

**John J. Hoefner  
Veteran**

**Wayne Clark  
New York State Military Museum  
Interviewer**

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Buffalo, New York**

**WC:** For the record, would you please state your full name and date and place of birth?

**JH:** My name is John J. Hoefner and I was born in Buffalo, NY on May 10, 1919.

**WC:** Did you attend school in buffalo?

**JH:** I attended my schooling in Buffalo public schools.

**WC:** Did you go on to college?

**JH:** Yes, I went on to college. I wanted to be an engineer. I started college at Canisius because I had a science degree. I ran out of money after two years and I didn't go back to school until I returned from the service. When I returned from service I attended the University of Buffalo and got my BS degree in Mechanical Engineering.

**WC:** Can you tell me where you were and what your reaction was to the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

**JH:** A group of us were quite active in horseback riding at that time and we were out riding that day, which happened to be a Sunday. When we got back to the stables we heard about the bombing.

**WC:** Did you know where Pearl Harbor was?

**JH:** Sure, I did, but a lot of people did not know where it was.

**WC:** You went into the service the following October?

**JH:** I graduated in 1936 and for a while I worked. I don't remember the date I went in.

**WC:** You went in on October 22, 1942.

**JH:** Yes, that was my induction date. A couple times I was called up and was rejected because of my eye sight. I always wore glasses. Then, after a while, they needed people.

**WC:** Did you enlist or were you drafted?

**JH:** I was drafted.

**WC:** Where did they send you for your basic training?

**JH:** Basic training started at Fort Niagara. I think we were there about 3 or 4 weeks and then we went to St. Petersburg, FL. And continued the training there.

**WC:** At what point did they decide to put you into the Air Force?

**JH:** That was decided at St. Petersburg. At that time during basic training they gave us some testing. You could request what you wanted, but that didn't mean you were going to get it. I requested the air force. I was also very interested in shooting before I

went into the service so I requested being an armorer. They accepted that and sent me to Buckley Field in Colorado. That was the armament school.

**WC:** That was after your basic training?

**JH:** Yes

**WC:** What was your basic training like?

**JH:** All I remember was a lot of KP and marching.

**WC:** Were you staying at a regular military base or in a hotel?

**JH:** We were staying in a hotel.

**WC:** Was that your first time away from home?

**JH:** No. My mother and father, and one sister and I traveled a lot. They liked to go on vacations. It was the longest distance I had been from home.

**WC:** At armament school what kinds of weapons did they train you on?

**JH:** The types of armament that were on airplanes. Machine guns basically. It wasn't rifles and that sort of stuff.

**WC:** Now, what was that training like? I've heard that you had to learn to disassemble a 50-caliber blindfolded, etc.?

**JH:** That is exactly what you did. They showed us how to do it and we had to learn to do it.

**WC:** Aside from the 50-caliber, did they teach you how to arm the planes with bombs, or anything like that?

**JH:** Yes, they did teach us how to do bombs, etc., because you didn't know what you were going to be doing after that. After that we were sent to a fighter group, which wasn't really involved with bombs.

**WC:** Do you remember how long your training was in Colorado?

**JH:** It was nine weeks.

**WC:** Once you completed that training, where were you sent next?

**JH:** I was sent to a fighter squadron that was stationed in Nevada. It was out in the middle of the desert. There was nothing around there.

**WC:** What did you do there?

**JH:** They had airplanes so we worked on the airplanes. They were learning to fly the planes. They were Bell P-39's. I knew them because I worked for Bell Aircraft for a while before I went into the service. They were used for training. That was where we learned our skills.

**WC:** Were you responsible for cleaning the guns?

**JH:** Yes. Once they were fired you had to take them out of the aircraft and clean them, etc. You had to disassemble them and re-assemble them.

**WC:** Were there any problems that were fairly common place?

**JH:** The P-39 had the engine located behind the pilot and there was a long extension tube that went from the engine to the front to drive the turbine that spun the propeller. In that tube there was a 37-caliber cannon. The P-39 was the only plane that had a

cannon like that. They had it synchronized with the propeller so that it shot through the propeller between the blades as it rotated. In the later version of the P-39 they had a 50-caliber machine gun under each wing.

**WC:** Was it fairly easy to take the guns out of the aircraft, or was it a lot of work?

**JH:** On the P-39 it was easy to pull them out, but there was a synchronization device that had to be set correctly or you would put a hole through the propeller. That did happen.

**WC:** Those guns must have been pretty heavy to lift in and out of the aircraft.

**JH:** The 40-caliber weighed maybe 20 pounds. The 50-caliber was heavier because it was larger.

**WC:** How long were you there in Nevada?

**JH:** I can't remember exactly how long. I'd say it was about two months. From there we were moved into more permanent bases and the one I went to was in Haywood, California. It was across the bay from San Francisco. It was a small field and our squadron was the only group there.

**WC:** What kind of living quarters did you have there?

**JH:** We had pretty good living conditions there. We were in Nissen huts and the weather was good and the town, etc. It was a lot better than the desert.

**WC:** So, you were able to go out at night and on weekends?

**JH:** Oh, sure, you could go out at night and you could walk the town. It was a nice town and had a municipal swimming pool we could use, etc.

**WC:** When you left Hayward, where did you go?

**JH:** Once we left Hayward, we were on our way to combat. We were assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in England.

**WC:** Did you know you were going to the 8<sup>th</sup> before you left the States?

**JH:** No. First, we met up with two other squadrons to form a Group. We met in Idaho to combine them. Then we traveled to New York City.

**WC:** How did you get to Idaho, by train?

**JH:** Yes. We took a train, and then by train to New York. We didn't know where we were going obviously, but we went to a base near New York City. We were there being mobilized with a bunch of other people. We didn't know it at the time, but we were going to England on the Queen Elizabeth. We sailed from New York and because she was a big liner and fast, we had no escorts. There were thousands of troops on the ship.

**WC:** Did you get sea sick at all?

**JH:** We could still see the Statue of Liberty and I got sick. I was sick all the way over.

**WC:** Do you remember the approximate date when you left for overseas?

**JH:** It was November 23, 1944. We arrived in Scotland on November 29. We went from Scotland by train to our bases.

**WC:** Where did you end up?

**JH:** After we got to England we were, oddly enough, assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force. We were at a base called Reydon Woods. The 9<sup>th</sup> was a strategic air force. We were there

about two months and they needed more groups in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, so we were relocated to Leiston.

**WC:** When you were with the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force were the aircraft flying missions at all?

**JH:** No, when we were with the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force we did not have any airplanes. We didn't do anything but march around and clean, etc. After we relocated to Leiston we were there for all the time we were in England.

**WC:** What was life like at that air base?

**JH:** We settled in to be there for the long haul. We started operations in February, so we got to Leiston in January sometime. Leiston was an interesting place. It was just a mile from the North Sea. It was cold with the wind always blowing off the sea. That's the base I ended up at.

**WC:** Were you living in the Nissen huts there?

**JH:** Yes. They were cold and had a pot belly stove that burned peat. It was smoky and didn't give off much heat. In the winter it was cold. There was no insulation in those huts.

**WC:** Now, you were with the 357<sup>th</sup> fighter group?

**JH:** Yes, the 357<sup>th</sup> fighter group, and the 362<sup>nd</sup> fighter squadron. On the air base, each squadron was located at a different part of the base. A group was made up of three squadrons. The 362<sup>nd</sup>, 363<sup>rd</sup> and 364<sup>th</sup> squadrons made up our group.

**WC:** I see that you were the first units to receive the P-51?

**JH:** Yes. We were the first air Force group to fly the P-51. That was a Godsend for the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force because it could fly a long way and (escort bombers) into Germany. Other groups there in the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force flew P-47's. That was a good airplane, a big, rugged plane, but it didn't have the range. They could get a little way into Europe and have to turn around and come back, and the bombers had to go on by themselves. That is when we had a lot of bomber losses, because they had no escorts. The P-51 could fly with them all the way in and all the way back.

**WC:** Did you ever get to go up in any of the aircraft?

**JH:** Not during combat, and you couldn't go up in the P-51 because that was a single-seater. There was a group of missions where they flew from England to Russia. They bombed on the way over and then bombed on the way back. I was picked for one of those missions. I volunteered for it and then I was sorry that I did. I found out what those poor guys in those bombers went through. It wasn't fun when you saw the flak coming up and heard some of it hit the aircraft. I went once but wouldn't go again.

**WC:** What was your position on the flight?

**JH:** We were kind of in the way. I was supposed to be a waist gunner. When things started happening the guys who knew what they were doing just wanted you out of the way. It was scary. The only other time I flew in a bomber was when they flew us into a base in Germany after the war. They flew us in B-17's.

**WC:** Was that one mission you were on in a B-17 also?

**JH:** Yes. That wasn't fun. Those guys did not have fun. They were a different air force than we ground guys were. I sure looked up to them for what they went through.

**WC:** At some point you left England?

**JH:** That was after VE Day. We stayed there all the time until the war ended.

**WC:** Let me go back a minute. Do you remember what your reaction was when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?

**JH:** I remember being saddened by it. I had looked up to him for what he did. I don't remember exactly where I was. The war in Germany was winding down at the time. The Germans had been defeated but had yet to give up. It ended in May of 1945.

**WC:** Do you remember what that was like? Was there a lot of celebrating?

**JH:** There was a lot of celebrating. The English really celebrated, because it was their war before us. They wouldn't give us furloughs because they didn't want us interfering with the English celebration. There was of course a lot of drinking and it was better that we stayed out of it. That was the end of their war but we were still at war with Japan.

**WC:** How did you get along with the English people? Did you have much interaction with them?

**JH:** Yes, some, but not too much. I liked the English people.

**WC:** How did they treat you?

**JH:** Good, as long as you behaved yourself. Guys would go off base and want to drink as much beer as the breweries could make. I had never been a big drinker so I didn't do much of that. They tolerated us. They had too, as we had come there and invaded their island. We had more there than the English eventually. They were getting ready for D-Day. I liked it there. We made six trips back there since.

**WC:** When the war ended, you ended up in Germany?

**JH:** As I mentioned, when we got there we were attached to the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force and got transferred to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. After the war, they didn't need the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force there anymore. Our group got transferred back to the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force, and we went into Germany as part of the army of occupation.

**WC:** In the group you went over with, were there any losses?

**JH:** Oh yes, there were losses. They were a fighter group and the planes didn't always work ok or they were shot down.

**WC:** Where were you in Germany?

**JH:** It was a little town about 20 miles from Munich. It was an old German air force base. We never had it so good. The barracks were brick, with running water and hot showers.

**WC:** How were you treated by the German people?

**JH:** There was no interaction at that time. There was no interaction with the German people, as there was a non-fraternization policy in effect at that time. That went on for most of 1945. I can't remember exactly when it stopped. Of course, it didn't work. The guys wanted to go with German girls and German girls wanted to go with American soldiers. We had lots of food and lots of money. Even what we got paid was a lot of money in Germany at that time. The ruin was a terrible thing to see. It was a shame that it had to be that way, but it did.

**WC:** Were you in Germany when Japan surrendered?

**JH:** Yes. Japan surrendered in August. The first word we got was about the dropping of the atom bomb. I remember we had discussions among ourselves about the right or wrong of doing that. I thought it was terrible, but necessary to shorten the war, and less people killed. Less US people were killed because of that.

**WC:** Once the war had ended there and in Japan, did your air operations cease?

**JH:** There were no air operations in Germany. We had airplanes and there was some flying, but not much. Of course, with the flying operations done, the pilots over there were young and hadn't been in combat. They were still learning to fly.

**WC:** What did you do during that time?

**JH:** We just cleaned up and messed around. We didn't do much of anything really. There wasn't anything to do. We stood guard duty a little.

**WC:** When did you leave Germany?

**JH:** It was November 1945, or maybe the end of October. They took us by train to Marseille, France, and there we took a ship. It was not a nice big liner like we went over on.

**WC:** Did you get sick going back?

**JH:** We had just passed Gibraltar, and I could still see the rock when I got sick. I was sick all the way across the Atlantic. That was a long trip. I think it took about two weeks. It was stormy.

**WC:** Once you arrived in the States, you were discharged at Fort Dix?

**JH:** We landed at Norfolk and went up to Fort Dix, which was closest to Buffalo, NY. We didn't do much there, while waiting for discharge.

**WC:** Did you come back with your entire group?

**JH:** No, the group was split up. You got discharged according to the number of points you had. Some had more points because they had gone earlier, and some later, etc.

**WC:** Once you were discharged, you headed for Buffalo?

**JH:** Yes. The first thing I did was get on the phone to American Airlines to get a flight, and I did. Of course, I never made Buffalo because of snow storms. We got to Rochester and got a taxi cab to drive us to Buffalo.

**WC:** So, you got in a taxi and came home. What kind of reception did you get from your family?

**JH:** Good! My wife-to-be was with my Mother and Father who lived in North Buffalo. I remember the snow in buffalo, a typical buffalo snow storm in November. It was the day before Thanksgiving. My wife-to-be drove my father's car up to Bailey Avenue to pick me up.

**WC:** How long had it been since you had seen your fiancé and parents?

**JH:** About three years. I had a furlough just before we went overseas.

**WC:** Did you make use of the GI Bill?

**JH:** Yes, I did. My wife and I got married on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1946. We took a week off for our honeymoon and then I started at the University of Buffalo a week later. I

completed my college under the GI Bill with a BS degree in Mechanical Engineering. The GI Bill was really a godsend.

**WC:** Did you join any veterans' organizations?

**JH:** I never joined any veterans' organizations. We were too busy. Later, there was an 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force association chapter here and I joined that.

**WC:** Did you stay in contact with any of the fellows you served with?

**JH:** Yes, I stayed in contact with a few. I think there was only one other person from Buffalo, NY in our whole group. I never got to know him. Most of those I knew were from California. One guy in particular, who was our Group historian, was from California. After I retired I did quite a bit of consulting work in California and I saw him quite a bit. So, we were as close as anybody over the years.

**WC:** Did you attend any reunions?

**JH:** Yes, I got into the 357<sup>th</sup> Group alumni quite late. Then I used to attend yearly and got active in that. We had them in Long Beach, CA, in Ohio, Colorado Springs, and others. After a bit we decided that a lot of people were getting older and attendance was getting smaller, so we decided it was time to close the hanger doors and not have any more reunions.

**WC:** How do you think your time in the service affected your life?

**JH:** Well, I grew up. It convinced me that I had to get my degree after the war. It made me more mature and I knew more about what I was interested in.

**WC:** You mentioned that you have two daughters?

**JH:** I have three daughters. One daughter lives locally in Hamburg, NY. One daughter lives in the Syracuse area. Our other daughter lives in Anchorage, AK. They all grew up in Hamburg and graduated from Hamburg High School.

**WC:** Do have any grandchildren?

**JH:** Yes, we have two granddaughters. One is 33 and the other is 18 and just graduated from Hamburg High School.

**WC:** OK, thank you for your interview.