

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

Question: What I want to do is just so I have it on tape, if I can just get your first and last name and the correct spelling, just so I have it on tape.

Answer: Okay. First name is Eugene, that's E-U-G-E-N-E, middle initial is D, stands for Duncan, my middle name, D-U-N-C-A-N, last name Pember, P-E-M-B-E-R.

Question: Now I discovered a gentleman that was just in, and I notice that all the vets always write their middle initial and I wondered why that was and he told me that in the service, at least his experience was, first name, middle initial. They didn't care about the last name by the time they got to that. So I don't know if that's true or not.

Answer: No, if you didn't have a middle initial they'd put it in parenthesis, NMI.

Question: NMI -- no middle -- huh. Now, which branch of the service were you in?

Answer: Well, initially in the Air Corps, in the air, and then later it became the Air Force. So I started out in the Air Corps.

Question: So you must have done a career almost then.

Answer: No, not really.

Question: Oh, really.

Answer: No, I got out at the end of the war. But I started actually in flying training as an Air Force pilot in, it would have been October of 1941. Flying training at Oxnard, California

Answer: Army Air Base, they called it. Which was primary training. And from thereon up to Minter Field in Bakersfield, California

Answer: For basic, and then to Stockton Army Air Base in Sacramento. Graduated from there.

Question: Now where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Answer: (laughs) Very interesting story. That was -- that was in primary school. So December the 7th, right? I was walking off what they called gigs for having received demerits for some misfeasance or malfeasance. Either my bed hadn't been made correctly or they found dust on top of my -- my dresser, or something like that. Or I didn't get a high score on one of the tests that were given to us so frequently. And they gave us gigs to walk off out there. And everybody on base was gone except three or four of us -- three of us I guess that were walking off these gigs. And we were supposed to keep quiet and walk in a military style around the -- kind of a square. And one of the fellows started calling to us. He says, hey, hey, something's happened. Keep quiet, you're going to get us in trouble. He had a -- one of the very earliest of the little portable radios -- hand-held radio. I'd even forgotten now that they even had them that far back but he had one, for some reason. And he said no, no, this is very important, it sounds like it. And he says shut up. And his name was Ryan, shut up, Ryan, the officer of the day will come out here and we'll be walking tours forever. No, he says, listen they've bombed someplace called Pearl Harbor. Who? The Japanese bombed someplace called Pearl Harbor. Oh, well, that's different. So then the question became, where's Pearl Harbor? I think we had it placed all over the globe except in the right place. Nobody knew where Pearl Harbor was. Anyhow, that's where we first heard, out there walking off tours at Oxnard Air Force Base on December the 7th.

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

Question: Did you have any idea what that meant to your future career?

Answer: Well, we were well enough aware of the fact that any time the Japanese had bombed something that belonged to the United States, that they were going to accelerate our training and we'd be involved directly in that, or assumed that we would be, anyhow.

Question: When you enlisted, did you know that -- did you have a pretty good idea we were going to war?

Answer: No idea at all. Had no idea at all. Wasn't interested in politics, didn't follow them, all I was interested in was a flying career. I wanted to get into the Air Force cause that seemed to me to be the best thing to do. Plus the fact that the Army -- I had, what did they call it, you had to sign up for the draft. I guess that was it. And our local draft board was breathing down my neck. That wasn't the reason I signed up but it was kind of a tug of war. As a matter of fact, I got two or three extensions of my draft board call cause I had applied for this and they -- somehow or other they messed my papers up and they didn't come through. I sent a telegram to the Secretary of War, saying if you want my body, words to that effect. You better call me now. Cause I had gotten a phone call from our draft board director who was a woman there in Alhambra where I lived at that time. She says you've used up all of your extensions -- you can expect a call within the next week I think it was. I said -- so I issued -- I really sent a telegram and it came back immediately, they assigned me to the school. And I was so happy to tell her about that.

Question: And you wanted to fly. That was your dream or --

Answer: Oh, I had -- when I was a kid, I grew up wanting to fly, yeah. We lived in a little town north of Los Angeles called Newhall. They had an emergency landing strip there for the commercial airlines. And it didn't take a very big strip for a commercial airplane to land in those days. There was a little valley out there. And we'd watch them take off and land in bad weather out there. And one of the very first of the World War I movies that was made, made in sound, was made there on my -- at that time -- former wife's grandfather's field out there. The little World War I airplanes could take off and land in your back yard so they made that -- they used to let school out to go out and watch them. That's how big it was. And then the plane that was carrying the Johnsons, Osa and I forget what her husband's name was, Johnson, who were, at that time, the most prominent people in collecting animals from Africa for zoos and circuses and stuff like that. They were world known for their abilities in what they'd done and that respect. They crashed right on top of a mountain just in view from the big picture window from our house -- last mountain that you look down on coming north into Los Angeles. And they hit just 200 feet below the top of it. And we, as kids, one of my best friends and I, we used to hike up there and bring back pieces of it. Yeah, it was very exciting. We wanted to do that, too. And he, my friend, became a pilot before I did. He was a year older than I and a year older in school and he went off to college before I did and took up flying while he was there. And he took me for my first ride. He retired as a full colonel from the Air Force.

Question: Wow.

Question: So what -- now you went on and became a full pilot, right? You got your pilot's credentials and did all that?

Answer: Yeah.

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

Question: What did you fly? What type of --

Answer: Well initially in flying we started out in PT-17's, which were Stearman bi-plane, and in basic training it was AT-6's which are built by Vultee, -- as they called them -- Vultee vibrators. It was a hundred thousand nuts and bolts in loose formation. It was very noisy airplane. Then we went to -- AT-6 was built by North American and it was a much more refined airplane. Like going from a Ford to a Cadillac. And then I went in fighter transition, I flew P-40's, that's the ones the Flying Tigers, the ones that most people are familiar with. And then to -- I flew some P-38's in transition and then P-51's -- it's a Mustang.

Question: And that -- now the P-40, that's how big a crew, two?

Answer: No, no, these are all single engine -- I mean single, one pilot.

Question: So your duty then, once you got -- so where did you -- when you left the States then, where did you end up?

Answer: Well, for a long time I was an instructor pilot. I taught flying in basic and advance school. And I didn't get into actually anything towards the very end of the war, they kept upgrading me and sending me to places to do things and, you're too valuable to go. And I said I want to go. In fact Cookie's husband at that time -- she's a widow -- was a widow -- he was a classmate of mine. And he got on the list to go and they sent him. I was on the list and they just never sent me so it took a long time to get -- free. So I got over towards the very -- the end of the war, in the Pacific. The 49th Fighter Group.

Question: How long was it -- how fast were they turning out pilots that you were training? I mean, was it a pretty hurry-up program or --

Answer: Well, it was, you know, I guess you could call it an accelerated program. They were training pilots as fast as they could, you know. I did most of my instruction at what was called Merced Air Base in Merced, California

Answer: It later became a B-52 base. But, yeah, we -- we trained a lot of pilots there. I was squadron commander.

Question: So how were you training -- cause, I mean, there were all fighter planes that you're training them on, right?

Answer: No, these are the planes they learn to fly before they go into whatever they go into later. This was primary basic and advance. I was training there in basic and then in advance school. And these are the things that people are selected, or select themselves to go into either single engine or multi-engine. Flying. So they'd go either fighters or to bombers, transport, something of that kind.

Question: What did most -- was there a prime plane that people wanted to go for? I mean was there that --

Answer: Oh, I think everybody wanted to be a fighter pilot, you know, P-38 was the one when we were in primary there at Oxnard, we weren't too far from Lockheed where they were building the P-38's, and ever once in awhile when we were at retreat there in the evening when you were saluting the flag and standing at attention and getting ready to break up to go eat -- to mess and to back to your own rooms and whatever, there was always some kind of fog around there, low fog scud coming in off the ocean, you could hear this un-eerie whine,

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

and Milo Burchan, who was the chief test pilot for Lockheed, was aware we were there -- he would come up and he would swoop down out of the fog and come right over the top of us in a big circle. That was thrilling.

Question: To rub it in a little bit that he had this hot-shot plane and --

Answer: Yeah.

Now the fly boys -- they were -- if I understand right, the women liked the men in the fly boy uniforms.

Answer: Oh, it was glamorous, sure, what the heck. There was certainly some attraction there.

Question: Now did you do just basic training with them or did you actually then take them up once they went through their basic and do flight training in the area that you were at or did they go somewhere else for that?

Answer: Oh, they -- as I say, we had first basic training at our school and then developed into an advanced training school, too, so we went from BTs to ATs. After they left there they went to specialized school. So you either went to fighter transition or bomber transition. So it would be other places, wherever, all over the country.

Question: And how big a class, roughly, did you have at a time? I mean, how many kids were you pumping through there?

Answer: I don't know. I don't ever think I ever thought of it in numbers of people going through. I -- it would take me a little while to figure up the numbers of ones that I had when I was commander of a training squadron, probably had 50 people, I guess, and we had several different squadrons training at all times there, so.

Question: So there had to be planes coming and going and up and, I mean, it just had to be crazy environment with all that going on.

Answer: Well, of course it was well controlled. We were only one of a number of flying schools.

Question: My dad ended up down in Texas somewhere. Well, he kept getting washed out. He was right at the end of the war, so he kept getting washed out of all the programs as they -- they went along. He never finished --

Answer: They closed up, yeah. Hm-hmm.

Question: Yeah, but they'd send him to the next program and they'd send him to the next.

Answer: Yeah, that happened.

Question: Did you enjoy your time in the service?

Answer: Oh, yeah, it was wonderful time, yeah.

Question: Did you think it prepared you for the rest of your life? I mean, was it a good training -- training for you for whatever you moved on to do after that or --

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

Answer: Well, it was a pretty good training for most anything. Yeah, well, you get intensive schooling and a lot of stuff that went with that, too. Counted for college credit.

Question: What did you do after the service?

Answer: I went into the Los Angeles Police Department.

Question: Really.

Answer: Yeah. Yeah, I retired from that and then I went to the California Commission on Peace Officers Training, where we established all of the -- the requirements for selection of all law enforcement officers in the state, in whatever category, and there are a number of different categories for people who are peace officers. And all of the training requirements.

Question: So you did -- end up a full career in -- in -- within the law enforcement.

Answer: Yeah, I did.

Question: That explains why you're in such good shape, I assume.

Answer: (Laughs) I don't know if that's the reason, yeah, it's part of it.

Question: Now so you went -- you did, towards the tail end of the war after you got held back cause you were such a good trainer, you ended up flying over the South Pacific or not. Did you end up staying Stateside or --

Answer: No, I ended up at the end of the war over there, I flew a few brief combat missions and then I stayed for the occupation.

Question: What was it -- what was it like flying a combat mission? Where did you fly out of?

Answer: Well, it was off of, let's see what's the name of that island, the thing that at my age my memory isn't always coming back quickly with these -- well, there's one of the islands they had -- some of the islands they had down there. The group, the 49th Fighter Group that I joined was one of the very first fighter groups to go into the Pacific theater. And they started out in Australia and went on north through the islands, they island hopped through and I joined them on up in the northern -- one of the northern islands.

Question: Was that so -- what, like each day you'd have a mission to go up and fly or how often did you -- do you remember how often you flew?

Answer: Well it depended on the circumstances. You could fly daily, sorties and missions. You could go several flights a day depending in how close you were to wherever the action was. Or they could be long range, which they would be a long one. Those long range flights were torture in a fighter plane.

Question: Tell me about that. What -- tell me about getting ready for a flight, getting in that fighter plane and what it was like getting in there. What all did you wear, and then when you got in there, how much room did you have and what was it like?

Answer: Well, flying in the Pacific area itself, the temperatures are normally pretty comfortable as far as the flight equipment that you would wear. But you wore a flight suit

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

which was a kind of a -- they were khaki colored, of course, light colored denim material. That you put on over your uniform.

Answer: Oh, really.

Question: Hm-hmm. They weren't very heavy weight, but they had big pockets down at the calf area in front where you could stuff your maps. And then they had slits through -- they weren't pockets -- where you could put your hands into your pockets if you had to get something out. And a place for pencils and pens and stuff like that, where you write down -- jot down notes or anything of that kind. And hearing device, much as the kind you're wearing there, and a canvas helmet, just like the World War I pilots used to wear, and a parachute, which was heavy. And times if you were going to be flying over water you wore a life vest.

Question: Is that one of the Mae West --

Answer: Mae-West type --

Question: inflatable --

Answer: Exactly, yeah, hm-mm.

Question: And once you got in your cockpit, were they spacious planes or were you just jammed in there?

Answer: For the most part they were. If you were a really big person it could have been probably, but, well a P-38 had lots of room and the P-51 had lots of room. The seats were adjustable long before they developed adjustable seats in automobiles, so.

Question: Now I assume you never had to use your parachute? You never put one down?

Answer: Yeah, I did, I had to get out once.

Question: What happened there? What was that like?

Answer: Well later on in the war, up in the northern part of the Philippines up there, bout Luzon up in the tip of the island, we were on what they call a search and destroy mission. It was after they were cleaning up the Japanese in the area, up in the mountains. The flight of three I was leading, and came down along the edge of a range of mountains where there had been troop sightings reported, and they were there because they got me with ground fire. And first I was aware of it was when a -- P-51 has -- had a air-cooled.. water-cooled.. liquid cooled engine. It was a V-12 Rolls Royce Merlin engine, marvelous engine, marvelous airplane. But it was susceptible -- you could shoot yourself down in it as a matter of fact, one of the few planes you could do that in. If you came in on a strafing mission where you're -- you come in at an angle like this and you go across the ground. You're not going to dive into the ground you're down like this with the plane moving forward, too. If they angle right and you're shooting and strafing, and the bullets are going down like that, and they're ricocheting off this way, well, if you coming across fast at a proper angle, they can ricochet right into you -- you can run into your own bullets. And if they hit into any of your cooling system, why you're out.. in serious trouble. Whereas one of those radio engines or something of that kind, you could knock half the cylinders off of them and they'd still run. But you know, in my case, when you get a big puff of steam out into the front end of the thing, that things are going wrong. Cause it doesn't take very long to empty the cooling system and then the prop seizes and then there's all hell to play. So you pull up, roll over, as we used to say, duck, push the

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

canopy back, stand up and salute, turn it back to the taxpayers of the United States and bail out -- fall out if you can.

Question: So you actually -- you -- do you roll it upside down and pop the canopy that way and then --

Answer: You pull the canopy first, try to gain altitude if you can, cause you want as much -- if you're down low as I was, you try to get as much altitude as you can but you want to get out also before the -- that prop seizes and tears itself off. Freezes the engine up, it's problems. And they were hard to get out of anyhow. One of my friends -- one of my classmates was flying them up out of China and he got shot down, broke his leg in nine places.

Question: So you were telling me about a friend of yours who broke his leg in nine places getting out because -- was that because of the -- did he break it when he was getting out?

Answer: Yeah, broke it on the horizontal stabilizer. You have to get clear of the airplane or it will run into you. So difficult to get out of. P-38s were difficult to get out of cause they had those twin booms back there and that big stabilizer that run all the way across, you know. You ran into that, why, bought the farm.

Question: So when you went out, did -- did all of your training come like that, or were you panicking when -- I mean, I imagine getting shot down, it's pretty scary.

Answer: Well, you don't get scared till afterwards. You know, you don't have time to react to anything like that. All you're doing is instinctively doing those things that you know you have to do to clear the airplane and you worry about what happens after. You know, it's like if you go on a really bad flight, you get scared when you come home and get out of the airplane and start thinking about, My God, what did I just do or what have I been through? And while you're involved in this, you're too much involved to be concerned with anything else except what's going on.

Question: So when you bailed, where did you then land? Did you land out in the water or on --

Answer: No, I landed in a tree. And, well, I was still pretty low and the chute hadn't completely opened yet -- that's what they call a streamer. It was just opening when I hit -- went down through a tall tree, fortunately, the chute caught up in above and stopped me. So, yeah.

Question: And did you then have to cut yourself out of that or how did you --

Answer: Yeah, I cut myself out and dropped to the ground which didn't help. The other two planes that were with me on my wing, they spotted where I went down and they circled around and -- and fired bursts into the area around in case there was anybody there from the local Japs -- see that they stayed away from me. I wasn't very far from the coast so I made my way down and picked up a trail there not far away, made my way down to the coast and got picked up by one of the Navy's big flying boats. Air sea rescue.

Question: Boy that had to be -- I mean your mind's got to be going a million miles an hour when that happened. Not knowing who's out hiding in the woods or --

Answer: Yeah, yes, you know how a rabbit feels. (laughs)

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

Question: You're the hunted, not the hunter at that point.

Answer: That's exactly right, yeah.

Question: So what did they give you for protection, I mean, did you carry a gun -- in the stuff you carried, or once you were on the ground you had no --

Answer: Usually carried a 45 automatic, standard Army issue.

Question: A revolver then.

Answer: Automatic.

Question: What -- so did you -- once that plane -- once you gave that plane back to the taxpayers, did you go back up flying again after that?

Answer: Oh, yeah, sure.

Question: Get back on that horse and --

Answer: If you got all your pieces, you know, there ain't anything else to do. That's no excuse. (laughs) No.

Question: Now you ended up in Japan after the occupation?

Answer: Yeah, I did.

Question: What was that like? What were your duties while you were over there? Did you help getting --

Answer: Fly. I was stationed up on the northern island, Hokkaido. Ours was a -- well, it was a peace keeping mission for one thing. And the occupation was very uneventful. There were no serious incidents of any kind that occurred anywhere that I was ever aware of. The Japs, when they stopped fighting, they became very submissive and nobody knew anybody that had been a soldier in the war and all of the women's husband had been in the band and cooked in the kitchen, and that was the size of it, you know. Very nice people. And Dougie and her husband were there at that same time. They were down in the Tokyo-Yokohama area which is a -- which is a pretty populace area

Answer: They had advantages that we didn't have up on Hokkaido which was pretty remote really. Our field had been a Navy base and it was -- it was well constructed cause as usual the Navy does things in a very deluxe matter compared to the Army. They had severe weather up there so the building were designed for -- for cold weather. All concrete. Double wall, double windows, steam-heated, central steam heat from everywhere, and it was the same for everybody, officers and enlisted personnel and everybody else. And I was a number of different things. We were very short handed when I first got up there right after the war. And I had -- wore several hats. I was intelligence officer, operations officer, half a dozen other things, I can't remember right now. But gradually as more people arrived I gave up most of those things and I became the operations officer, that was my principal duty for a long time.

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

Question: Did you -- I heard a lot of veterans talk about during that time, actually being able to tour around the city they were in. Did you get the chance or was it still some fear of there might be some Japanese still with weapons?

Answer: Nothing. No way anywhere. No, nothing of that kind. As I said, no -- an incident of that kind never having occurred anywhere. We got the newspapers that were published by the -- the -- US -- whatever they called themselves. It was a regular newspaper that had been published in Europe and everywhere else by the military services, and they were -- all the news that was everywhere. And as operations officer I had access to everything that happened anyhow. Or as a -- excuse me, as intelligence officer, I had access to that and a lot of other stuff. So I knew everything that was going on. All the plans that -- part of the time up there we were same distance from Vladivostok, Russia as we were from Tokyo. So when we flew, not infrequent training missions down to the Tokyo-Yokohama area down to Johnson Air base which is a big air base there, they were the same as they would be if we were forming a mission over Vladivostok or the coast of Russia

Answer: The Russians were never too friendly people, and they were very suspicious, as you know. We had planes stationed at our base occasionally. The Army -- Navy sent up a big B-24 and a crew and they helped answer the questions of stuff we had stored in one of our hangers that we didn't use for planes -- but it had big stocks of all kinds of stuff in there. We were just told to hold on to and someone would get it some day. They didn't tell us anything beyond that. So this Navy plane showed up one day with a Navy crew on it and they said that's their stuff. So what they did is that they -- they flew long range, long time missions, along the -- between Japan and the Russian territories over there. And up off the Sakhalin Island which the Russians had taken over from the Japanese. They -- I don't think they still let the people get back and forth from Sakhalin to Japan. Families are separated and it was entirely inhabited by Japanese. (laughs) Then we also had our own planes that came up. In fact one time later, after I left there, a B-29 got shot down up there by the -- by the Russians. So sorry, he didn't mean that to happen, that kind of thing, you know. But I swear they used -- we had -- we put our spotters on the corners of the island in various places around Hokkaido -- a long way from base. One of them called in once -- weather used to come in.. islands down here and the weather would come in from the Russian area -- just on a shelf, like that. You know how a weather front moves in. So the front -- clouds moved in and then way behind it the rest of the storm moves in and pretty soon it covers and go on by. As I say we had some pretty heavy storms. So we had snow piled 15 feet on both sides of the runways when they were clear. But the guy that was out on the end of the island says I think you ought to know this, he says. You've got a flight of -- of, what was it, nine geese, moving over your area at 300 knots. So we were night flying and since I had been an instructor in the training schools, I -- and all of the skills of being able to set up training programs, so when they needed to keep some pilots skills up to date, they needed to do night flying. And you can't just turn a bunch of airplanes loose in the air and say go out and fly and then come back; you had to have them scheduled for takeoff and landing and positions to be in. So we'd stack them in the air and then you'd have to work out a stacking program to where when an airplane took up another one came down and you'd run them up through three stacks. And I was the only one on the base with the knowledge as to how to do that so I was fairly useful in that respect.

Question: And that's all running dark, I mean no lights at all, in your night training? Is that --

Answer: Oh, yeah, this was on uh.. but the Japs -- the Russians used to come down and fly through our pattern at night. They had jets and we had prop driven planes and every once in awhile there'd be a big bright light about this big (gestures). If you wanted to believe in

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

extraterrestrial things, this was it, or some of them may have come from. So here was this big round bright light that would just move around and through your pattern and disappear.

Question: So was that your first jet you saw then, the Russian jet or --

Answer: All you saw was a bright red spot, so. (laughs) But we used to do, they'd come down and do that to us at night, we'd get up in the daytime, we'd go up there, get up to altitude, 38,000 feet or so, way high, and then we would just peel off and make a big split "S" down across the end of the island over there, with our gun cameras on, shoot everything they could as they came down. We'd be home before they could take off. So (laughs)

Question: Do you remember where you were when you heard about -- Hiroshima -- when you heard the bomb had been dropped?

Answer: No, no I don't remember. Flying around someplace I guess. But one of the most memorable things that I had that took place there, on occupation. And I site that because of the fact that I think it's one of those things that, you know, you say, can this be true, you now. Is there a God or guardian angel or what is it that looks after -- something -- too much to be coincidence. But then you can't say that they happen for any reason other than that, either. But we used to take flights, as I mentioned, down to the Tokyo-Yokohama area to Johnson Air Base which is a big field there, which were training flights. And we'd gone down there on one training flight because they had a big bunch of dignitaries that were down there from Washington, D.C., and they put on what they called a fire power demonstration. So they had the three groups from the island, they had the one from the southern island, and the ones there at Johnson and then our base. So we had eight, we got three -- yeah, three squadrons in a group, and each squadron had 25 airplanes. We had 75 airplanes so that was a collection of three times 75 -- number of airplanes there. They go down and put this fire power demonstration on. And what you do is -- part of the planes are loaded with bombs, 500 pound bombs, and part of them with napalm, which is 150 gallons of flaming gasoline. So you come in over a target and they had -- I don't know where they picked the area or how they picked. Flying in formation as we had to -- it was so tight you didn't have any idea where you went. The only -- only person that knew where you were going was the guy who was leading all this. So anyhow, we had 75 airplanes and these other two groups had 75 airplanes so you came in -- this is a fire power demonstration. You come in and you lay down either two or -- or if you're carrying bombs, you've got four or 500 pound bombs. If you're carrying napalm, you've got two of these big napalm tanks. So you come in with the bombs and you drop them all over everywhere or pinpoint them, whatever the particular thing is, which opens up holes in everything. Then they come around with the napalm and they fill all those holes with flaming gasoline. And then you come around with 3500 rounds of 50 caliber ammunition and you shoot everything full of holes that hasn't been hit before. So you can picture that that was pretty spectacular kind of thing. Anyhow we're on our way back from that and we ran into real heavy weather, coming down again, as I say, from over the Russian side. And the colonel was leading the squadron. We were building a new - a new base that was going to take over the one that we had down on the northern part of Honshu, move it down from Hokkaido and it would be more centrally located there and it would be the central air base that would take care of international flights and everything else, bombers and the whole works. So it was under construction but it hadn't been opened yet. And at that time as the operations officer, I knew about it. I had to go down there and check on things, see how they were going and all that, keep up charts and whatever. So the colonel of course knew about it so he led his group over there. He took his 25 airplanes in. And then the second group -- they tried to make it through and went a little bit further and decided that they couldn't do it and they turned around and went back except one guy who probably had a hangover or had his radio off. He just flew straight on ahead. And I saw several years later where a Japanese fishing boat had

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

fished him up out of the harbor there. And -- but the guy that was leading our group -- he had a hot date with the nurse there at the base, and he was going to get back to the base come hell or high water, which we almost did in his case. And I was flying at the very end of the group with two new pilots that had just come to the base and hadn't been oriented to the area at all. They not only didn't know our area, they had no idea where this -- this new field was, or if there even was one. So when we finally convinced this guy, we got up in the area where we were running into freezing rain, and we weren't equipped for that. And the base kept saying you can't land, the base is closed, there was sleet and snow and high winds and visibility is -- is almost zero. So finally, you know, wiser persons got to this guy to convince him, hey, we can't get through, you're going to have to go back. So he turned us around. Well by this time the weather had moved down to where there was just a little hole over the northern end of the island of Honshu there. We looked down on Tsugaru (?) Straits -- and that's spelled with a "T". Tsugaru, something like that, which is one of the roughest pieces of water anywhere in the world at best times. And you could see even from up high as we were, dashing waves hitting the end of the island and spraying it. And there was just a hole, that was it. So we circled down, he said, you know, he said break into trail and circle down. And I tried to bring these two guys with me cause I knew they would get lost if they -- if I got lost, they'd get lost, but if they got lost by themselves, they didn't know where they were. You know, I had some vague ideas. So anyhow I was watching coming down, these planes are spiraling down and they'd hit the -- hit the weather -- they just disappear -- just (gesture) and they were gone, one after another. Pretty soon they were all down and I'm behind them. You start hearing ahead of us people saying where are you. And I said, well, I don't know. Where the hell are you? Can't see anything. What altitude are you? Well, such and such an altitude. And someone says well, so am I. What direction are you going? Well such a direction, well, I'm turning around and going back. So then our brave leader said turn around and find the hole. So I'm confronted with the fact that there's 22 airplanes in front of me turning around and coming back and I don't know what their altitudes are cause they're all different altitudes and they're all strung out all over everywhere and I'm going to be flying into them. So I thought well I better start climbing, most of them are down low. I'll climb as high as I can and then make a turn. Well, I should have climbed and leveled off and turned but because these voices sounded so insistent about them going back and finding a hole, I didn't turn. Turning on instruments, climbing and turning on instruments is not always the easiest thing to do. And with two guys on your wing, two men wingmen pull in on you and they fly off of you. It's like just flying formation, same thing, they just watch you. So started the turn and I was climbing and I look back and this guy was there and I look down and that guy was there and I look forward and I look back up there and this guy was gone and I look down and that one was gone and I thought, oh, Jesus, you know. And I looked back to see if maybe I'd missed him and when I looked back, I was looking at the ocean -- I was coming down upside down. I had about 200 feet of altitude and I was moving fast. And yes, I panicked. I really did. But I rolled the thing out straight, and there was panic there in the cockpit there for awhile because it spun my gyros -- I didn't know what direction I was going, and at that altitude there were cliffs off the end of the island that were higher than I was. So either I was headed towards Seattle or I was headed toward one of those cliffs. So first thing I did was try to pull up as far as I could into the base of the clouds without getting into them. And circled and I could hear all these people saying we're lost, you know, hole's gone, it's not there anymore. And just all kinds of air talk. And the people that were with me -- I had no idea where they'd gone, I figured they'd probably gone into the ocean or something. But I did remember that since I was operations officer that we had what they call a GCA crew, ground controlled approach, done by radar. We had the original team that was developed for the Navy to do that but the Navy didn't need them any longer, but we did. And they sent (inaudible) developed by Gilfellen (?) Radio Corporation. So they sent them over to us, and that's another whole story is how we got them, actually. They'd been sent to us but they had lost their orders and the people that had them at the big transition motel in Tokyo didn't have their records either. We

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

were down there one day on another mission and ran into these guys in the mess hall or bar more likely. And they were telling us what they were and we had no idea what it was, we'd never heard of it. And one of the fellows that was with it remembered that one of our people on the base used to go out on weekends and check all around the area and there was a big base the Japs were building nearby us that they were going to bomb the West Coast from -- from long, heavy-range planes. And on there was stacked a bunch of equipment that was marked with military things on it, US, but it -- we didn't have any record of it and we had no reason to access it but he remembered some of those things. So the fellow that was with us got on the phone, called up to the base, which was not easy to do cause the -- any time it snowed, our land line came over from the headquarters out to the -- to the radio transmission, it would get wet snow on it about that deep and break. And it was snowing out there. Anyhow, he called and he said, explained it to these people -- put them in the phone. They said yeah, that's our equipment. So we got the only GCA crew in existence. The original developed crew by -- and boy, the lives they saved. Anyhow, I knew that -- that they were down there. We'd sent them down to the new base to practice. And I thought well, it was getting close to closing time, it was 4:30 I guess, and time's over at 5 o'clock, everybody goes off -- it would have been a weekend, they had a weekend pass and they'd have been gone. And civilians had been training the -- our military people to do this. And so I -- I called -- I put out my call letters and I called and heard nothing. And I called again. And I was still circling all this time. And I called again and a voice came back to me. He said identify yourself, and what do you want? And not the exact words, we're using regular phraseology, you know, Red Fox, whatever you are, but. I said well we got 25 airplanes out here that are lost. And we need a homing directions into the base. And they said stand by, we'll do it. So they got on the air and they started -- they got people ordered to where they would call in by their positions in the flight and one by one they got them zeroed in there. Well by the time they -- nobody was scattered so far but what they knew that when some of the planes got directions, then that was the direction they all needed to go, so they all started in that direction. So pretty soon they weren't too far away. But I was the last one. I waited for the very end to make sure that everybody else had been picked up. So I'm out there flying around and they gave me a heading to come in on and I flew for a little while. I called back, I said, I don't like this heading, I think I'm going to get to Seattle quicker than I'm going to get to you, and the guy says, oh, I'm sorry, we gave you a reciprocal heading. Turn around. So I had to make a 180 and they gave me a new heading to go back. And by this time I had pretty much gotten control of myself, staring at those waves with the ice and all that -- hadn't been too much of a thrill. Anyhow, got in, landed at the airport, first time and only time in my life that I was coming in for a landing, they shot a red flare at me and I thought what are they doing that for? I've got to get down, I'm almost out of fuel. I realized I wasn't slowing down the way I should. I had the wheels down but it still wasn't -- I kept pushing the throttle back, pushing the throttle back, and I thought -- oh no, I had been cutting back and didn't have the wheels down. So I put the wheels down and then I remembered I better put some flaps down too cause I still was going too fast. And I got down safely and got in and everybody was congratulating -- I checked and found out the two fellows who had been with me were down safely and that was it. But, you know, which is just routine stuff, except that night, they gathered money to buy a couple cases of beer from the officers bar to take over to the enlisted crew that ran the GCA group and what they found was that they had left the GCA shack, which is five miles off -- four or five miles off the end of the runway, and got into the 6 by truck and were on their way into the field. Cause as they say, it's open post, man, we've got to get back there and get into town. So they were about half way in and the fellow who was in charge, the chief enlisted man, whatever he was, he says hey, he says, I think I forgot to turn the set off -- equipment. And they said big deal, what difference does it make. Nobody's going to bother it. And he says, well, I'm responsible. They said well forget it. Who's ever going to do that. Nobody ever vandalizes anything around -- he says I don't care, he says, I'm not going to lose my stripes. And he pounded on the window to the driver who

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

complained about it too and he says take us back. So they drove back, pulled the truck up next to the shack. They got there. Not only had he not turned it off, he hadn't closed the door. So as he walked up to the building they heard me calling, asking for a fix. How do you like that. That's how close it came. If they hadn't gone back after that, there'd been 25 airplanes and 25 pilots gone.

Question: And you would have just been all over -- I mean, wherever.

Answer: Well, you can't bail out and survive, usually. You know, you don't know how you're going to survive. It's all mountainous. And you don't survive if you end up in the ocean, that's for darn sure.

Question: Boy, you were -- you were looked over out there.

Answer: Yeah, so I think that's probably a really totally unusual and significant event from the standpoint of, did fate play in that particular event. It saved all of our lives, only because I was aware of the fact that there was a team down there to do this but not that they'd even be there at that hour. They'd left and came back. It was only because actually he hadn't turned the radio off that he heard my voice. If he'd turned it off and the door was open, he wouldn't have done anything anyhow.

Question: Oh, man. Yeah, that's when you start shaking is once you realize afterwards where you were at.

Answer: Yeah, that's when it hits you that man that was close. So I -- well, anyhow, if you believe in a God or a higher deity of some kind, that's like the guy in the shell holes in the World War I, you know, in the trenches.

Question: Well thank you very much. That wasn't too bad was it.

Answer: No, very interesting.

Question: Boy, that's that --

Answer: -- cross country with a friend of mine, we had a -- all of the -- each of the three groups that were there in Japan supplied a couple of pilots or more to squadron over in Kempo, Korea, just before it became Seoul. And we used to take equipment and stuff over to the men who were stationed over there out of our group. So that was flying all the way down from the top of -- or the middle of Hokkaido down the full length of Honshu and across the Japanese Sea and up over to Korea

Answer: Flew over Hiroshima and all that. It was a fun flight. But I was -- we had a C-46, and I had never been checked out in a C-46, that's one of the bigger transport planes they had. Was flying with a friend of mine who had been checked out. He wasn't imminently qualified but he did know how to land and take off at least. And so we got about halfway down the coast and, I don't know what we were stopping for, fuel, I guess. I don't know why we would have had to stop down there for fuel, we hadn't gone that far. Anyhow we were about half way down the coast of Japan and we decided to land at this airport for some reason or other and he said you want to land it? I said sure, why not. So, well this thing sits 30 feet off the ground in the pilot's seat and I leveled off, came in, leveled off beautifully, about 30 feet high, I guess. People in the control tower never say anything, they just say take this runway, the wind is such and such, and when you're down, taxi such and such or whatever. That's about as much as those guys ever -- no conversation beyond that. In this case I came

Eugene Pember

Tape 1 of 2

down (gesture) and the tower said "Jesus Christ." So what happened was is that we -- we flew on over to -- to Kempo that night by the way. We were often accused of starting the war because we know we flew across the DMZ up there. We hadn't any idea where we were. Either we hadn't bothered to figure our course on the map or anything else, and I don't think we'd figure on it getting dark but it was really dark when we got there. We got to one point where we figured we should be getting close to the field. And we could hear, very faintly on the radio, Kempo Field giving landing instructions to somebody. So pretty soon we came along to a place where there's two rows of lights on a field, looked like runway lights, I mean Kempo was pretty primitive anyhow. Smudge pots. So we figured hey, this is it. So we wheeled around, gave our landing request and statements and all that and wheeled around and my buddy was flying the plane. And we lined up with it.. but it wasn't quite in line with the numbers they'd given us for the direction of landing. It was about 15, 20 degrees off, but looked good enough to us. So we came in, level, we came in, made our approach, made a regular required approach, long down, downwind leg and started in on the final approach and he says okay, drop the gear. And I dropped the gear. And he says okay, give me some flaps and I gave him some flaps and he says give me the lights and I gave him the lights, the lights came swinging down like this out of the bottom, and they light up everything just in a path as they come up like that. And just as they did, we picked up a big military bus.. moved right into the middle of the lights and stopped. And there were white faces and glistening eyes all looking in our direction and hands up against the windows, and then pandemonium. They were going out the windows, they were going out the door, they were going out everywhere. And he says full throttle!. And I shoved the throttles all the way -- we were in landing configuration, we were down for all intents and purposes -- we were through flying, we were almost out of air speed, full throttle he says, jerk up the gear, and I pulled up the gear and he said milk up the flaps, and we were just (gesture) trembling. We just scraped the top of that thing when we went over it. And we got up and -- and after we got through shaking, he tried to reorient and we discovered we were probably still another 20 minutes from the field. And we didn't hear anything about that except that, years later when I was on the police force there in LA, as a detective investigating some incidences -- hold ups in bars and we were getting information and stuff and we were waiting to talk to somebody and there were two fellows sitting at the stools at the bar. And this one guy says yeah, there we were, he says, in a bus, we were getting ready to go out and open post, he says, Friday night and we were crossing this parade ground, and here comes these dumb asses down in this airplane trying to land on us. That's part of the small world syndrome. So yeah there were people there and they didn't know that.

Question: That's Sir, dumb ass to you.

Answer: Yeah. I said well hey, that was me. (laughs)