

Hale Burge: On these questions you asked me, “were you chosen or how I got to be an aircraft mechanic.” I had to beg like the devil for awhile to get the job and that’s how I become working on airplanes, just starting on OJT [on the job training] first off.

We got over to the island [Shemya] about 6 o’clock in the evening. I used one of the trucks to haul supplies clear around to the southeast corner of the island. This island wasn’t very big. It was only about 3 miles long by a mile or so wide and not very wide. It was on a northwesterly to southeasterly angle and a little island with no mountain, no trees, no grass, just dirt ... I mean sand and muskeg is all there was there.

Anyway we moved around from one place to another living in our tents while the engineers took the sand to help build a runway which at the time I got there was only a ¼ of a mile long steel mat runway. And I watched the runway grow. Eventually there was an asphalt plant company out of the United States come in and build a little asphalt plant to black top the runway after all. And while doing so Tokyo Rose would give us the word that they were gonna bomb us because we had a factory of some kind going on there. But we never did get bombed.

One morning while I was on the early morning out to the latrine I heard a P-40. It was always on patrol around the island in the low overcast and all of a sudden he made a go-around and was coming down to land but he was on the south side of the island not too high in the overcast. And all of a sudden his engine quit and bingo! --straight down he hit the water. I saw it from where I was and the poor guy naturally died right away.

It took about a week or two to get a barge over there with a crane to pick up the airplane and he was all eaten up by octopus or something. That was my first scene of a crash out there on Shemya which they had many others later on.

Anyway, on the flight line up there everything was done outdoors. And I was working in the orderly room and the first Sergeant ... I mean the Lieutenant in charge at the time told me that he’d give me two stripes but he couldn’t give me anymore. So he asked me if I would go up and work in aircraft supply. So I did for awhile. I didn’t like that too much because I was interested in working on airplanes.

The Lieutenant in charge there wanted me to stay in supply and we got along real good but I was interested in airplanes. So I told him I wanted to work on airplanes and I got transferred over into salvage yard where crashed airplanes would be taken apart and good parts be put back into supply. And I worked there for awhile the summer of ’43.

And on up into October, word came out that everybody was going back to the States but 50 of us and I was one of the 50 that had to stay. And I cried like the devil because I wanted to back to the States like everybody else did. But this Major Crawford, our CO at the time, told me, “Well, you just have to stay here because that’s already been laid out and you’ll stay and the rest of them will go back.”

Well, I really was so glad that I did stay later on because I heard a lot of the boys, lower ranking ones, got sent to the infantry when they got back to the States and some of them ended up dead

in the South Pacific. So I thank the good Lord that I was punished by staying there and I never complained from then on.