

**William Hennessey
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke
Mark Maret
Interviewers**

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West Point, NY**

Q: Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name and your date and place of birth please.

WH: William Hennessey and I was born in Staten Island New York on November 2nd 1923.

Q: Did you attend school there?

WH: Yes I did.

Q: And you graduated from high school?

WH: I graduated from high school and started college.

Q: In what year did you graduate from high school?

WH: It had to be '40.

Q: And you were probably in college when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

WH: Yes.

Q: What was your reaction to that?

WH: I thought it would be over. Actually, I had so much confidence in our country, I guess I thought it would be over before anything. All of these broadcasters and so forth really had thoughts and ideas that when Pearl Harbor got bombed that the Navy would take care of it and I didn't think too much of it at that time.

Q: For the next couple of years did your life change?

WH: Well I had started college and when Germany entered the war it got global. So I enlisted in New York and I waited several months until they called me up.

Q: Did you enlist in the Army Air Force?

WH: Yes.

Q: Had you ever flown before?

WH: Yes. Well I flew- I knew I was going in because I had joined up but hadn't been called, like I said. So what I did was dropped a couple courses and took a

flight course in Piper Cubs at the nearest airfield. They were giving that and giving credit for it, so I said well, let me get a leg up and see if I can handle flying.

Q: What did you think of the Piper Cub?

WH: It was great, I liked it. Easy to fly, no trouble.

Q: How long did it take you to solo?

WH: I think it was five or six hours. A little ground training and flying. And so then I got my private pilot's license there, and then shortly after I was called in. So I knew I wasn't going to get sick, things like that flying.

Q: Now, going away to the army's flight school, being that you were already a licensed pilot, did you have it any easier do you think?

WH: Well I wanted combat. I mean, that might sound a little crazy but I did want to get into combat.

Q: Did you want to be a fighter pilot?

WH: Yes. And I was offered to go into what they call the ATC at the time. I think that was army transport command, because I had twenty hours on a private code or something. So I turned that down and just stayed with my class and that was the only time I was ever approached about previous flying time. After that it was primary, basic, and advanced.

Q: Now when you went to your primary, what type of aircraft did you fly?

WH: Stearman.

Q: What did you think of the Stearman?

WH: Loved it. Still my favorite aircraft. I tell you, you can do anything with it. You could just leave it go to controls in a spin and it would bring itself out. Loved the airplane. Everybody did.

Q: And after the Stearmans what did you fly next?

WH: After Stearmans we went to BT 13s, basic trainer. I soloed about eight or nine hours I think on that. Kept changing instructors. I didn't have any trouble with it but you had to fly that basic trainer and a lot of fellows washed out in basic. But I got through that also.

Q: Did you get your wings at that point?

WH: No. I went to advanced. I flew the AT 6. Another great airplane. So, no trouble flying and I graduated in June of '44. And that's when I got my wings and took a little gunnery over the gulf and we came back for assignment. Ok that's my hurtful part. I was trained as a fighter pilot I had good scores in air to air and air to ground and suddenly I was on the list for multiengine. They sent out sheets, posted them. So I tried to get out of it, and of course I didn't know anybody, so we

went from there to Lincoln Nebraska, picked up a B17, went down to Louisiana for a lot of flight training and things like that. After that we got our orders and flew over.

Q: Now you flew an aircraft overseas?

WH: Right. We flew from Lincoln to Bangor Maine to Goose Bay Labrador to Iceland and then to Scotland where we gave up our airplane and went by truck transportation to where my base was.

Q: Had you ever heard of the 8th air force before?

WH: Oh Sure.

Q: What were your feelings?

WH: Well I didn't know too much about the others and so I was glad I was going to England rather than to the Pacific.

Q: But you must've heard of the horrendous casualty rate that the eighth had suffered?

WH: Oh absolutely but it's like everything. If it doesn't affect you, you're not going to be a part of it.

Q: Now you basically stayed with the same crew?

WH: Yes.

Q: The plane that you flew, did you usually fly the same plane?

WH: No. When you first got there you flew as a co-pilot to pilots that who maybe had their time and were finishing up and would break us in a little bit. So then we got the same, kind of we got assigned to the same plane. Scheherazade was the name of the plane.

Q: Was there any kind of nose art or just the name on it?

WH: No it just said Scheherazade, there was no dancing woman or anything like that on it, it just said Scheherazade.

Q: Was your flight jacket decorated or painted at all? With the aircraft name on it?

WH: Oh yeah. Name was already on it. When I got there, late, compared to these other fellows that have been over there, it was sort of bad luck to change the name of the airplane. So all you did was get an old plane that somebody had finished their missions. It had patches on it, it had the bomb, the bomb missions that the plane had flown, things like that so we picked up not a new airplane- my new airplane we left in Scotland someplace.

Q: Now, what was your first mission like with your crew?

WH: First mission was not too bad if I recall. No fighters, we always had flak on every mission. Some of the flak was close, some of it was far away, but I don't recall losing any aircraft on my first several missions.

Q: And you flew thirteen missions?

WH: Sixteen.

Q: Sixteen missions. What was your worst mission? I mean, I'm sure they were all pretty bad.

WH: Yeah, well the one that we were attacked by enemy [Me] 262, they were the German jets and I could see this fellow going 180 to the group and he made a circle and came down and I couldn't see him but when I looked back again I saw his nose cone opening up. They had their guns in the nose, so I could see that and I thought that was it for us but he took my wingman on my other side, and my wingman went down. That was probably the thing that got me thinking the most about all this, you know.

Q: Was that your friend Bob O'Brien?

WH: No, no. He was different crew; different. He was from the states; I knew him beforehand. That's an altogether different story. He was shot down on his first mission he was assigned and several people on his plane were killed when they landed one chute didn't open et cetera, he was captured he broke his leg and was put in a German jail in a little town and he was left there for maybe a day or two and realized that nobody was around and he was locked in this small jail in this little town he didn't know where, and going to starve to death actually. And suddenly, our troops came in the door about three days four days after he was in that cell because everybody had left. The police, most of the townspeople had left to go up into the hills or do something so I always remember that so he never really got the chance to do anything in his first mission, he was shot down.

Q: Any other more memorable missions that stick in your mind?

WH: Not really. We came back on three engines one time, but that wasn't a big deal. A little piece of flak as big as a dime had entered the nose cone and it was leaking oil, but not enough. The waist gunner saw the oil and was following the tail plane a little but not enough to bother us too much. We got back, a little late, but we got back.

Q: What was it like coming back from a mission, were there long briefings and debriefings?

WH: They weren't long. If we had a very long and arduous mission, they always had a little shot or something there. Most of us were young guys who hadn't too much to drink anyway. But the debriefings, when you got to them, most of the answers had been already told to the debriefing offices. We were just telling the

same thing more or less. It was the briefing going out that was kind of exciting, because you didn't know where you were going and they'd drop the curtain- it seemed like all of the bases had a curtain in front of a huge map and they would open the curtain and everybody was surprised at the same time except the briefing officers, and that's when you knew you were going to wherever and it showed you where the flaking placements were and navigation. Crew would take off then and they would go to another area to get briefed on navigation and we were told more or less the compass headings and things like that. And if you were Catholic you went to confession or whatever, and had your breakfast, and you went out to the plane. This was maybe five in the morning, something around that, maybe five or six because it was dark, it was winter. A tremendous winter that was. Everything cold. And we got to the plane and we'd take off. Now, that part was one of my white knuckle times. When we took off, we took off by a signal from the tower because there was no radio.

Q: Was it a light signal or like a flare?

WH: Yes, like a light. About every thirty seconds a plane would fly off and it would just disappear because it was dark. And nothing was lit up too well, but forming up was pitch black. We didn't have instruments. We knew what we were supposed to do, climb at, let's say 150 feet per minute, and make a thirty degree left turn after three minutes and so forth and so on. And then we were supposed to start the CR formation maybe at 7,000 or 8000 feet but all those circling aircraft from all those fields used to run through my head all the time. And that was one I remember, a cold morning take-off.

Q: How big were those formations?

WH: Well we had four squadrons to a group. And I think each squadron at that time was flying about maybe twenty-two aircrafts, b-17 so there was about eighty aircrafts. That's just on our base. Now a few miles away, there was another group taking off, in the same conditions, whatever route they were flying, and then we would form up near the channel somewhere and go over as a formation and each group had its spot.

Q: So there were literally hundreds of planes?

WH: Absolutely, oh sure, there were thousand plane raids at the end of the war.

Q: Were there a lot of accidents? Mid-air?

WH: Yes. A lot of mid airs. We heard them from time to time and I can't remember if we had one I thought there was one before I left there but I'm not sure.

Q: What was your last mission like? Did you know it was going to be your last mission?

WH: Well we kind of thought it was. The last mission was another milk run I think we went down into someplace around Munich and I don't think we had any trouble, I don't recall it. I didn't know it was the last mission at the time. We came back, were stood down for a couple of days and then the word got out to us that the war was over.

Q: Do you recall where you were or what you were doing when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?

WH: I think I was in the barracks, and it didn't mean that much; nobody went around morose, we were just wondering who was going to be the next president, and I think we might've stood down that day, I'm not really sure about that.

Q: When did you go home?

WH: Some groups stayed over to photograph Europe. But evidently we weren't one of those groups. We went home I think around April or May; I think the war ended—

Q: --It ended in May in Europe.

WH: We went home shortly after that. Oh I must say this- we flew ground personnel over Germany for a while and just to show them what they would get back at their offices and desks and so forth and so on, we did fly a mission where we dropped food to the Dutch. And we dropped food to them and I remember that we dropped it on a racetrack, and we came in low and the Dutch people were running out they were starving, literally starving. The Germans were gone. The Dutch people ran out onto the racetrack and we were dropping cartons, there was no parachute drops we were opening up when I land, we went over I don't know, 400 or 500 feet I guess, they were running out onto the racetrack and I forget and they lived through this whole thing and now we're going to hit them with a wooden carton of soup or something. I remember that quite vividly.

Q: Was there any talk about sending you guys to Japan?

WH: Yes. We went home for a fifteen day. We flew home. The war was over in Europe—

Q: --So you actually flew home?

WH: We flew over and if memory serves me correctly we were supposed to fly to Texas to begin training in B29s but the admiral was stopped and all of that was called off. So after that we went down to Florida we stayed around then for processing and all that, and we got out. And flew home.

Q: When you got out did you make use of the GI Bill at all?

WH: No I didn't. I flew in the reserves at Newark for a while.

Q: What were you flying there?

WH: AT6's mostly. There was a couple of B51's there but we never got to check out on them. And it wasn't a good organization at the time and I was still trying to get to school, I had gone back to school. So I was flying on weekends, if I could get a plane. See we would go over there and there would be fifty guys in a hanger and maybe six aircrafts to fly. So we'd fly here up to Stewart, touch and go landing, and fly back. That was our flying. So I needed to get an airplane, which unless you had a higher rank than I was...

Q: What rank were you?

WH: I was First Lieutenant. That was it.

Q: How long did you stay in the reserves for?

WH: Not too long.

Q: So you didn't get called up for Korea or anything?

WH: No. I think the Korean War had ended, we thought we might be called back, but we never were because jets were in and a lot of people were flying those things around, you know we were just propeller guys.

Q: Now, you went back to college and graduated.

WH: Right, I tried private business for a while but my family was in the fire department my father was assistant chief I had an uncle and so forth and so on, so I followed them.

Q: Followed in their footsteps?

WH: I followed them. I became a chief, county commander, and retired from that just before 9/11, thank God.

Q: Did you join any Veteran Organizations, like the VFW or Legion?

WH: Yeah well, I'm with this group here, the 8th air force, and I have a 447 bomb group that meets, my bomb group. And I have the southern wing chairmen which is here. I have Veterans of Foreign War, I'm not too active in that, it's done by mail.

Q: How many guys are left from your old unit in World War II?

WH: I don't know. I don't know that, it disappeared, it wasn't a good separation when we separated because we thought we were going to get back together again. So I was talking to a couple of them for a while and then lost all contact. So I have no contact with them.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

WH: Well I think I grew up a little faster than I would have. I more or less enjoyed my time, that is it was interesting, that's profound. It was interesting,

and I didn't mind the other stuff that went with it, but if they wanted me back in Korea I would've gone, and lost my wife, if I had died.

Q: Now, did you continue flying privately?

WH: No I didn't. I had looked around a while for a fellow who might want to share with me a small aircraft but I could never get one. Just keeping an aircraft is expensive and twenty-five hour checks and a 50 outfit, and keeping it on an airfield, so I never got into it. So it was over from there on it.

Q: Alright well thank you so much for your interview.

WH: Thank you folks.