming back on the last day with tears in their eyes. It was a slaughter on that road. They were slaughtering them. And the pilots were saying, "I don't know if I can kill any more. Because it is a horrible thing to kill somebody, you know. And, so, then I started to think about that. And I thought how can God allow this to happen? Because I was believing in God. And then I thought well maybe God isn't real? We just think God is real. And maybe he is the Wizard of Oz, I finally decided. Like the Wizard of Oz, they thought he was so powerful, but when Dorothy finally found him, he was a fake. He wasn't anything powerful. So I thought, finally, when we die, when we see God, we'll find out he is the Wizard of Oz. So I went crazy for three years. And every time my wife would go to church, I would sing, "Well, we're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz." And then I started to seek help from the VA and I go now, it's called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And after that, for three years, I was having dreams of killing people, and people jumping on me, and trying to kill me. And I still have some dreams. But I take some medicine now that helped me. But, and, some vivid things come back. Like I remember I was strafing a train one day and strafing the soldiers as they jumped off the train. We'd get the engine first, so the train would stop. And one fellow jumped out and he set up, I saw him. He set up a .30 caliber machine gun as I passed over. And I thought, "I've got eight .50s, he doesn't have a chance." And I came back and killed him. And then there was one thing, I never told anyone for forty years, and I was sitting on the porch, watching TV with an Alten movie about Viet Nam, where this squad of eight men, had a Vietnamese baby, and the baby was crying. But it was night time in the dark, and they knew the Viet Cong was there, and the only way they could stop that baby was that Alten shot the baby, so that the rest could survive. And I thought about this one train I strafed. You get right on the ground and go in on it, and just pour the lead into it. And as I pulled over, here was a school, and kids were running out. And I don't know if I killed any kids.

John: Oh, wow.

Harold: That is the horrible part. And, maybe I didn't even hit them. I think most the

bullets went into the train, you know, the box cars, I mean the passenger cars. But I worry that some of our soldiers in Iraq are facing the same thing. Like this is one who just came back to Janesville. He says, "I was scared I'd get shot. And I'd never get home to see my eight-year-old son." And he says, "I was also scared I'd have to shoot an Iraqi and he wouldn't get home to his son." You know, it's a horrible thing to have to kill someone. And I kind of believe in Winston Churchill who said, it is better to jaw, jaw, jaw, jaw than to war, war, war, war. War is the last resort. And I know one time I was up at, maybe this doesn't fit?

John: Oh, yea.

Harold: I was up at Fort McCoy, and there was a general at the bar after hours, and he had his battle dress on. And I said, "Well, general, what happened today?" "Well," he said, "we were out throwing grenades, and rifle practice, and I threw a few myself." And I said, "How are the men? Pretty good?" "Oh, yea, they are excellent shots. Excellent. Fine soldiers." And I said, "I am sure they are, but the moment of truth is going to come some day, when that soldier has his gun lined up on the chest of an enemy, and all he has to do is pull a little bit to the left, and fire, nobody will know the difference. He missed. Or, he will fire at his chest and watch that man fall on the ground and start screaming for his mother." And we had lots of pilots that would give a little bit of rudder so that they would miss. And I guess, in World War II, as I understand it, only one in twelve ever heard a gun fired. That are veterans. Like we had a thousand men. Nothing against them. But we had a thousand and twenty men on our base, but we only had forty-eight pilots out shooting. You know? And only one in twenty ever fired their guns.

John: Oh, yea?

Harold: Yea. In World War II. And only fifteen percent could kill somebody. That is written up in the books. By the time we got to Viet Nam, I mean, Korea, fifty percent could kill. By the time we got to Vietnam, ninety percent could kill. Because of the training. In World War II, they had a target set up, and you shot at a bulls eye. But, finally, when you get to Vietnam, now they're training with a silhouette of a man jumping up and you shoot the silhouette. So you are trained to kill. You have got to train people to kill. That's what you've got to do.

John: How did you learn to shoot with an airplane?

Harold: Oh, I remember we went to Matagorda Island in advanced training. In Texas. We'd fly to Matagorda, and they would have airplanes pulling a target, way behind their plane in hopes they'd didn't get shot. And then we'd shoot at them. But, the sights were pretty primitive in those days. It was a red circle with a red dot in the middle that superimposed itself on the target. But nothing like they got today. And, of course, when be bombed, we didn't have a bomb sight. We would roll over and start down from about 5,000, and get lined up with the target, and

make sure we weren't yawing to the right or left. And then when we wanted to drop the bomb, we'd pull the nose up, pull back on the stick, and when the bridge would disappear behind the nose, we pushed the button. That was the only bomb sight. So we didn't hit too often. I think, in World War II, only twenty percent of the bombs ever hit what they were aimed at. And now they can, just think, in this war in Iraq, we dropped over thirty-eight thousand bombs. Thirty-eight thousand. Now, they had to do some damage.

John: Oh, yea, and a lot of those were precision, laser-guided and that.

Harold: Yea. They go right in.

John: That is remarkable.

Harold: Well, I was trying to think of anything else that, I don't know. But, I ended up, one more little story.

John: Yea.

Harold: I ended up in the Reserves, you know, like the National Guard. And, during the Cold War, I was the commander of eighty-four men at the Rock County Airport. That is how I finished up my tour, after twenty-three years. I had eighty-four men. We had everything from a doctor to medics, air police, state policemen would be air police, you know, whatever comprises Reserves. And we would train for one weekend a month at Janesville and then we'd come up for our two weeks training at Truax [Dane County Regional Airport at Madison]. And Truax, at that time in the '60s, had F-104s. And it was real Air Force, it was not National Guard. And did you know they had the SAGE building in there?

John: Yes.

Harold: Yea, that six foot concrete wall. And I was in that one day when we were training how to recover. We were an Air Force Rescue and Recovery Squadron. And they have two hundred of these throughout the United States. And we had a little bit of everything, so that when the planes came back from their mission, if their base was gone, like Truax was gone, they could land at Janesville, and we would take care of the wounded, take care of the planes, and so forth. And the Russians - this was a top secret - only I and the first sergeant knew. And, of course, it doesn't pertain now, after thirty years, twenty years or so. But there was one top secret, and that was, as soon as the war started, there was ten Russian missiles aimed at that SAGE building.

John: Oh, yea?

Harold: Nuclear bombs. And that the expected life of Madison was eight hours. It could

not last more than eight hours. It would be gone. Because one of them was going to hit here. So, the top secret was, as soon as the war began, they would scramble their fighters. And I was in there. They had the old computers in there. It would fill up a grocery store, and you could feel the air conditioning coming off all those tubes, you know. But, as soon as the war started, that computer would tell the planes where to go. You know. For defense. And they would not land back here. They would land at Janesville. But then, as soon as they took off, all of the personnel, the crew chiefs and everything - this was a top secret - would load up into trucks and they would close off Highway 90, and it is only thirty-four miles to Janesville airport, so they would come screaming down the airport to Janesville, and they would run their part of the war from Janesville. So that was the top secret, you know.

John: Wow.

Harold: But Madison, during the Cold War, didn't have much of a life. If war had started. Of course, a lot of people living today don't remember the Cold War.

John: Yea. I interviewed with IBM to work on the SAGE system.

Harold: Oh, you did?

John: I ended up not taking the job, going elsewhere.

Harold: That computer, they told me, could take the airplanes off, and tell them where to go, and land them.

John: Yes. That was all tubes.

Harold: All tubes. They showed me the diesel engines. They were as high as this room, and there were five of them that would run it in case the electricity went out, so they could cool that thing. But what did SAGE mean?

John: I don't know.

Harold: Something about strategic aircraft guidance, I think.

John: Could be. I knew the SAGE system and I knew the DEW line.

Harold: But there was no windows in that thing. I don't know what else I can tell you.

John: Well, you stayed in after, you stayed in the Reserves?

Harold: Yes, I have a retirement pay now. I am on a ten percent disability.

John: Okay.

Harold: So I get about \$106 from that, but, of course, with the government, they take it away from my pension. I get a pension from the Air Force. So they take that away, but they take real good care of me at the VA hospital.

John: Yea, that is a remarkable place. I know a lot of people that go out there.

Harold: It's a wonderful, wonderful place. But there aren't many of us left.

John: No. You said, reunions. Have you done reunions?

Harold: Yea, but I don't go. I went to one two years ago. I am not going to any more, because the pilots I did know are all dead now, and there is only about thirty-one of us go. And I want to see more of the United States. I want to see more of New Mexico.

John: It is a fabulous country.

Harold: You only got so much money. You know. And reunions do end up costing you a thousand dollars. So I don't go to those any more. And the ones who do go, boy, they are hobbling around.

John: What about vets organizations? The American Legions? The VFW?

Harold: I am a life member of the VFW. I am a life member of the Disabled American Veterans. And then I am a life member of the Reserve Officers Association. Things like that. But I don't always attend all the meetings. You know.

John: Did you ever use your GI Bill?

Harold: Never did. When I came back from the service, I was discharged from Fort McCoy. You know. I joined the Reserves right away. But, I lived at the YMCA down here. It was a block off the square. It was \$5 a week to stay there, see. And, as far as, I remember going up and down State Street. Here, I was a retired First Lieutenant at that time. And I'd been making what, \$290 a month, or something. And I went up and down State Street trying to get a job. I'd go in shoe stores. "Have you got any experience selling shoes?" "Well, no, all I ever did from the time I was eighteen and graduated, I was in the Air Force." "Well, I'm sorry, but we want somebody with experience." And then I remembered that my grandfather had worked for Mautz Paint. Oh, I was bartending, over here, at the Loraine Hotel, for \$.85 an hour, at night. You know, to make some money. So I went with Mautz Paint and besides staying in the Air Force Reserve I stayed with Mautz Paint for forty years and retired from them. So, that was eighteen years ago, so I haven't worked since.

John: That is great. Tremendous. This is a remarkable story.

Harold: Well, I suppose there is a lot more someplace.

John: You know, I write.

Harold: Oh, you do?

John: And a good friend of mine just passed away, Stephen Ambrose. I don't know if you knew of him.

Harold: Oh, I didn't know him, but I know of him, of course.

John: He was talking to a bunch of veterans here. Several years ago, before he died. And he said, a lot of the guys had said, "I didn't do much. I don't have much of a story. We just did what we had to do." And he said, "Nah, you saved the world. You really did."

Harold: Well, I don't know. The credit goes to those who have died. I know Mike Martin. He was the big brother to me. That is why I miss him so much. And a few years back, and all during the years, we still, his brother still lives at Portland, Oregon. And we still go to visit him, and he comes to visit us. And he is a multi-millionaire out there. And, but, all my life, he was growing older as I grew older. I mean, there isn't a week I don't think about Martin. Because he was a big brother during all the training. Watched out for me. But then, about six or seven years ago, my wife went to Arlington, looked at his grave. And I was reading there, age twenty-four. And that was the first time I realized he wasn't growing older with me. You know? So, that is what was so tough. That is a remarkable story. You want to hear the one about Martin Coffey?

John: Oh, sure.

Harold: Okay. It was on that mission, it was on the 10th of June, and we were strafing German tanks and troops on the ground near Rouen, France. And all of a sudden, I saw a plane crashing into the woods because, and then I didn't know it was Martin. We kept on going around shooting up stuff and all of a sudden, they said, "Oh, Shetwood's on fire. And he is headed toward the beach." They had a landing place they dug out right away. So he landed at the beach. He got the fire out. He landed at the beachhead. But, I got so mad, I was over a marshaling yard, I just unloaded all my shells on that marshaling yard. I didn't know Coffey was dead. I got back, I found out he had been killed. So, he was listed as missing. And then, many years ago, it must have been fifteen years after the war, I found out from his brother. I contacted his brother out in Oregon, his younger brother. And he said he was married to Mary Ann, and Mary Ann was the heiress to Jansen Swim Suits.

And his father used to send \$675 check to his son all during our training. And Martin would spend it on coffee, on himself, Phelan and I, as long as we ended up the month broke. We rented a car for three months, you know. And his wife was fabulously rich, but I found out that he was listed as missing in action. And they always expected Martin to come to the door. But I thought they told him, they saw him crash in the woods. You know, he is dead. You know, but no it is missing in action. They can't find the body. So, after the war was over, his father was a very good friend of Touhey Spaatz, who was the commander of the 8th Air Force. So he got a hold of Touhey Spaatz in 1948 and said, "I want to know where my son crashed." So he found out, and his dad went over to France, and went to that area. After talking to many farmers, he found the farmer who had witnessed it. And he said, "Yes, we went out to his plane and we found him dead in the cockpit." So, not knowing what the Germans would do with the body - they just put them in a ditch sometimes and covered them up. "My wife and I buried him under a tree in the woods there, with his dog tags." So his dad had him disinterred and brought back and buried. He found his own son. But the story does not end there. The father was a multimillionaire and he had all kinds of airplanes. After the war, he even bought a Catalina for \$5,000 so he could go fishing up in Canada. A float plane. But the plane, the car was for town. When you left town, you used the airplane. Well, when Martin and Phelan and I were in Taunton, Massachusetts to go overseas, he got a telegram. His son, Lance, had been born, see. And he bought beer for everybody in the place, and the only stipulation was that not one beer bottle could leave. Well, we were walking on beer bottles.

John: Wow.

Harold: Well, anyway, his grandfather had Lance up in one of his planes when Lance was ten years old, and they ran into a thunderstorm over the Columbia River and they crashed and they were both killed.

John: Oh, how tragic.

Harold: Well, Mary Ann - this shows what happens to people - the widows. This will be real quick.

John: No, we have time.

Harold: But Mary Ann went into seclusion for a year then. Wouldn't talk to anybody, or anything. She lost her husband. She lost her son. But finally she came out of that and she remarried. And then she had another son, and when that son was sixteen, he was killed in an automobile crash.

John: Oh, wow.

Harold: She went into seclusion again and within a year, she committed suicide.

John: How tragic.

Harold: So this kind of shows what happens to the family, after someone has been killed in the war. You know? It goes on and on and on. But, here if you want it, this is the letter I wrote my mother. Is there time for just a letter?

John: Certainly.

Harold: This is a letter I wrote my mother. And this will go, this stuff, too. It says,

Dear Mom,

Oh, if only I could have been with you these last three years. [I wrote this after I finished combat.] So we could have shared each other's love and companionship for three years. This damned war has cheated us out of so much happiness. I've killed an awful lot of the enemy and probably caused many times as much grief to them but that will never bring back our last three years. Probably many of those I killed didn't want this war any more than I but they were trying to kill me and my friends, and they were the enemy. It is such a horrible shame that such a few greedy insane minds should ever come to have such power as to swing the wills of so many millions, but what is done is done. And even though we have been cheated, we and thousands of others have found ourselves, and been drawn closer together than ever before. Always I've said, "Whatever is right to happen will happen," but in this case, I can't see it to be right in any way. In the words of us laymen, no matter how you cut it, it's still salami. And in this case, dirty, rotten, filthy salami. I only wish that such people as Mary Baker Eddy [I was a Christian Scientist] and our own Mable [Mable was the head of the Christian church here] I feel that in time people will be fully and completely recognized so that our childrens' childrens' children will never be cheated as we have been. Why I should talk like this is beyond me, for I'll be coming home soon, and be with you all again. Maybe I am talking for my friends who can't. Coffey, Phelan, Hart, and so many others. I guess I am. We have only lost three years. Just a grain of sand, compared to what they and their loved ones have lost. I'll be home soon. Love, Harold.

But I thought that might be kind of interesting if you ever made a display of some of that.

John: Sure.

Harold: And I have this. There is a girl, Rachel Shelton, a young girl, she is nineteen. And she had to write a thing about me. So this is what she wrote. So you can have a copy of this, if you want it.

John: Sure.

Harold: But I talked her into going into the Army. She is over in Germany. She graduated from Orfordville last June, and I said, her parents didn't have enough to send her to college, so I said, "Why don't you check?" So, she joined up. And so she joined up, and she called me from Germany a couple of weeks ago. She is a dental technician. She will have a job all her life. But she said, "You know, I enlisted for four years." She said, "They've just informed me, they've increased that to six, now, and I have no choice." Can you imagine? And then I had, on Memorial Day, they made a nice front page article on me. I never expected to live. They got that. And that picture of the Thunderbolt. And out of those men, only three survived.

John: Wow.

Harold: But, three out of twenty-four. Can you imagine? Oh, my God. So I do have some memories.

John: Oh, yes, You've got a remarkable memory.

[End of Interview.]