John Pletcher: I had one really narrow escape up here with the B-26 and I can remember that airplanes number - it was number 1460, tail number – and it had done this before with other people. The left propeller would go out of control occasionally on take-off and by out control I mean – they were supposed to be constant speed propellers so when the engine got up to a certain speed on take-off the governor would start turning the propeller blades to increase the pitch to hold the rpm, the rotation speed, down to whatever was set for the maximum. But this particular propeller occasionally – and you never knew when it was going to happen – it would run away. It would not change pitch. So you could be in flat pitch and this thing would get to screaming like everything and they changed parts on that thing. I think they changed everything including the propeller and never got it out. But I understand later, down in the lower 48, they found the problem which I'll explain later.

But on this particular day I and another airplane were supposed to fly from Umnak out over Adak. They were still making the landing at Adak - you couldn't land at Adak - so we were patrolling out there with two airplanes. And it took us about two hours to get out there and we patrolled for two hours, around the island, to make sure there were no Japanese ships coming in to bomb them or interfere with them. Then two hours later there'd be another pair of airplanes take-off to go out to relieve us. It would be about a six hour mission with about two hours patrolling out over Adak.

On this particular day I was flying this number 1460 and we were taking off on the main runway and it was one that had some steel matting on it. I had gotten up -- I remember looking at the airspeed when I felt this airplane, I heard the airplane propeller begin to run away and you could definitely tell it because it was overspeeding. I glanced at the airspeed indicator and it showed over 100 mph and it was too far gone to stop. And I didn't know if I was going to get airspeed enough to take-off and, lo and behold, out of the revetment clear at the end of the runway a B-18 pulled out on the runway. Well, what the heck was I gonna do? I had to make a decision in a hurry so I yelled at the co-pilot to pull the wheels up and I pulled the nose of that airplane up hoping I could frog hop over the B-18 and by golly, lo and behold, it did. I have no idea what the airspeed was but I know that I didn't hit the B-18 because my former squadron commander was co-pilot of the airplane at the time and he told me later, he said, "I sat there watching that B-26 nose wheel wondering if it was going to get folded up before it hit the B-18" [*laughing*]. And it must have shook the B-18 and, lo and behold, the pilot on that airplane was the group commander and my former squadron commander was the deputy group commander.

If I hadn't cleared that B-18 that would have been one hell of a wipe out because it would have gotten both airplanes and both crews. It would have been terrible. But for some reason that I'll never understand, that ol' B-26 lifted off and got over, I'm sure that I forced it out of ground effect. I knew that I had cleared the B-18 because there was no crash, no vibration or anything. I knew I had cleared it and my next thought was I'm almost stalled and I had to baby that airplane so it didn't stall into the ground beyond the end of the runway until it could get airspeed enough that I could climb out. We recovered and began climbing out and as soon as I pulled the throttles back about an inch that propeller came under control just like that – wham! – back to normal. And they never could figure that out.

Well, later, they said that down in the states they discovered the electrical panel was – the panel for the radio operator was on the left side of the airplane at the wing root, in the fuselage, of course, where the wing root comes into the fuselage – that there was a bundle of wires and terminals there, and the linkage for the throttle for the left engine came back through the fuselage and out the wing root to the engine. There was a turn – I don't know what you call it – anyway part of the mechanism to get around the corner to go out to the wing tip was a lever on a pivot. This was loose enough that at times this lever could, when it was at full throttle, would lean over and touch the electrical panel and shorted out the left side of the airplane. These propellers were controlled electrically – they were electrically controlled propellers – they were Curtiss propellers. The first thing that happens when the electric propeller, like that, the electricity goes first to a brake which is on the motor of the propeller. The propeller has an electric motor which turns the blades through a gear mechanism in the hub and it has a brake on it to keep the blades from turning the motor backwards. The first thing that the juice does is release that brake and then it goes to the motor to turn the motor. And there wasn't enough current left to turn the motor to turn the blades to change the pitch on the propeller and it was all because of shorting out. They claimed that that was the reason that that particular airplane had that problem – and it only happened occasionally – and it only happened on full throttle. Every time it happened to anybody, as soon as they pulled throttles back a little bit, the propeller would come under control. And I wonder how many airplanes they may have lost in the European theatre for similar reasons – nobody knows.

But they used to complain about propeller problems in the European Theatre and they blamed it on sand – like in North Africa – they claimed it was sand. Well maybe some of it might have been the same thing.

Janis Kozlowski: So they never made any modifications given what they…?

John Pletcher: Well, they didn't know it. So I suppose that maybe it wasn't an error in design particularly but it's just one of those things that you might call an unforeseen consequence of doing something. But anyway, the upshot of it was, that I can believe that that could be the cause of it because invariably as soon as you pulled the throttles back the propeller would come under control. And by the way … when we recovered and got the prop under control we went ahead and flew all the way to Adak and did our two hour patrol and back. We flew approximately six hours with that airplane and brought it back with no further problem. Now with the FAA if you had an over speed on an engine like that it's a mandatory teardown of the engine. [*laughter*]

Janis Kozlowski: You would have been grounded that day. [*laughter*]

John Pletcher: Oh, yeah! It's an automatic grounding and you have to disassemble the engine and magnaflux it to see that you haven't damaged something in the engine, like cracked a connecting rod or crankshaft or something that's going to blow up later. We never thought of such a thing. As a matter of fact, I don't remember ever having an operator's manual for the B-26 up there. They just - the instruments had red line markings on them as to what the maximum was but as far as a manual to tell us how to fly the airplane – I don't recall ever seeing one up there. They had them after I got down to the lower 48 in the training school. We had a lot of information down there.