



Henry Potter

WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO SIGN UP FOR THE U.S. SERVICE?

Decided in Spring of 1940 to join the Air Corps, try to learn to fly. That's when it all started. Summer of 1940.

WHERE DID YOU GO FOR YOUR AIR FORCE TRAINING?

Started down in Oxnard, California. That's where I started primary flying school but I didn't make it through that. I failed, failed in flying.

AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

And then I went to navigation school, instead of setting out as Air Corps. Air Corps at the time, could've gotten out and gone back to South Dakota but I didn't really want to. I wanted to continue in the Air Corps, have a chance to be a navigator. So I took it.

DID YOU THINK YOU WERE OVER WITH..READY TO GO BACK TO SOUTH DAKOTA?

Oh yeah, but I didn't get to be a pilot.

WERE YOU VERY DISAPPOINTED?

Absolutely...very much so at the time.

BUT YOU DECIDED TO STICK IT OUT, THOUGH YOU CONSIDERED GOING BACK HOME TO SOUTH DAKOTA.

Well, didn't want to go back to South Dakota at that time. a lot of my friends were in the National Guard and ready to be called up, thought I should stay there and not go in the air corps so I didn't want to go back...be a failure.

WHAT UNIT OR SQUAD WERE YOU ASSIGNED TO AFTER YOUR TRAINING, DO YOU REMEMBER?

No, I went to training school in clarksville field in shreveport, LA. Where I did my training for navigational school. The Air Corps only had one at that time, although they were training navigators PanAmerican down in the Miami area. They were training navigators also, but the Air Corps only had one school that they ran.

DID YOU FIND THE NAVIGATIONAL TRAINING CHALLENGING?

It was pretty challenging for me, because I wasn't great on mathematics and in those days they did a lot of that. So yes, it was pretty challenging.

BUT YOU OBVIOUSLY PASSED AND WERE ASSIGNED TO A RESPECTIVE UNIT.

I was assigned to the 34th bomb squadron in 17th group up at Tacoma, WA. (cough)

WHICH TYPE OF AIRCRAFT WERE THOSE, WERE THOSE B-25s?

When we first got there, they were still flying B-18s, then we transitioned to B-25s while I was there, that was summer of '41.

SO THAT WAS JUST A FEW MONTHS BEFORE PEARL HARBOR.

That's right...(Pearl Harbor attack)

WHEN NEWS OF THE PEARL HARBOR ATTACK HAPPENED IN DECEMBER, WERE YOU AMONG THOSE SURPRISED?

Yes, I think we all knew something was going on because we were in a high state of alert at our field beforehand, but I don't think any of us thought Pearl Harbor specifically..don't know for sure, but we felt something was going on.

WERE YOU IN TACOMA AT THE TIME OF THE BOMBING AT PEARL HARBOR?

Actually that morning I was in Portland, Oregon a on weekend pass.

DO YOU REMEMBER HOW YOU HEARD OF THE ATTACK?

My brother worked for a Bonneville power project, my dad was out there, so he took us over to Bonneville power where he worked, and they couldn't get in. We asked what was wrong, "Well Japanese just bombed Pearl Harbor and we're locked down." Nobody in or out, even though he worked there and had passes and all that. That's how we heard about that..or how I heard about it?

DO YOU RECALL WHAT YOU FELT RIGHT AWAY?

What did I feel right away? I felt that I'd better get back to Pendleton, Orgeon where my unit was, got in my car and headed from Portland to Pendleton.

AND THEN WAR WAS OFFICIALLY DECLARED BETWEEN THE U.S. AND JAPAN, THEN LATER ITALY AND GERMANY DECLARED WAR ON AMERICA. DID YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHERE YOU'D BE SERVING?

No, had no idea. My unit, our airplanes been on maneuvers in SE part of US and on their way back to Pendleton, and all we'd been told was be prepared to move, though at the time we had no idea where. So we didn't move, stayed there and did patrol duty off the coast of WA and OR for submarines.

WHEN DID YOU FIND OUT THAT YOU'D BE INVOLVED WITH THE BOMBING RAID ON TOKYO IN APRIL OF 1942?

When did I find out? Well, our unit was transferred from Pendleton to Columbia, SC, and it was in SC where we first heard, that..well, we didn't know where it was going to be..[doorbell]...[Henry asks caretaker to get door] ask for volunteers for dangerous mission, didn't know or tell us where it was. It was Doolittle who came there looking for volunteers. They'd already selected the airplane so they wanted people trained in flying..

AND THIS WAS UNDER GUIDANCE OF JIMMY DOOLITTLE. WHAT KIND OF MAN WAS HE?

Great man. Great leader, one that inspired you to do probably more than you knew you could do. Whatever he asked you to do, you knew he could do it himself. He was a great leader and to those of us who were growing up at the time, knew who he was but of course, didn't know him. So..that's about most I can say for him, great man and great leader.

I IMAGINE BEFORE YOU KNEW IT, YOU AND THE CREWS AND THE B-25s WERE ASSEMBLED ON THE FLIGHT DECK OF THE HORNET. WASN'T IT A BLUSTERY MORNING AT THE TAKE-OFF?

Morning that - 'course been on carrier for close to 18 days. It was very rough. The water was breaking up over the deck, but we had full confidence in our leader that he could do it, we could do it. we were the first ones off the deck, so thats.where the 15..we had 15, 16 airplanes, it showed the other 15 it was possible to do it.until we did it, no one knew for sure.

WERE YOU A LITTLE NERVOUS KNOWING YOU'D BE FLYING OVER THE JAPANESE MAINLAND?

Well, yeah, obviously. A little bit nervous, little bit concerned. Wondering what was going to happen. We had a pretty good idea what'd happen if we were forced to land in Japan which none of us of course wanted to do. So we didn't have that problem. They didn't shoot any of us down and none of us were forced to land in Japan.

WHEN YOU WERE FLYING OVER TOKYO, WHAT DID YOU SEE OUT THE WINDOW?

Only thing I remember is we saw buildings. Don't remember....anything.hold on please...[interruption for signing paper].

SO..YOU WERE IN THE LEAD AIRCRAFT INTO TOKYO WEREN'T YOU? AS NAVIGATOR? THE TRAILBLAZER, FIRST CRAFT INTO THE STRIKE.

That's right.in all truthfulness, Brian, all of our planes were a trailblazer for delaying our takeoff, most everybody was on their own, making their own way to the target, we didn't really have time for gasoline to get into formation.we were going to go alone anyhow, the first airplane...others would've been perhaps in flights of three, so we just didn't have the luxury of waiting for fuel, because of fuel, waiting for everyone to take off. Took about an hour for all planes to get off the deck. [WOW.] So we didn't wait for everyone else.

SO IT WAS A SCATTERED SOIREE OF AIRCRAFT FLYING OVER TOKYO.

Yes, we were all going to different targets so it was pretty scattered.

WHAT WAS YOUR TARGET?

We were going to main part of Tokyo, manufacturing area. Our original tactic was to go in before dark and get a fire lit in area that was very..prone to burning and have a beacon --so to speak -- for the other people coming in after dark. But because of the circumstances, we had to take off early and that plan was out the window but we all went on our own in the middle of the day.

I HEARD THAT THE SQUAD HAD TO LEAVE EARLY BECAUSE A JAPANESE FISHING BOAT WAS SEEN IN THE AREA.

Actually they may have been fishing, but their main purpose out there was to watch for United States fleet. Actually they were picket boats stationed in various locations watching for United States Fleet.

SO TO PROTECT THE MISSION, THE PLANES WERE SENT OUT EARLY.

Once we were spotted, there wasn't much else we could do. Either take off and go to Japan, or push the planes over the side or try to go Hawaii or something like that. So the decision was made that since we were in distance of Japan to go ahead and do the mission.

AND THIS WAS AN IMPORTANT MISSION FOR AMERICAN MORALE, WASN'T IT?

Not only for American morale, but we found out later...did a lot for the morale of other people. In fact one time I ran into.met a man who was a prisoner somewhere.I don't know where, one of the islands. He was a Dutchman, and they heard about it there too, he said "it did a lot for us. " So it did a lot for the morale of a lot of people including our country.

WHEN YOU RELEASED THE BOMBS, HANK, WHAT WERE YOU THINKING AT THAT TIME?

Getting out of there and heading to China where we were supposed to be able to land.

BUT BECAUSE THE PLANES WERE SENT OUT EARLY, THAT WASN'T NECESSARILY A POSSIBILITY.

We were, regardless, bad weather at beginning, good weather over Japan, and then when we were headed for China we were about to be out of fuel, fortunately picked up some weather that gave us a tailwind that helped us on to where we were able to get inland over China. Some of the folks couldn't, had to land or ditch in the South China sea. But we had enough fuel to get over land, where we bailed out at 9:30 at night over the mountains.

We bailed out of the airplane, it of course crashed. No place for it to land. Yeah, probably couple hundred miles Southwest of Shanghai.

WERE YOU GREETED BY FRIENDLY VILLAGERS OR CHINESE MILITIA?

No, we were fortunate and ran into friendly Chinese, there were no Japanese in the immediate area where we were...

SO FROM START TO FINISH IT SOUNDED LIKE A REAL PRECARIOUS MISSION.

Yeah, we all pretty much knew what would happen if we landed in Japan itself. Unfortunately, some of our people were captured and learned the consequences of being captured by the Japanese.

I UNDERSTAND MANY AMERICAN POWS WERE TORTURED AND EXECUTED IN THOSE PRISON CAMPS.

Three of our people were executed and one died in a prison camp from lack of care...and 4 out of 8 captured, four did live through the war and got back to the United States after the war..

DID YOU EVER KNOW ANOTHER SOUTH DAKOTAN FROM THE DOOLITTLE RAID..DWIGHT SMITH
- NO, DON SMITH, THANK YOU.

I knew him, actually both started out in flying school...

WHAT WAS HE LIKE?

Well, he was a good man. Apparently knew him in high school although I never competed, he's out of Belle Fourche and we didn't compete with them directly - knew of him but didn't know him but joined Air Corps at the same time.

HANK, AFTER THE BOMBING RUN WHAT WERE YOUR WARTIME EXPERIENCES THEN?

Well, they took care of us, and helped us get from where we were to Chung King which is where we were headed for. But we didn't fly there, we went by boat and bus and what have you.

AND WHEN YOU GOT BACK TO U.S. FORCES, WERE YOU REASSIGNED? PUT BACK INTO ANOTHER MISSION OR SERVICE?

We were. We went to India and were reassigned to another unit, then orders came through for us to go back to the United States and others stayed there in India. And I was one of the fortunate ones that got to come back to the United States.

MUST HAVE BEEN A RELIEF TO COME HOME.

It was, I was glad I made it although we were eventually assigned to another unit and went back to war in North Africa.

AGAINST THE ITALIANS AND GERMANS? THAT MUST'VE BEEN QUITE AN EXPERIENCE.

It was. They had different airplanes and different situations in North Africa..

WHAT TYPE OF AIRCRAFT DID THEY SWITCH YOU TO?

I was in B-26.

THE MARAUDER.

Right.

WHICH ONE DID YOU PREFER?

Oh, the B-25 I believe, although the B-26 was a good airplane. Had a bad reputation but we had good luck with it.

SO HOW MUCH LONGER WERE YOU IN WORLD WAR II, HANK?

Actually I spent from December until next July, where I had the opportunity to come back to the United States...

SO YOU CAME HOME IN 1943?

It'd have been.19...God...I guess maybe in the middle of 1943.

AND THEN DID YOU COME HOME TO SOUTH DAKOTA, OR WHERE DID YOU GO?

No, I came back and first spent several weeks, months, travelling the United States with airplane and talking to factory workers and bond sales and things like that. Publicity for the services. And then went back to training future air crews. ..

WERE YOU TRAINING OTHER AIR CREWS BACK IN LOUISIANA?

No, actually I was stationed in Colorado Springs and traveled throughout the Midwest and checking and training combat crews that were getting ready to go to war.

DO YOU REMEMBER..HOW BIG A LOSS WAS IT FROM YOUR OPINION, TO HAVE FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT DIE BEFORE THE END OF THE WAR?

How big a loss? I wouldn't even be able to answer. As far as I was doing and so on, I was in Washington when he died and at his funeral. As far as immediate effect on me, I don't remember if there was one. We were all pretty glum about it and wondered what would happen when the next fellow came on but I don't remember if there were any particular emotion outside of being sorry that he died.

WHAT'S YOUR OPINION ON DROPPING THE NUCLEAR BOMB ON JAPAN? WAS IT A GOOD DECISION?

That's the best thing that could've happened. If it hadn't, we'd been in very bloody battles I feel. For that to try and invade Japan, I think it was - personally, a good decision.

TODAY THE JAPANESE, GERMANS, AND ITALIANS ARE OUR ALLIES - WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THAT?

Not sure what you mean.

WITHIN THE SCOPE OF A DECADE, THE AXIS POWERS BECAME OUR ALLIES...THAT'S AN UNUSUAL TWIST OF HISTORY, OR IS IT?

I've worked with later on in Europe, all three of them, never had any problem. I mean, once the war was over, and they got back and had their good graces and able to join NATO --- I did work with all three nationalities.

HANK, YOU GOT INVOLVED WITH NATO, WORKING WITH THOSE THREE NATIONALITIES?

Yeah, I was assigned to SHAPE: the Supreme Headquarters for Allied Powers in Europe, --- so I worked with all countries in the war planning.

SO YOU WORKED IN EUROPE WITH JAPANESE, GERMANS, ITALIANS?

No Japanese. Italians and Germans.

DO YOU THINK THAT VETERANS TODAY ARE DULY RECOGNIZED FOR THEIR SERVICE?

Probably not. I think there's a lot of things that could've been done and could be done for them more particularly in ways of health care [DOORBELLS] that probably isn't being done, because -- from my own

personal standpoint -- I don't have a complaint. I think there's a lot of them that need help. As do all of our older citizens.

NOW THERE'S A BIG DEDICATION CEREMONY IN PIERRE, YOU SAY YOU HAVE THE INVITATION FROM THE GOVERNOR. WILL YOU BE THERE?

No I don't think I'd be able to. I just don't think my health is going to be for making trip up there. And if I went I'd like to be able to drive and right now my driving's restricted. I doubt seriously that I could fly up there. Really considered it, just saw it last night and -- the one card from Governor Janklow -- but I'd have to look at it again, and call him and tell him chances are that the answer likely will be no. I'd like to be there, course my name won't be there on whatever the hell they call it. the statue that had names on it, no one ever turned my name in when one of the South Dakotans, or whoever they are had an application at one time, didn't send it in and no one sent it in for me. So my name wouldn't be there anyhow.

SO HANK, WHAT DO YOU DO WITH YOURSELF THESE DAYS?

Until I had my stroke last September, spent 2-3 days working for the Confederate Air Force. do you know what that is? [I SURE DO]. I spent a lot of my time working with their wing in San Marcos. Not working with airplanes but lots of WW2 hangars that we've been renovating and spending lots of my time just being a carpenter or worker, that's where I spent most of my time at.

DO YOU HAVE FAMILY HANK?

Well my wife died a few years ago, I've a number of children..fortunately they help me here in Austin, great help. Others live in Florida, and Africa, and there oughta be one in San Antonio. I've had a lot of help from my children during this time right now, because they don't want me to live alone...help - Lucy answered the phone last, having Lucy spend the day here, so that's kinda my family..

IS LUCY FAMILY OR A CARETAKER?

Yeah. I'm going to have to have one, they don't want me to live alone. I've lived alone from the time my wife died and the time I had my stroke, they don't want me to live alone and I'm not sure that I want to. That's where I stand right now, Brian.

HANK, ANY CLOSING THOUGHTS ON SOUTH DAKOTA, WORLD WAR TWO, ANYTHING?

No, I think you've covered it pretty well. I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in the Tokyo Raid and even more fortunate to be Doolittle's navigator for it. it's done a lot for me. I've been able to meet a lot of people. Had a lot of good times at various reunions.