

Nelson, Mckay

Air Force: 1942-1946

This interview was held on December 28, 2005. The questions were asked by Bryce Goodwin and Shelly Goodwin.

INT: Okay, if you'll begin by stating and spelling your name, full name?

VET: My name is Mckay Harris Nelson. I was born here in Cedar City to... my parents were John Henry and Vera Harris Nelson. They lived on 2nd East, at 296th South 200 East. My present home is at 480 East Rainbow Canyon Drive.

INT: So you live in Cedar City?

VET: Cedar City. Zip of 84720-2724.

INT: And before I start asking questions, I want you to show those books because those are really cool, just kind of hold them up to the camera maybe?

VET: I brought with me three publications here. The first one is *The Diary of a Bomb Squadron*, which I published back in about 1990.

INT: And you actually published that yourself?

VET: Yes.

INT: That's way cool.

VET: This is written..., the daily history of my squadron in China during World War II.

INT: So that's what it talks about; that book?

VET: Yes, this has day to day activities and all the membership that I could get photographs of. The second book is one by our 14th Air Force Association publication and it was published for our 50th Anniversary.

INT: So did you all get a copy of that?

VET: We had to buy these from the Association, but yeah. The third book here is Chennault's *Flying Tigers* which our Association published it in about 1985 and these were published and sold to the membership and anyone interested in buying them.

INT: So what's that one about?

VET: This is about the 14th Air Force.

INT: Is that what you served in?

VET: Yes.

INT: Did you draft or enlist in the... what did you enlist in, the Army or the Coast Guard or what?

VET: I enlisted in the Army Air Force... Air Corps back at that time, back in September of... I actually enlisted in March of 1942, but they sent me home to wait until they had bases constructed for us to start. And I was inducted in Santa Anna Army Air Base in the first of September in 1942.

INT: So you...you volunteered for the service?

VET: Yes.

INT: Did you serve full time or were you in a reserve unit?

VET: No, I served full time for three-and-a-half years in the Army Air Corps, which became the Army Air Force eventually when they had separate Air Force Units.

INT: And then, where was your headquarters or where have you been stationed when you were in the service?

VET: It's quite a long story here.

INT: That's fine, that's fine...we want that.

VET: I can read a few of these to you. I enlisted at Santa Anna... was inducted at Santa Anna and went through preflight school at Santa Anna for about nine weeks. And we had physical training and education. Mathematics was one of the important classes that we took. And we also studied of chemical warfare and things pertaining to flight. I started at... I spent at about nine weeks at Santa Anna and I was...went into flight training at Hemet, California for another nine weeks flying primarily small aircraft starting out, single engine aircraft. And from Hemet, California, we were sent to Marana, Arizona, where we were flying the BT17 aircraft which was a 715 horse power engine as I recall. We were in pilot training. Following that, I was sent to armament school in Lowry Field in Denver, Colorado. There we studied aircraft armament systems and all the machine guns, the bomb racks, the bombing facilities on the aircraft. Upon completing armament school at Denver, Colorado, I was assigned to Smokey Hill Army Air Base at Salina, Kansas. There, we were preparing a B29, the first B29s out in the factory that were being prepared for shipment overseas for the first B29s that went overseas. Some went to India, some went to China, and some went to Saipan. And from Saipan, they used the B29s to bomb Tokyo from that island.

To get back into flying, I had to sign up for gunnery school and that was held at Fort Myers, Florida, down in the southern tip of Florida. And that was mainly aerial... aerial gunnery training. After completing aerial gunnery training, I was sent to Columbia, South Carolina and assigned to a bomber crew of the B25 unit at...the B25 was a twin engine light bomber, medium bomber. And from there, after completing our crew training at Columbia, we were sent overseas to China. That trip over there included... starting at Miami, we flew to the Azores in the middle of the Atlantic, and to Casa Blanca in Morocco, I think, in Africa, then into Tunisia and to Tunis, and then to El Alamein and Cairo in Egypt. From Cairo our route took us across Saudi Arabia to Avadan, which was in Persia, which is now called Iran. And we stopped there for gas and from then we went along the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea to Kharache on the West end of India. Our squadron remained in India for a year and a half and we were flying missions out in...we were about 100 miles due West of Calcutta and bombing missions at that time were over in to Burma and Eastern India and into Burma and some up into China. After completing a year and a half there, our squadron was moved into China and we became part of the 14th Air Force of General Claire Lee Chennault.

Our base in China was located was located 40 miles outside of Kung Ming, China at a little farm village called Yang Kai. And at Yang Kai we had three squadrons of B25s. We had the 491st, which I was assigned to, the 22nd bomb squadron, and 11th bomb squadron. We operated off of this small...it was a dirt strip, a small Air Base and we operated out in that area to bomb targets in Southern China, down into French Indochina, which became Vietnam as you know it. And we also flew missions out over the Gulf of Tonkin toward Hanin Island, which was under the control of the Japanese at that time. We bombed also...be bombed the village of Hai Phong, which became one of the major bases controlled by the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War.

Of course we flew missions down into French Indochina, bombing...we had airdromes, railroad yards, highway and railroad bridges. And down in Southern China, we

bombed...ran strafing missions over their railroad lines and bombed bridges and airdromes held by the Japanese in Southern China. And I'd like to say, we carried sea sweeps for raids into Hanin Island down into the Gulf of Tonkin.

INT: And you say you were a tail gunner; that must have been pretty scary. How was that?

VET: Well, it's exciting, I'll say that. There's times when it's scary and times when it's exciting.

INT: Did you ever fly the plane or were you mostly just a tail gunner?

VET: No, I didn't in combat, no.

INT: You were just the tail gunner?

VET: Strictly as a tail gunner, yes.

INT: What years was it when you were serving in the Air Force?

VET: I was inducted in September of 1942 and stayed in three and a half years and was discharged back at Santa Anna California three and a half years later. Got out in 1946, January of '46.

INT: What was the highest rank that you achieved while in service?

VET: My highest rank was a staff sergeant.

INT: What was that? What did that do?

VET: Staff sergeant?

INT: Yeah.

VET: Well, that's... if you look in the dictionary, it calls it a low ranking military grade, enlisted grade.

INT: Did you receive any kinds of awards for your service?

VET: Yes. I was... I did. Oddly enough, these decorations didn't come at the time we were in China, they all came many years later. I got my first decoration, which was a China service medal, I got it in 1980 at one of our reunions that the Association had in this country. Other awards that all came, fifty-seven years later. I received a package from... I guess it's the Military Service Unit in St. Louis and in that package that I received Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal.

INT: What was that for?

VET: Well, that was for the service in South East Asia. With that medal, came two bronze stars, which were really difficult to describe. It's usually for having action in outstanding missions.

INT: What were the outstanding missions that you would say you had action in?

VET: The biggest... a lot of our missions, not most of them, but some of them were bombing bridges down in French Indochina. That included also... in Southern China, we were flying against Japanese held bases at Tien Ho and White Cloud airdromes in the Canton and Hong Kong areas. Then along with that, we got a lot of other medals. I had one from the victory medal from World War II. Had a good conduct medal, and the Ruptured Duck, which was a medal for good conduct while in the service. And then along with that, we received to citations. It was called a Unit Presidential Citations and they were awarded for outstanding activity during the war.

INT: Were there any, like, famous people or people that we might recognize that you came in encounter with during your service?

VET: I've always said that, as a member of the 491st bomb squadron, I flew with hundreds of silent heroes too numerous to list. After the war, our association with other units, I was past present at that 14th Air Force Association, and I had contact with General Claire Lee and Anna Chennault. We see, Anna's still alive in Washington DC area and I see her almost every year when we go back there for memorial services at Memorial weekend. I've had association with Tex Hale, Generalissimo Chaing Kai-shek, Ed Rector, who was also a famous AVG Flying Tiger, and Senator Ted Stevens and Bob Dole.

Ted Stevens was very helpful. He was head of the Senate and he helped me be able to receive a Flying Tiger...not the Flying Tiger, but the distinguished flying cross for a fellow in our squadron who had crashed on a mission that we were flying and was able to save all of his crew and got...the plane crashed and burned, but he was able to save all his crew and not kill any civilians doing that. So we were able to get the things... Flying Cross awarded to us about two months ago. He lived in the Los Angeles area.

INT: When you reflect back on your military service, what's the most, like, memorable experience that you had? It can be frightening, it can be humorous, it can be whatever you want. What was the most vivid memory?

VET: Well, I think this low level bombing of bridges was always an exciting situation. But the more dangerous and the ones that were scary missions were frightening missions were those that were bombing day time... night time bombing of the airdromes down in Southern China at Canton and Hong Kong. Our line that we have... all of our supplies had to be flown over a hump, which is a Himalaya Mountains and that was always a dangerous situation do to usually bad weather. We also had to be on the lookout for Japanese Air Craft trying to bomb our... attack our Air Craft that was flying, supplying material to us and had to fly over the hump.

INT: Were there any moments of religious or spiritual moments during your service?

VET: After trying to think back for 60 years, I doubt that... I don't remember any spiritual experiences that I could relate to.

INT: What was your family like while you were serving? Your family life.

VET: Well, my family life as I said... I don't know if I said before. I grew up in a family of 9 kids: 7 boys and 2 girls in the family. Four of us ended up serving in World War II. I was serving in the Air Force in China and South East Asia, my older brother was in the Army invasion of Europe in Belgium is where he was stationed. The twins in the family were just out of high school, were inducted and trained in Mississippi and then were sent to Southern tip of...having trouble now. Well, it's one of the larger islands down in the South West Pacific close to New Zealand and Australia. And they became part of the invasion fleet that General McArthur put together to re-invade the Philippine Islands and the one twin was killed in the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines. The other brother survived that attack okay and then came home and signed up for the National Guard and before no time, why he found himself in the National Guard on his way to Korea with the 222nd at that time.

Getting back to our family difficulties... the big thing was we, my father had a farm to maintain. He worked for the highway department and he had, uh, all his help was out fighting the war so he had to, pretty much by himself, still run the farm operations.

INT: That must have been tough.

...Keep that going. Our...the bad thing about, back in those days, being in China, I found that our communications were very bad. We...We'd a letter it may not get to my

parents until maybe six weeks later.

INT: Whoa. It took that long, huh?

VET: Yeah. Well, it all had to be... everything had to be... was well censored and you couldn't really tell the parents anything that was going on, they were in the dark and they...no way we could get information to them. That's the way the war in Iraq is right now.

INT: So they wanted you to keep it confidential?

VET: Everyone could have a cell phone I guess if they wanted to call home when they feel. But the censorship and being on the one side of the Himalaya Mountains, why it was impossible to get much telephone or radio communications outside of China. And the language difference was one of the big barriers about that.

INT: What were your experiences of joy that you might want to tell your grandchildren and some sad things that happened that you might want to forget during your service?

VET: Can I ask you what number that is on your list?

INT: That's number 11.

VET: To think back to the poverty that the local Chinese had to endure was not an item of joy. There weren't many happy things to talk about, it seemed like we enjoyed more talking...or playing with the antiques of dogs and monkeys that were part of the squadron mascots.

INT: Will you describe your feelings your of support from home? Your family, your country, your congressional and political views.

VET: I really had no objections from the support we got from the American people, they were behind us 100 percent. One time we were in a bad situation when the war ended. We were out there in the jungles of South East Asia waiting for a boat to come and get us and bring us home and the dock workers at the New York area to that opportunity to have a strike and we were very unhappy with that situation. Our trip home was delayed a couple of months because of that. Our biggest...the big handicap of being in China was the fact that everything had to be flown into us. We had, like I say a service line of about 12,000 miles to get material and equipment to us. And we had to have it flown over the hump to us in China. Our food... well, actually, the supplies included our gas, bombs, ammunition, air craft parts, and even tooth paste. Food was...we almost had to live off of the food of the land. We could get an army K-rations, which we used when we flew missions so that was our food for the day.

INT: So there wasn't that much food coming in for you guys?

VET: No. There wasn't.

INT: You just had to live off of the land?

VET: Whatever they could get. One thing I always said... I thought the chicken was probably our best friend. We at least were able to get one egg a day.

INT: So is that mostly what you ate? What kind of stuff did you eat down there?

VET: Well, in China, we ate you get eggs... you have eggs and rice.

INT: So they had a lot of rice and eggs?

VET: Yeah. That's one thing that they had in China was lots of rice. And of course meat was another situation. We had to live off of water buffalo meat and it was not very

palatable.

INT: What was the environment like where you were serving?

VET: The environment?

INT: The terrain.

VET: The environment was... our main base was located at a small farm village about forty miles from Kung Ming. The big crop in that area was rice, but they did have some vegetable farms there. But the bad thing about the vegetable farms... they fertilized all of the farms with human waste that came out of our outhouses at our base. The good thing about this whole situation... I assume that I, think that I had at least about 100,000 dollars worth of free travel and education during that period.

INT: Do you have any regrets while you were serving?

VET: No. Not at all. I felt that it was well worth my time that I spent in the service.

INT: What was the single most positive experience of your service?

VET: The most positive what?

INT: The single most positive experience of your service.

VET: Well, I think the thing that's really hung with me over the years is the fact that I found that not all people are bad. There's good people in every nationality, or religion, or... and even the Japanese that we hated so bad during that time were...we knew that they weren't all bad.

INT: That's really cool of you to say.

VET: Many good traits that we had. But they were fighting for their country and we were fighting for ours.

INT: Yep. How has your service impacted your current political, social, or religious views?

VET: I can't say that it's change too much. I feel that we have to have tolerance to other people and we can't always be in control. We have to give other people credit for their thoughts on political, social, and religious views. My advice to most military personnel is that if you're going into the service, that you get every bit of education that you can get and you'll find that it'll make it much easier on your life when you do have to go into the military.

INT: How do you feel about the current conflict in Iraq?

VET: Regarding the war in Iraq, I think that we have no business being there. I cannot... we cannot police the whole world and if people in other nations are not content with their way of life, why they are the ones that have to make the change, not us. And I think it's a mistake to go into Iraq on a bunch of outright lies or false impressions. That the Iraqi's weren't as bad off as we had made them out to be.

INT: Do you have any last words you'd like to say?

VET: No. Eventually, I plan to turn these two books... or three books over to the... either the library here or the library at the university. I think they already have this book, this book's on file in the library here and that one will be... I could go either way; either give that to the university or leave that to the library here.

INT: Well, thanks for coming over and letting us interview you.

VET: Well, [indistinct].