

**Oral History Interview of  
Elton Wilson**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall  
October 28, 2013  
Plainview, Texas**

**Part of the:  
*World War II Veteran Interviews***

© Southwest Collection/  
Special Collections Library



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

**Southwest Collection/  
Special Collections Library**

15th and Detroit | 806.742.3749 | <http://swco.ttu.edu>

## Copyright and Usage Information:

An oral history release form was signed by Elton Wilson on October 28, 2013. This transfers all rights of this interview to the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University.

This oral history transcript is protected by U.S. copyright law. By viewing this document, the researcher agrees to abide by the fair use standards of U.S. Copyright Law (1976) and its amendments. This interview may be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes only. Any reproduction or transmission of this protected item beyond fair use requires the written and explicit permission of the Southwest Collection. Please contact Southwest Collection Reference staff for further information.

### Preferred Citation for this Document:

Wilson, Elton Oral History Interview, October 28, 2013. Interview by David Marshall, Online Transcription, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. URL of PDF, date accessed.

*The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library houses over 6,300 oral history interviews dating back to the late 1940s. The historians who conduct these interviews seek to uncover the personal narratives of individuals living on the South Plains and beyond. These interviews should be considered a primary source document that does not implicate the final verified narrative of any event. These are recollections dependent upon an individual's memory and experiences. The views expressed in these interviews are those only of the people speaking and do not reflect the views of the Southwest Collection or Texas Tech University.*

*The transcribers and editors of this document strove to create an accurate and faithful transcription of this oral history interview. However, this document may still contain mistakes. Spellings of proper nouns and places were researched thoroughly, but readers may still find inaccuracies, inaudible passages, homophones, and possible malapropisms. Any words followed by "[?]" notates our staff's best faith efforts. We encourage researchers to compare the transcript to the original recording if there are any questions. Please contact the SWC/SCL Reference department for access information. Any corrections or further clarifications may be sent to the A/V Unit Manager.*

## Technical Processing Information:

The Audio/Visual Department of the Southwest Collection is the curator of this ever-growing oral history collection and is in the process of digitizing all interviews. While all of our interviews will have an abbreviated abstract available online, we are continually transcribing and adding information for each interview. Audio recordings of these interviews can be listened to in the Reading Room of the Southwest Collection. Please contact our Reference Staff for policies and procedures. Family members may request digitized copies directly from Reference Staff.

Consult the Southwest Collection website for more information.

<http://swco.ttu.edu/Reference/policies.php>

### Recording Notes:

*Original Format:* Born Digital Audio

*Digitization Details:* N/A

*Audio Metadata:* 44.1kHz/ 24bit WAV file

*Further Access Restrictions:* N/A

### Transcription Notes:

*Interviewer:* David Marshall

*Audio Editor:* N/A

*Transcription:* Christopher Cunningham

*Editor(s):* Cammy Herman, Walter Nicolds

## Transcript Overview:

This interview features Elton Wilson discussing his experiences with the US Army flying “The Hump” in the China-India-Burma Theater in World War II.

**Length of Interview:** 1:04:36

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Transcript Page</b>	<b>Time Stamp</b>
Biographical and information	5	00:00:11
Joining the Army after Pearl Harbor, flight training	7	00:02:53
Trip from the United States to India	11	00:10:40
Flying “The Hump”	15	00:16:35
After the war, receiving dad’s farm, life as a farmer	22	00:28:55
Working to ferry planes in Dallas	24	00:32:38
Life on the farm after the war	25	00:35:17
Dangers encountered during flights of The Hump	28	00:39:03
Rest and relaxation in India	33	00:47:03
Many pilots who crashed or bailed out over The Hump	36	00:52:32
Wilson’s medals and awards	39	00:56:58
Activities after the war including flying and farming	40	00:59:14

### Keywords

Army Air Corps, The Hump, C-46, China, India, Burma, Japan

**David Marshall (DM):**

The date is October 28, 2013, and this is David Marshall interviewing Elton Wilson at his home south of Plainview, Texas, and if we could just start by getting your date and place of birth?

**Elton Wilson (EW):**

Okay, I was born about six miles from here in the old Snyder community in 1921.

DM:

Okay, what community was that?

EW:

Snyder, it used to have school houses about every seven or eight miles.

DM:

Is it spelled the same way as the Snyder down the other side of Lubbock?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Oh, okay.

EW:

It doesn't exist—none of them exist anymore.

DM:

Okay, but it had a school building and what all was there at the community?

EW:

That's about it. I was born in a little house across the corner from it.

DM:

Okay, you said 1921.

EW:

Yes.

DM:

Now what day were you born?

EW:

November twenty-first.

DM:

November twenty-first, you got a birthday coming up.

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

(laughs) How is it that your family came... did your parents come to this area, or their parents?

EW:

Well, my dad's parents came here first.

DM:

Okay.

EW:

And they lived in a house over here. It's moved to Plainview now, it's in town, and then that was, I was about three or four maybe when we moved down south. My dad bought a farm down about 12 miles south of here. It was really out in the country then. There were no paved streets or anything. So I lived down there, and I went to a country school, it was named Wilson. Two and a half miles, I walked for eight years.

DM:

Oh you did, two and a half miles, you said it was named Wilson?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Was it named after a family member?

EW:

No, I think it was President Wilson.

DM:

Oh, yeah, okay.



EW:

[inaudible] Then the bus came by and we went to Petersburg for three years. That's when we only had eleven grades.

DM:

That's when what?

EW:

We only had eleven grades.

DM:

Eleven grades, yeah, okay. You know what, I'm going to set this [recorder] over here because that humming might kind of drown this out, so I'm going to get, can I get over like this?

EW:

Yeah, and then—

DM:

Let's do that.

EW:

I can turn that heat off. It'll probably go off in a minute.

DM:

Oh, I think that'll be fine, but I just wanted to get closer to make sure.

EW:

Oh, I know I've been accused of not talking very loud.

DM:

(laughs) Well, if I can't hear it very well I'll just ask you to repeat it, if you don't mind.

EW:

Okay, then I went to Petersburg for three years. I didn't have any money to go to school on, so whenever Pearl Harbor was bombed, I think I was about twenty years old then, so I decided I'd just join up. So I joined up as a private in the army. In the mean time I'd heard of this cadet program, and so I said, "Well, might as well just sign up for it, too."

DM:

Was that the Army Air Corps?

EW:

Army Air Corps, so I did that, and I waited about two months, and they accepted me, for some reason, and so I went on down to San Antone [San Antonio] to Kelly Field.

DM:

Kelly, mm-hm.

EW:

So I went to pre-flight there, and then I made it through pre-flight, and then we went over to Ballinger for primary.

DM:

Now let me slow, ask you here. What is pre-flight? It's before you actually get instruction in the airplane?

EW:

Right, yeah, you learn how to be a soldier.

DM:

I see, so it's like—

EW:

Yeah, we had guns, and we had parades, and we had school.

DM:

So it's like basic training?

EW:

Yeah that's what it is.

DM:

Like basic training, okay, pre-flight.

EW:

And then we went to Ballinger pre-flight, and I made it through that.

DM:

Ballinger, Ballinger had a—



EW:

It just had a school. It had a nice little school.

DM:

That's a pretty little spot, too.

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

But you, so you spent some time in Ballinger. They had a base?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay.

EW:

And I got through that. That's the first time I'd ever been in an airplane, (laughs) and, in fact, I think I'd seen one plane before.

DM:

I was going to ask you about that now, if you had any aviation interest?

EW:

Oh, no.

DM:

You just decided to volunteer, and then what caused you to think, "Well, maybe I'll fly a plane?" What caused you to enter that cadet program?

EW:

Well, I had a friend that had mentioned this—that he was, I think he was in the National Guard, and they call it a National Guard as you know, and he mentioned that he was going to apply for it, and I said, "Well, I might, too."

DM:

Okay, I see.

EW:

And not expecting to ever get through it, but anyway we went to Waco then for basic and Eagles' Nest [Pampa Army Airfield, Pampa, Texas] for advanced and made it on.

DM:

Okay, did you have any trouble along the way or did it kind of come natural to you?

EW:

It was okay, I had moments that I was wondering if I was going to get any further, but I did, and you just got to concentrate, and work at it.

DM:

What happened if you didn't? Would you go into infantry?

EW:

Probably so, you'd have better chances in the service if you don't do this, but I was an old country kid, and never been anywhere, and never expected to get through it, really, but I was competing. Fact is, when I went into Kelly Field I was put in a tent with six people from New York and New Jersey (laughter) and all, names started with W though.

DM:

All city kids.

EW:

Right, yeah, and they had a lot of experience. A lot of people had, you know, been flying planes in those days. So anyway I got through it. And I thought I did pretty well with aerial gunnery, so I thought, "Well, I'll be flying a P-Shooter or something." But that was when they started to take all the pilots to fly over The Hump [The Allied supply flight from India to China].

DM:

I see, what do you mean by P-Shooter? Like a fighter plane?

EW:

Well, yeah, they didn't have P-51s in action at that time. They had the old C-40 and B-40 or P-40 or whatever, P-40. Anyway we went through training here at various places in the states in a C-46. I went to Kansas City and flew with Continental Airlines for a while, and we went to various places, and I wound up in Greenville, Nevada flying a C-46.

DM:

Okay, so you had already been in trainer planes by that time?

EW:

Oh, yes.

DM:

When was the first time you were actually in the cockpit with an instructor?

EW:

Well, I don't remember the date, it was in Ballinger, of course.

DM:

It was in Ballinger, okay.

EW:

I forget now the plane that we flew but anyway, then we had a P-13 or something like that in basic, AT-6, and advance, so I went from AT-6 to advanced. So I went from an AT-6 to a twin engine—

DM:

Were you concerned about this or did you just kind of—

EW:

No, no.

DM:

Just do it?

EW:

Well you do what they tell you to do. You do the best you can.

DM:

No reason to question.

EW:

No. Wouldn't do any good. Anyway, I got through all that training in Reno and then we picked up a plane in Buffalo, New York—to various places where they'd take things off to lighten it up. They even took the ice conditioners off because they were heavy too.

DM:

Ooh, to keep the ice off the wings?

EW:  
Yeah.

DM:  
They took those off because you had to fly at a high enough altitude to get over the Himalayas?

EW:  
Yeah we flew over twenty thousand feet. These were new planes that were just being built. We were stationed—I made my first flight over the Hump as a co-pilot, December 24th.

DM:  
Christmas Eve. What year was that?

EW:  
That was 1943, about. Then after that we were up in the northeast part of India.

DM:  
Do you remember what town was nearby?

EW:  
Yeah there was little small town, Dibrugarh

DM:  
Could you see the range, the Himalayas from that town?

EW:  
Oh yeah. We were down in—actually our place was an old tea plantation.

DM:  
Let me back up just a second. How did you get there? How did they transport you over from—you were in New York I guess—how did you get there?

EW:  
Well from near Miami, Florida to—we flew a plane, so it took us about two weeks to get there.

DM:  
Did you fly across the Atlantic?

EW:  
Oh yeah.

DM:

Oh did you? Well that was a big deal right there.

EW:

Oh yeah. [phone ringing]

DM:

Go ahead and get that. I'll pause this a second.

[pause in recording]

DM:

So let me see if I got this right Lindberg flew the Atlantic for the first time in '27 and here you flew it in '43 just sixteen years later. Y'all were flying these big C-46s over. That's a lot of progress isn't it?

EW:

Well it was for me anyway.

DM:

What did you think about taking this thing across the Atlantic? How long a flight would that be?

EW:

To tell you the truth, you don't think about it. You're just doing what you're supposed to do. So if you get across, okay, if you don't, your end of service.

DM:

You know I've heard a lot of guys that were in World War II say the exact same thing. I guess you were so well trained that you just followed orders.

EW:

Yeah. Bear in mind I was just an old country kid.

DM:

Well how long was the flight and where did you land from Miami?

EW:

Well, we went to South America. Well we spent one night in Cuba, and then we went—we had a base in Cuba, still have one over there.

DM:

Was that Guantanamo, where you flew in? Do you remember? Guantanamo?

EW:

No.

DM:

Okay, alright, but a base in Cuba.

EW:

That was a long time ago. (laughs) And then we went on down to South America. I guess we were in Brazil and someone had sabotaged a plane. They cut some hydraulic lines. So we spent two or three days there because we had to get the supplies back from the States. Then we flew to a little island out in the Atlantic, it was Ascension Island, I don't know whether you've ever heard of that or not. That's all it was, just a little island, had one tree on it.

DM:

They had put a base on it though so you could make a hop over?

EW:

Right. We refueled and took off again to [correction: from] South America. I think we stopped—I can't remember the name of the place that we landed in Africa but then we flew across Africa. And we spent two days going across Africa. Then we had to go around some of those countries and finally wound up in India.

DM:

How big was this squadron that was going, how many other C-46s?

EW:

Just one of us.

DM:

Just one C-46. And what other kinds of planes were with you?

EW:

None.

DM:

You didn't see any other planes? You were just flying this route?

EW:

Oh no, right. Just three, pilot and co-pilot and navigator.

DM:

Was that normal to just send out one plane at a time? What if there was a distress?

EW:

Well we started out with about three planes but one—

DM:

Got cut?

EW:

Got cut in Brazil.

DM:

Did they speculate it was maybe German sympathizers?

EW:

It had to be.

DM:

Axis sympathizers.

EW:

Yeah. I don't know why anybody else would do that.

DM:

Yeah, okay.

EW:

But then, I don't remember just what date we landed in Calcutta. And then we were there for a few days and then sent us to the valley on at upper Assam and that was in the northeast part of India. Our base was right near the bottom of the Brahmaputra River which is a big river.

DM:

Yeah, big river.

EW:

So by the time we got settled down we were in tents. And the weather in India—



DM:

It was wet?

EW:

It was wet and it was hot.

DM:

Do you know what time of year you got there? Were you there in monsoon season?

EW:

We went through monsoon season. I don't remember what month it was.

DM:

In a tent?

EW:

Well we finally moved into a bashuk [a thatched bamboo dwelling erected for use by US military personnel; spelling unknown] after two or three months.

DM:

That is a wet area down there around Brahmaputra.

EW:

Oh yeah. That's why you had the tea plantations.

DM:

That's right. Well this is amazing though. Here you are from a little community in West Texas and now all of a sudden, after your training, you've been on the east coast of North America, you've been to Cuba, South America, Africa, Asia. That's just kind of mind boggling. But did you think anything about it at the time?

EW:

No. We were just doing what we was told to do.

DM:

Do you ever look back and go, "Wow, that was quite a—?"

EW:

Well, I've thought about it.

DM:

That's a big thing. You were halfway around the world.

EW:

Well yeah. So we averaged a flight about every three days. I flew ninety-two round trips.

DM:

Oh really? This is over The Hump?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Can you—I don't know if you can still do this, but can you remember any landmarks along that route?

EW:

We didn't have any. It was all mountains. There was a series of mountains and three different rivers that come down through there. And they were probably ten thousand feet high.

DM:

Those were your landmarks basically.

EW:

Yeah. We had a Fort Hertz, we had a station there that had some kind of radio on that we would home in on. And we didn't have many instruments and we didn't have any up-to-date facilities.

DM:

Did you have charts?

EW:

Yeah, we had charts.

DM:

And you had a radio beacon but not a—you couldn't talk to anyone?

EW:

No. You flew a certain route and you had to use the old Morse code. So you didn't see anything but the weather.

DM:

What all did you have as far as a crew? You were the pilot.

EW:

We had a pilot, a co-pilot, and a radio operator.

DM:

That was it, three? Wow.

EW:

Yeah. Didn't have an engineer.

DM:

The radio operator was doing the Morse code and trying to help you navigate through there? Or was it all by sight?

EW:

No you had your little helmet on. You had to keep up with the Morse code yourself. Anyway, I was one of the luckier ones because I really didn't have any real major problems. I turned around before I got too far about three different times to have the plane checked again.

DM:

What were the problems, do you remember?

EW:

I don't remember.

DM:

Just some kind of mechanical problems.

EW:

It was mechanical. And if you get so far there's no need to turn around.

DM:

Right, right.

EW:

It would take about five and a half hours to go over.

DM:

One way, five and a half hours?

EW:

Um-hm.

DM:

And where would you land?

EW:

We had a few places to land over there. We landed at Kunming most of the time. They probably put the B-29s in there later just for—it was way up north.

DM:

Now can you tell me again the name of the base or town where you were flying out of?

EW:

Mohanbari.

DM:

Mohanbari? Can you spell that for me kind of?

EW:

M-a-l—

DM:

M-a-l?

EW:

M-a-l, I think, that would be close enough. Mal-b-a-r-i

DM:

B-a-r-i, “Mahlbari” [correction: Mohanbari] or something like that. Out of India, northeast India. When you flew over, did you fly as a squadron?

EW:

No.

DM:

Just one plane at a time?

EW:

Just one plane.

DM:

Was there a reason that they did that? Were they trying to avoid detection?

EW:

No, you were on your own, I don't think you could—with the weather we had over there. And I think about eighty or eighty-five percent of my time I was on the instruments or night.

DM:

Because you were going through clouds or it was dark?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Was it typically a day flight or a night flight?

EW:

Twenty-four hours.

DM:

Twenty-four hours. And about every three days you would head out. How long were you in Kunming?

EW:

I got over there in December and left in December, so I was over there a year.

DM:

Okay, but once you arrived at your destination in China, how many hours would you be there before you turned around and came back? Three days or?

EW:

Oh no. They'd give me time to unload it and take a little gas out and give you enough gas to get back to India. And then, I think there was one time I had to spend the night because I had something wrong—well I landed one time with a flat tire.

DM:

Well how did you do that?

EW:

Well you just keep your wings off there.

DM:

I'm looking for one with the landing gear down but I'm trying to remember does it have two front tires and one in the back?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

And one of the front tires was flat?

EW:

Yeah the front one, the big one. You don't want your wings to hit the ground.

DM:

No. So what happened then? How did you bring that—you didn't know it was flat though did you?

EW:

No.

DM:

Till you hit.

EW:

And the landing strips were put together with the coolies over there. They'd just pick up rocks and make a place to land. But anyway, the good Lord was with me.

DM:

It was because it was a rough airstrip over there that you popped a tire coming down?

EW:

I think it was flat when I landed because when I touched it, it—

DM:

Can you describe what happened when you landed? Did you tilt, did you turn one way?

EW:

I tried to keep the wings from hitting the ground is the main thing. But it finally came to a stop.

DM:

How do you keep it from—do you have to steer away from that wing to turn away from that wing? It seems like if you turned into your flat, the wing would go down into the ground. Or did you just have a knack?

EW:

It was just one of those God things. I guess.

DM:

(laughs) It worked out anyhow. That's pretty scary.

EW:

Anyway, and I never did really have any real problems except the weather. And sometimes you'd have the ice build-up on the wings and it would just [inaudible] build up on the props and the nose of the plane and once in a while they would pop and fly off. And it was raining and the wind was blowing. The winds were pretty strong; they would get a hundred miles an hour or so.

DM:

Well that seems like that would be one of the biggest challenges of flying over the Himalayas—would be the weather.

EW:

It was. Once in a while you'd fly over on a nice clear day it was a nice sight. It was inhabited with natives somewhere you didn't know where. Of course we had heard of the headhunters over there.

DM:

Did you fly over far enough east to see any of the Burma Road? Did you ever see the winding Burma Road?

EW:

We carried pipe—that was one of the things I didn't like to carry. We carried pipe for the Burma Road. They were rebuilding the Burma Road and they were putting the pipeline in at the same time.

DM:

The pipe was too heavy? Was that why you didn't want to carry it?



EW:

No. We just, if you hit some of that bad weather you didn't know whether it was going to be tied down to where it would hold or not. And they were lengths almost as long as the plane. And I don't remember what size they were, it seems like they were twelve inches or something.

DM:

So it could rattle around back there and damage something, knock a hole in the fuselage or something like that?

EW:

Oh yeah. Matter of fact, if it ever broke loose, that was it. Then we carried quite a bit of gas and old fifty-five gallon drums. And if you smelled a little gas in there, which was kind of hard to do when you had an oxygen mask on, you'd locate that thing and open the door and toss it out because you didn't want—

DM:

Don't want to slosh it. Because I guess any electrical circuit could set that stuff on fire?

EW:

Oh yeah. And I don't remember how many barrels they had anymore but it was a pretty good load. And we carried all kinds of supplies.

DM:

Did you know what all? Besides pipe and gas?

EW:

Yeah, we knew. They didn't have anywhere to put the planes inside. They were all outside in all kinds of weather. The crews worked on them outside too. So we would find something wrong, maybe it was the hydraulic system or something that you knew you was going to need sometime. And communications like I said was mostly Morse code.

DM:

Is that Morse code ingrained enough in your head that you could remember it?

EW:

It was at the time.

DM:

Got a little rusty on it now?

EW:

In training, we flew the old Link Trainer you know, you could take [inaudible] to see if you were doing it right.

DM:

That was a serious part of your training I guess, having to be able to communicate.

EW:

Well at the time in training we didn't know why we was doing it.

DM:

I guess you were glad for it later? (laughs)

EW:

When I was in advanced training, we went out to an island down on the coast where they had aerial gunnery and I did real well on that and that's the reason I figured I'd be a P-shooter pilot but they had other plans for me. But anyway.

DM:

What about other supplies that you carried besides pipe and gasoline—mostly military armaments or—?

EW:

Yeah and supplies to the troops that were stationed over there. I know there was one time that we flew a load of Kotex. We couldn't figure out how many women soldiers they had over there. But we were carrying supplies to P-40's over there and they were using those for filters on some things. It was so many different things.

DM:

How about food supplies?

EW:

We would take food supplies, yeah.

DM:

Now was most of this going to Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese army over there? Or was most of it going to attached U.S....?

EW:

Well, that and the people who were based over there, because we had about four different fields we were flying to. This is all kind of coming back to me. Because after I came home I wasn't coming back to farm. I was either going to go to school or I had a connection with American Airlines. But when I got back, they said, "You can have the farms."

DM:

They said what?

EW:

My dad just told me I could have the farm. His farm and raising all that stuff, which wasn't very much at the time. I kind of decided I'd try that so I did. And then in about two months after I got back I was invited to a party. I didn't have a date so I asked one of the girls I went to school with over there. She was going to Tech. I asked her if she knew anybody I could take to the party. She said, "Yeah, I have one. She's my roommate." So she came and went to the party and six months later we were married.

DM:

Oh is that right? So what year?

EW:

That was in '45.

DM:

In '45. What is the anniversary day?

EW:

July the fifteenth. And we had four kids, two boys and two girls. Ted is one of them.

DM:

And your wife's name?

EW:

Anne. A-n-n-e.

DM:

Anne. Where did she grow up?

EW:

I met her and her folks were living in Lorenzo. But she had lived in Lubbock before that but I don't know. She was born way down in East Texas somewhere.

DM:

Oh really? Okay.

EW:

But we had fifty-three years. She's been gone now about thirteen years.

DM:

Is that right? When y'all got married did you move right up here to this spot?

EW:

No, when we got married I figured I could find a place to stay almost anywhere and we couldn't. So we had a little house on a farm over toward Petersburg that we moved into and fixed up. We had two boys there before we moved up here in '53.

DM:

Well Petersburg is kind of between Lorenzo and Plainview. Closer to Lorenzo I guess.

EW:

Yeah. Of course that's where I graduated from high school.

DM:

At Petersburg?

EW:

Yeah. Anyway, after I got back, we thought we were going to get back home in time for Christmas. We got to Casablanca and there was too much passed ahead of us so we finally took a boat after about four days.

DM:

Is that right?

EW:

We landed in Newport News, Virginia on the twenty-sixth day of December.

DM:

Okay. The twenty-sixth of December. Just a little late.

EW:

Yeah. So I missed three Christmas's of being home.

DM:

Oh no.

EW:

Anyway, we went on up to Washington and got weathered in there for two or three days and I got a flight into Dallas, that's where the home base was going to be. So I just took my baggage and went down to the depot and got on a train and came home. Didn't check in. I got back down to Dallas on the second of January. And that's when I had ground schools for all the fighter planes and I got in the ferry division. So then after I did my transition, all those planes were there. They were putting the P-51s together there near Dallas. So I'd go over and pick the P-51s and fly them around.

DM:

Really?

EW:

Fly them to New Jersey, Florida, wherever.

DM:

Golly. (laughs) How was that after flying a C-46?

EW:

That was quite a bit different. You were by yourself and in a new plane. We would have to— about every so often we'd have to hold them up all the way for about three minutes.

DM:

Hold them up for three minutes?

EW:

Yeah. Open them up. All they'd go. Put the gas to them.

DM:

Oh, I see.

EW:

You didn't have to fly if there were any clouds in the sky or anything. I enjoyed that part of it.

DM:

Yeah, I'll bet. How long did you do that?

EW:

I don't recall. I was transferred from Dallas to Washington D.C. to Washington International Airport. I was up there for about six months flying V.I.P.'s. So that was my experience.

DM:

By the time you got out, had Army Air Corps become the U.S. Air Force?

EW:

Yes—no, no.

DM:

It was still Army Air Corps. What year did you get out then?

EW:

I got out in, I think it was the early part of '45.

DM:

'45. Early part of '45, then you got married in the mid-summer of '45. Okay, out here. Were you thinking about going on the G.I. Bill after the war?

EW:

I had thought about it but I never did use any of that.

DM:

You had a farm.

EW:

Yeah. When I got back to farming I just took to farming.

DM:

Have you farmed ever since?

EW:

Um-hm.

DM:

Has it been mostly cotton?



EW:

No, it was various things. I was in the insurance and real estate business for about twenty years. I quit that several years ago.

DM:

What about your parents, did they cotton farm out here? What kind of crops?

EW:

They were farming. Of course when they were here and we moved down to El Paso, we had horses and we didn't have tractors and I was about three years old when we moved in there. So I was raised up on a farm and am still on a farm. I've never lived in town.

DM:

Good for you. (laughs)

EW:

This is as close to town as I want to be.

DM:

(laughs) I'm the same way and I'll tell you about that after we stop the recorder. So your dad, he had a farm, but did you have some livestock?

EW:

Oh yeah.

DM:

What was your main crop?

EW:

Well I guess we—of course we had to have our horses, and we had cows, and we had hogs, and chickens, so we would raise a lot of feed—and cotton. I think dad drilled his first well over at the Petersburg place about 19—about 1939 I think. We had good water back in those days.

DM:

Oh yeah. I've heard about it gushing out of the Caprock in big springs of water.

EW:

When I moved up here in '53 we had two ten-inch wells.



DM:

Two ten-inch wells? Wow.

EW:

They were sitting on two hundred feet.

DM:

What do you have to go to now to get water?

EW:

Three-hundred and they're small wells.

DM:

Is there any concern around here about the water being depleted?

EW:

Oh yeah. We wasted a lot of water when we had the water.

DM:

Well you know back then people thought it was unlimited.

EW: Yeah.

DM:

How about your drinking water, did you have a windmill?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay. Do you know how deep it was?

EW:

It sat only about forty-five feet.

DM:

Isn't that amazing. (laughs)

EW:

Yeah when I was a kid growing up we were out in the boondocks. We had neighbors and they were always real neighborly.

DM:

Well it's just a really amazing story for someone to have been out in the country in a rural area of West Texas to have suddenly been thrown in with these guys from New York and New Jersey and then just going all over the world. It's an amazing story. You might have just kind of taken it in stride at the time but for the rest of us that's just an incredible story.

EW:

Well I was in the service and I was just doing what I was told.

DM:

Um-hm. By the way, when you were flying the Hump, was there any sign of the Japanese?

EW:

Yeah we had planes fly over every once in a while.

**Ted Wilson [Elton's son] (TW):**

That's yours I already made the copy.

DM:

Oh thank you.

EW:

What is that?

DM:

This is what you did I think for the rotary club. It's a copy—you were filmed doing this for the rotary club apparently.

TW:

It wasn't filmed it's just a recording.

DM:

It's an audio recording. It's kind of like what we're doing right now. So we'll put this in the archives too if you don't mind.

TW:

There's a couple of newspaper articles in there too.

DM:

Good, well I really appreciate it Ted.

EW:

Well when I came back I forgot about the flying. I went to farming.

DM:

You were able to just kind of put that out of your mind?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Did you ever think about it?

EW:

Well I guess when people would ask me a question about it.

DM:

Did you ever dream about it? You didn't have any kind of—you know a lot of people came back with some trauma even if it was just because of bad weather.

EW:

You have a few days, or a week or two or three that you've got to get settled back down to where you were.

DM:

What did you see of the Japanese? You said you'd see them flying sometimes?

EW:

Well, they had a plane that would fly over just nearly daily but he wasn't shooting anything. But we did have some planes that would come back with holes in them. We were flying most of the time when the Japanese couldn't fly.

DM:

Okay. And that would be what—at night or rough conditions?

EW:

Weather.

DM:

Would they send you out when the weather got rough just to avoid the Japanese?

EW:

No, no. If it's your time to fly, you go fly.

DM:

You go fly—It doesn't matter what the weather is. Were these Japanese Zeroes—little fighter planes patrolling?

EW:

Yeah I guess they were Zeroes. They had them down in Burma. They would fly supplies over to someplace in Burma.

DM:

Yes, okay. Well hopefully by that time their air force was getting a little thin. I know they were losing a bunch of them in the Pacific.

EW:

Yeah. Well the ones that went down over the Himalayas, some of them got out on the rivers or something like that. And they wound up sometimes in Burma. But it would take them quite a few days to get to Burma.

DM:

Would y'all wear your parachutes all the time?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Did you sit on them—did you have that kind you sat on?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Did you ever take any pot shots from a Japanese fighter?

EW:

No.

DM:

Did you ever see any anti-aircraft on the ground that took shots at you?

EW:

Unh-uh.

DM:

So maybe—how would you list—if you had to concern yourself with weather and Japanese and any other conditions, what would be your biggest concern?

EW:

Weather.

DM:

The weather ranked higher than the Japanese. (laughs)

EW:

If you get lost over there, you're lost. And we got lost one time and we found our way back on a beam.

DM:

On a beam?

EW:

Yeah. Those winds will throw you off course pretty easily.

DM:

I'll bet.

EW:

The weather was our worst enemy.

DM:

Were there American radio stations scattered here and there to give you a beam? Where'd the beam come from?

EW:

Fort Hertz. It was about halfway over some place down there.

DM:

Down in some valley?

EW:

You could see it on a clear day if you flew over it. Just one little building.

DM:

Golly. How about when you were at Kunming, did you ever see any Japanese activity around there? Did they fly over?

EW:

No. We would, like I said when I had that flat, we went into Ching Kong or someplace and looked around but most of the time we were busy.

DM:

Oh yeah. Ninety-two missions. That's a lot of missions. I've talked to other pilots who flew over France or Germany and not that many missions. This is a lot. How many people were able to do ninety-two missions?

EW:

I really don't know. We had a lot of publication. In fact, there's a big book over there, I've got two of them. I looked at one [inaudible]. But we had a month, maybe it was every three months, we'd get something on it and we would have reunions. I went to my first reunion, I think the thirtieth one. It was in Miami.

DM:

The thirtieth reunion?

EW:

Yeah. I had a friend—we flew together some—and he called me and told me I needed to make one of those meetings. So we went and we flew over to Miami and then we had one in Midland, Texas, in fact we had two there. And I went to one in Colorado Springs.

DM:

When's the last one you heard of? Are they still having them?

EW:

No. There are not many of us left.

DM:

What about the casualty rate on this flying over the Hump? Ninety-two missions sounds like a lot. Were you often hearing about crashes or—?

EW:

Well, you wouldn't hear much. In fact we got our mail [inaudible].

DM:

I'm sorry?

EW:

We got—our mail was secret (censored). We weren't supposed to tell anybody about what we were doing.

DM:

Do you think that there were some casualties occurring that you didn't hear about? They just kind of kept from you?

EW:

That's the reason they called it the Aluminum Trail.

DM:

The Aluminum Trail? Because of all of the wreckage along there?

EW:

Um-hm. Most of them that go down, that was it.

DM:

Have you ever heard of the percentages of how many people?

EW:

Not really. I may have.

DM:

I wonder if anyone has ever really looked into that.



EW:

They probably have.

DM:

It's a sad subject to look into—it probably wasn't very low.

EW:

No. I was one of the lucky ones.

DM:

I just kind of—I don't remember the figures but I just kind of suspect this turn around in flying missions was a lot more rapid than what you see flying out of England over into France and Germany. I imagine there was more of a layover.

EW:

Yeah, we would have some days when we would have—maybe four, five, six days without having to fly. Then sometimes you'd have two—but they'd average about one every three days. And we had some better flights where we'd fly down through, stop several places in the valley to Kunming and had a rest-leave in—not Kunming—Calcutta. Yeah I had a rest-leave in Calcutta for a few days.

DM:

Oh a few days? So you would just fly down to Calcutta?

EW:

Yeah. And then Darjeeling was a little place where—of course this was under British rule at that time, and tea plantation growers would go up there. And we went up there one time and that was over in the northwest part of India up in the mountains. You'd take a train as far as it would go and you'd take a car or a taxi on up there. (both laugh) And I went on a hunting trip on the Brahmaputra River Island for a couple of times. The second time we went up there we was only there a day and one of the hunters shot a buffalo and it made him mad so he gored him and it killed him. So we had to take him back.

DM:

Oh really?

EW:

So they said there wasn't going to be any more hunting trips.

DM:

Golly, a water buffalo.

EW:

Yeah we brought a big boar back and the water buffalo. And it was camp meat. We were on duty.

DM:

It was what? Camp meat?

EW:

Camp Meat.

DM:

Oh you brought it back for camp. How was it?

EW:

It wasn't very good. (DM laughs) But it was as good as the rations we would get, just about.

DM:

I want to ask you more about India but can I pause it a second?

EW:

Yeah.

[pause in recording]

DM:

I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your experiences in India. So you got to get out and see a little bit of northern India it sounds like?

EW:

Yeah we flew over a lot of India. In fact, what is now Pakistan was part of India at the time. Karachi and—

DM:

Right, right. Just a few years before that all split up and the British were out.

EW:

Yeah. The British—of course we were back home when the British turned it over to India. But India is quite a place over there now.

DM:

It's quite a bit different from here isn't it? Again here you are from a semi-arid area, pretty dry area, and then you were over in that wet Calcutta area and millions of people. What was your impression of all of this?

EW:

Well, like I said, you're in the service and you're doing what you're told to do. But when we went over there in a tent, of course we had to have mosquito nets over the bed and all that kind of stuff. And we would have mice, and we would have rats—I think rats more than mice.

DM:

How about snakes?

EW:

They had snakes.

DM:

Did you see any poisonous snakes over there?

EW:

I'm sure I did. (both laugh)

DM:

Didn't stop to find out?

EW:

No, I didn't ask them. But down in Calcutta they have snake charmers you know.

DM:

Did you see some of that?

EW:

Oh, yeah.

DM:

Did you? Golly.

EW:

Calcutta was quite a place at that time. There wasn't much in the way of automobiles or anything. And of course their cows are all sacred over there so they just roam around where they want to.

DM:

Is that why you were eating water buffalo instead of cattle?

EW:

Yeah. Well the Indians wouldn't even eat a water buffalo.

DM:

What a different world.

EW:

It was at that time. It's a different world now, I know, but that was seventy years ago just about.

DM:

What an experience. Here you were twenty-two or so, twenty-three maybe.

EW:

I had a birthday while I was over there of course. I guess I turned twenty-three at that time.

DM:

Because you had just turned—you got over there did you say Christmas Eve of '43?

EW:

I got over there—we landed in Calcutta close to the first of the year—month. So by the time we got situated in India—that was my first trip over. And we flew co-pilots for a while until we got used to the routes and all that stuff.

DM:

Oh I see. There was a little bit of training then?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Did you ever hear of any guys who had to ditch and parachute and walk out of there?

EW:

Oh yeah.

DM:

How'd they get out of there? Following the rivers?

EW:

Following rivers. It was jungle, just jungle everywhere.

DM:

Did you get any kind of jungle survival training or anything like that?

EW:

We had a kit that we would carry with us of course. It wouldn't last very many days.

DM:

Do you remember what was in the kit?

EW:

Not really.

DM:

Was it mostly food or was it ways of procuring food?

EW:

It was food.

DM:

Okay. Did they give you any kind of water purification tablets or anything like that?

EW:

Oh yeah, you'd have to have—you don't want to drink their water over there.

DM:

That old jungle water (snaps fingers) would just get you like that wouldn't it?

EW:

I forget now what they put in the water, but we had a big jug that we'd drink out of.

DM:

In your survival kit—was it part of your backpack? Did you have a pack that you—what if you parachuted out, I mean was this already attached to you so that you would have it if you—?

EW:

Yeah it was someplace, I don't know, I don't remember. I know we had it.

DM:

Did you get any kind of jump training before.

EW:

Unh-uh.

DM:

You just hoped you didn't have to bail out.

EW:

(laughs) You learn the hard way.

DM:

(laughs) If you had to jump you had to jump.

EW:

I never did have to use a parachute in all my trips flying.

DM:

Isn't that wonderful?

EW:

Oh yeah.

DM:

I'm glad for you.

EW:

I've had a good life.

DM:

Yeah. You know I just wonder, it just seems like if you were bailing out over that terrain you wouldn't have much choice as to whether you landed on a mountainside or a valley or—

EW:

No. When you're out you go where ever you're going to land. The wind would be blowing you. You might be several miles from where you thought you was going to land.

DM:

I guess probably when you went over there you'd never seen any big mountains had you?

EW:

No not really.

DM:

Snowcapped mountains?

EW:

When we flew out of Reno, Nevada, we'd fly over the Rockies.

DM:

Right. Okay, you had seen them at least, okay.

EW:

Yeah in fact me and another guy, his parents bought a new car and he talked about it. So we even drove up to Pike's Peak in 1940, I believe it was '40.

DM:

Oh in '40? Before you even joined the army?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Well good you were familiar with mountains. (both laugh)

EW:

You go up Pike's Peak you learn a lot under the conditions we were going in at that time.

DM:

Well that's fourteen thousand feet. These others were in the twenties.

EW:

Yeah. Well, we didn't fly over the highest part of them.



DM:

Did you ever see those higher Himalayas?

EW:

Oh yeah.

DM:

Around Everest and all that? Did you fly up that way?

EW:

Well, you could see a long way on a clear day up there. They've found planes in recent years up in Tibet and places you know.

DM:

They have? They've found wreckage?

EW:

They'd get lost. When you're lost, you're lost.

DM:

Have you heard over the years about any wreckage from flying the Hump—being found in recent years?

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Are they still finding things?

EW:

I haven't heard of any in several years. Some of them have flown over there for get-togethers in China. Fact is the Chinese gave me a—well I was a member of the Chinese Air Force at that time.

DM:

Y'all got some kind of special medallions I believe for this service as I recall.

EW:

Yeah I've got one somewhere. I don't see it in here.

DM:

Let me ask you something about that too. I had it in my note here. I understand that—where is it—some of the, at one time it was the Tenth Air Force that people were flying for over the Hump and at another time it was the Air Transport Command. Were you part of the—

EW:

Air Transport Command.

DM:

Okay. Yeah, I think I recall y'all getting some kind of special commendation for that kind of flying.

EW:

Yeah, we did. I don't know—

DM:

Is it probably up here in your medals you think?

EW:

It probably is. I've got a bunch of stuff in drawers that I've collected.

DM:

If you don't mind I'll take a picture of some of the things up there, in just a little bit. But let me ask you right up, do you know what these two lower medals are for?

EW:

Well, that's Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal, I got two of each one of those.

DM:

You do? Okay, and what is this over here?

EW:

That's the Chinese one.

DM:

That's the Chinese medal? It's over on the left. I'm describing it on here so that when I take a picture, whoever's listening to this can know it's a yellow and orange ribbon with a medal over to center left.

EW:

Yeah with the wings up above it. Those three items there are from the Chinese Air Force.

DM:

And these too. The two wings up above the medal.

EW:

Yeah. Right.

DM:

Okay. Interesting. So you're an honorary Chinese pilot? (both laugh) After you got back from all of that, did you ever stop in Europe on the way back?

EW:

No. My wife and I went over to Europe one time.

DM:

Oh did you? Where did you go over there?

EW:

We flew into Geneva and went to Germany and then we went to Austria and Italy.

DM:

You picked some pretty spots to go.

EW:

Yeah.

DM:

Well you've been on a lot of continents then. More than most people ever think about going to.

EW:

We went to the Hawaiian Islands.

DM:

Now did you continue to fly as a civilian after the war?

EW:

No.

DM:

When you were out of the army—that was it?

EW:

I took my dad for a flight when I got out and I may have—well I've flown some more but not as a pilot.

DM:

Right. Oh I see, okay.

EW:

I haven't even flown in a few years now.

DM:

Did you ever think about doing that? About just getting your own plane and flying for any business reasons?

EW:

Not really because when you get into farming you concentrate on that and you buy what you have to have for farming. And you don't have a good year every year on farming.

DM:

Right. You have to store up for the lean times. Did you ever think about becoming a commercial pilot early on, right when you got out?

EW:

Yeah. I had connections with American Airlines and I did want to go to college or try with American Airlines. Because I had made up my mind I wasn't coming back to the farm. But then I changed my mind.

DM:

When you had a chance to farm you did that. Have you had any regrets about that?

EW:

No, no.

DM:

Most years have been okay?

EW:  
Yeah.

DM:  
Well one of the first things you had to face as a farmer I guess was that pretty bad drought in the early fifties.

EW:  
Oh yeah.

DM:  
Was that difficult? Did you have irrigation by then?

EW:  
Oh yeah.

DM:  
Oh good, okay. Irrigation saved a lot of people during that period I understand.

EW:  
And prices on commodities would get down. I had 7% on cotton and all that sort of stuff.

DM:  
Was fifties worse than it's been more recently? Or has this stuff more recently been more difficult?

EW:  
No, I remember when there was—right before irrigation, we would have some real dry years.

DM:  
Okay.

EW:  
Did you ever hear of that storm that rolled in, the big storm? I remember that one really well.

DM:  
There was a what—Black Thursday?

EW:  
It was on Sunday I believe.

DM:

Oh, okay. That's right, that's right. Golly.

EW:

I think that's the only time I ever went to the cellar.

DM:

That you ever what?

EW:

Went to the cellar.

DM:

Went to the cellar because of the sand storm?

EW:

Uh-huh. That was something to see.

DM:

I've heard it described. I made the mistake one time, I was talking to somebody like I'm talking to you now and it was dusty outside and I said, "We've got a dust storm going out there." And they laughed and said, "You don't know what a dust storm is." (both laugh)

EW:

We were lucky because our neighbors just north of us, it messed up their place. Then we had on over towards where I went to school and it turned their house on the foundation so it was really a storm.

DM:

Do you think there was a tornado in that?

EW:

There could have been.

DM:

Have you seen any tornadoes in this country out here?

EW:

Oh, yeah.

DM:

Any close misses?

EW:

Yeah, I had one come across the field about a hundred yards from here one time. It messed up the neighbor's house.

DM:

About what year was that?

EW:

It was probably about—could have been fifteen, twenty years ago. But I haven't seen any lately.

DM:

Yeah. That's good. (laughs) We'll keep our fingers crossed about that one. Well I think I've asked all the questions I need to ask today. But is there something I've missed or something that we need to add here?

EW:

I really can't think of anything. I think we've covered it all pretty well.

DM:

Well I'll tell you what, some other questions might occur to me. I may give you a call sometime and ask a question or two if you don't mind and then I'll listen to this. This is another audio recording of you.

EW:

I don't know what's on there so.

DM:

It's got the date on here. It's June 15, 2010, so three years ago you were recorded by the—it says Plainview Rotary on it. So I think you were at the Rotary meeting and gave a talk. So I look forward to listening to that also.

EW:

I joined the rotary in '69. I've been going every Tuesday since.

DM:

Okay. Well let me turn this off.



*[End of Interview]*



© Southwest Collection/  
Special Collections Library