

Interview with Paul Polink

Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Program

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**Interviewed by Janis Kozlowski, National Park Service
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This interview is part of the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Project. The interview with Paul Polink was recorded with his permission on a digital recorder. Copies of the audio file are preserved in mp3, wav and wma formats and are on file at the offices of the National Park Service in Anchorage, Alaska. The transcript has been lightly edited. All photos courtesy of Paul Polink.

Janis Kozlowski: [00:00:00] I thought I'd just start out asking you some questions about your service during World War II.

Paul Polink: I want to correct one thing - I arrived there February of '45 and left in April of '46. I just wanted to correct that, because we were enroute for a while, and we stayed longer than usual at Great Falls, Montana. And I thought we got there in '44, but we didn't.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. So could we kind of maybe start at the beginning, and tell me how you got involved in military service, anyway. I mean, did you enlist?

Paul Polink: I was a senior in high school, and they had an Air Force reserve outfit – that you could join the reserves when you were a senior in high school and ... they wouldn't call you to active duty until you were eighteen. So, that's the program that I got into. And of course, in World War II, I would have been drafted anyway, and I preferred to go into the Air Force.

Janis Kozlowski: What made you choose the Air Force? Did you have a specific position in mind that you wanted?



Waiting for the bus to Anchorage. That's me in the center!

Paul Polink: Well yes, most of us in our class wanted to be “flyboys.” We wanted to be pilots, or bombardiers, or navigators. But, at that time, the war was so well along that they didn’t need any more pilots or aircrews at that time. So, we were all, what you call, “washed out.” And we had a choice of becoming airplane mechanics, or radio operators. We cried for a few days and drank a beer at the PX, and ... eventually we got over it, because ... the other two options were not appealing to us.

Janis Kozlowski: So what did you choose - which path did you choose; or which one did the Air Force choose for you?

Paul Polink: They chose that I would be an airplane mechanic. And I didn’t know a hammer from a screwdriver - I don’t know how, but I passed those tests.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] So, you’d never worked on an airplane before?

Paul Polink: No. I never ... I was not mechanically inclined.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] It's funny.... I wonder ... do you know why they put you down that path if you really weren't mechanically inclined? Was it just an in alphabetical choice, or random choice, or ...?

Paul Polink: No, apparently, I graduated pretty high in my class. I’m not boasting, but ... apparently I deceived them on a test that I took about mechanics - I knew more....

Apparently, it's not all a pair of pliers and a chisel, whatever - hydraulics and electricity. I guess I scored rather high on a lot of those things.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum] And so what kind of training did they give you so that you could be an aircraft mechanic, and where was your training?

Paul Polink: Well, I was sent to Keesler Field [Biloxi] in Mississippi, where there was an airplane mechanics school. And after I got into it, and began to see what hydraulics would do, and into electricity, I became quite interested - although I still wanted to be a pilot.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:03:30] So, it didn't turn out to be such a bad thing for you after all?

Paul Polink: No, it wasn't. I ... I had a brother who was a bomber pilot. And he was shot down over Ploesti [Romania]. And, 'course, this is getting off-track, but, anyway, I sort of liked his experiences too.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum] Did you say that was your brother?

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh? So ... two of you in your family served in World War II?

Paul Polink: Five of us served in World War II.

Janis Kozlowski: Five of you! Really!

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: And where did your other ... where did your brothers serve?

Paul Polink: Well, my brother served in the 15th Air Force – the one I told you about that was shot down over Ploesti. And he was a prisoner of war. I had a brother on Okinawa with the Marine Corps. And then I had two brothers in the states. And at that time, they had a rule that only - and I was in Alaska, which was not a state at that time - that only three people from one family could leave the states. The other two were confined to the states.

Janis Kozlowski: So, your parents must have had some, a lot of sleepless nights worrying about all of you.

Paul Polink: I think they did too, but we all returned.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh. Thankfully. [Chuckle]

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you heard ... your brothers had left earlier in the war, and were part of the fighting in other theaters. So you knew what was going on, and ... that probably influenced you quite a bit, didn't it?

Paul Polink: Yes. I was quite impressed with ... you know, what was going on in the service. And ... everything was going our way after about a year or two after Pearl Harbor.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did you have an idea where you wanted to be stationed?

Paul Polink: No. I had no idea. And I realized that we were gonna go where they would send us.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:05:31] Did you have an idea when you got out of mechanic school where you were going - did they give you any idea?

Paul Polink: Well, I went to ... the Ford Bomber School in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where they made B-24s ...

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-hum]

Paul Polink: ... for a short course. And then I was sent to a gunnery school - I was supposed to be a gunner on a B-24. I didn't like the idea, but, we had no choice. But, after being there only a short time in Texas ... I was sent to the troop carrier in Barnesville, Illinois - George Field. And of course, we trained there for towing gliders and dumping paratroopers and a lot of things. We were ticketed for the China-Burma-India Theater ...

Janis Kozlowski: OK. And so, the....

Paul Polink: ... but that never happened.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. So, the thinking was that ... they were training you as a mechanic and a gunner. And so that you would - would you work on the ground on the aircraft, and then accompanying the crew on missions as well?

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: That, that seems like double duty.

Paul Polink: Yes, it was. But ... like I say, because of the time in the war and the way the war was going, we stopped training as a gunner and were sent to the troop carrier.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. And the troop ... you said the troop carrier school was at George, George Field?

Paul Polink: George Field, in Lawrenceville, Illinois.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. And your gunnery school for B-24s was in Texas?

Paul Polink: Yes - Harlington, Texas.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:07:03] OK. So, then what happened after you got out of your troop carrier school?

Paul Polink: Well, we waited around, and finally I was assigned as a replacement crew for the 54th Troop Carrier Squadron, in Alaska.

Janis Kozlowski: And so how did you end up ... how did you get up to Alaska?

Paul Polink: Well ... we went from George Field, Illinois to ... to Great Falls, Montana - where our staging area was. And we were there for ... longer than usual time. And we thought, well, we thought we were headed for Alaska. But then ... the Army has a lot of delays and they never tell you anything about them. But ... I, we went to the... with our pilot and co-pilot and radio operator - we were one crew. And several crews were sent to Alaska to be replacement crews for people who apparently were leaving.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did you take an airplane up with you?

Paul Polink: We were passengers, we did not take an airplane on our own, but we were passengers with several other crews.

Janis Kozlowski: And was it like a commercial flight then?

Paul Polink: No, it was an Air Force flight.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. So where did you land in Alaska?

Paul Polink: We landed in Alaska in February of 1944 ... is that what you asked?

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. And where did you actually land – was it in Anchorage, or ...?

Paul Polink: We landed at Elmendorf Field.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. And is that where you were stationed?

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. So, what was it like there at Elmendorf when you arrived?

Paul Polink: Well ... it, it was puzzling at first. And then ... we, we, were broken in quite quickly, and the first thing [Chuckle] you know, we were flying. Apparently I took someone else's plane – and they were apparently being discharged.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:09:49] They pushed you right into action right away?

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: And so what kind of missions did you go on and where were they?



Paul Polink: Well, we went out in the Aleutian Islands ... they were ... were regular - we had a mail plane that left every day. And there were high priority people that moved around and “Emergency Leaves” for people who were coming home. And we flew medical shifts to bring people out of the islands that were ill and needed further medical treatment that they couldn't get there. And then, there was [sic] some routine flights, where we took rations and ... whatever - movies and magazines and all of the things to different bases. And we landed at a lot of weather stations. And generally, we took supplies to people that they needed.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. And what kind of planes were you flying on?

Paul Polink: C-47s. That was the ... the commercial version of a DC-3.

Janis Kozlowski: You know, we still have some of those up here.

Paul Polink: I can imagine.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle]

Paul Polink: That was [Chuckle] quite an airplane.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] Yeah, it still is. [0:11:15] Well, let me ask you about, about these missions you flew - did you actually go to the Aleutians on a daily basis if the weather allowed?

Paul Polink: Well, someone in our squadron did. We, if I went out on a mission, I would ... when my plane came in, if it was fit and there weren't any major inspections due, I would go, like, on the bottom of the list. And then, as the planes were sent out, I would work my way up to the top, and then I would go out. Usually ... I went out at least every other week.

Janis Kozlowski: So, most of the time you worked on the aircraft at Elmendorf, and then occasionally you went on the airplanes down to the Aleutians?

Paul Polink: Yes. But, we were pretty regular in the Aleutians - there were always planes going down for one reason or another.

Janis Kozlowski: And so, where did you personally get to go down there – where did you land?

Paul Polink: Well ... eventually, I guess I landed on pretty many ... much of the ... all of the islands. I went to Attu several times. Adak was a, an important stop for us. And Shemya – [I] had been in Shemya. And, in fact, on V-J Day, I was at Kodiak Island with the Governor of Alaska, who then was Governor Gruening. And there were six United States Senators that were there ... I guess there were discussions about a hydroelectric plant, or some dam that was a big project that was going to be done at Kodiak.

Janis Kozlowski: So you got to mingle with some important people on that trip?

Paul Polink: Yes I did. And incidentally, we were going down the runway at Kodiak, and the copilot threw his arms up in the air and ... then he quickly told us that the tower called and said that the Japanese had surrendered.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh!

Paul Polink: That was in August of '45.

Janis Kozlowski: So, what was your reaction to that?

Paul Polink: Well I was very happy. And, naturally, I thought, “Well, this means maybe going home in a few months.” And then, that’s what happened.

Janis Kozlowski: Were you happy about that idea.

Paul Polink: Oh, yes.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah.

Paul Polink: [0:13:45] Although, Colonel Grossmith talked to me ... about staying in the service, and ... the Jets were just coming in. And he said, "I can foresee a great future for you in the Air Force." But I wasn't listening - I just wanted to go home.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. You couldn't see that future at that point. [Laugh]

Paul Polink: No.

Janis Kozlowski: What was the name of that colonel that talked to you?

Paul Polink: Colonel Grossmith – G-r-o-s-s-m-i-t-h. He was our squadron commander - and a greater person, I never knew in my life.

Janis Kozlowski: Really! So, you really admired him.

Paul Polink: I did.

Janis Kozlowski: What characteristics did he have that you thought made him such a good leader?

Paul Polink: Well, he was a ... he knew everybody in the squadron. And he ... he was a very active baseball fan - and I played baseball; I got to know him personally. But if anybody was having a tough time, he would try to work it out for them. And of course, if it was money, he wouldn't hesitate to ... advance the money to anybody. And he ... he was just a great person. And ... and he maintained a high level of morale. And it was a, it was a great squadron to begin with, and I was very lucky to have been in the 54th.

Janis Kozlowski: Do you remember his first name?

Paul Polink: Yes, I have an article here ... Louis ... Lieutenant Colonel, L-o-u-i-s B. Grossmith [Lt. Col. Louis B. Grossmith, Jr.].

Janis Kozlowski: Let me ask you about the missions again. You said you ... that your squadron hauled some priority people on some of these trips. And you mentioned Governor Gruening and six U.S. Senators going to Kodiak with you. Do you remember any of the other dignitaries, or priority people that your squadron flew?

Paul Polink: They're ... we also had some USO personnel we would take from time to time. In fact, one of our planes – not mine, but one of our planes - took Joe Louis, you know, the heavy weight boxer?

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, yeah. [Ah-huh]

Paul Polink: Anyway, they took him to various places around the islands. And he put on exhibitions. And I can remember ... several Colonels and Generals, but I never knew their names. And I never was introduced to them - they were passengers, naturally, high priority.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:16:30] You said you sometimes served as a medical ship. Do you remember ... what kind of the injuries, or illnesses that people had that you had to evacuate them?

Paul Polink: Yes, they ... we would have a medical team aboard - we had no responsibility for them. So, they would have a nurse, or two, and then medical technicians who were usually ... somewhat pretty husky. We had a lot of people who broke down in the islands - some of them had been there two or three years. And it was really cruel, because ... a lot, some of the islands [Chuckle] never saw much sunlight. And ... they... we had some mental patients aboard. But, otherwise, they were just complications from ... from operations that were performed in the islands that they thought needed to get to the mainland. And once they got to the mainland, they could get out of there rather easily to hospitals in the United States.

Janis Kozlowski: So, they didn't keep them at Elmendorf? They sent them to a medical facility somewhere outside of Alaska?

Paul Polink: That's, that's true.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, was there a hospital at Elmendorf at the time?

Paul Polink: Yes, and it was pretty modern, I guess. And some of the patients ... did not go beyond there - their problems were resolved, and whatever. But, most of them went on to the states to special hospitals for special treatment.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. So, did you hear ... being stationed at Elmendorf, did you hear some stories about life in the Aleutians?

Paul Polink: Oh yeah. I heard a lot of.... We would ... I really felt sorry for those people. Because they ... there was really a lot of adverse reactions to.... And what surprised me was the longevity that some of these people had on these islands - like, a couple of years, or whatever. And they sort of forgot people. And it was kind of though, mentally to be there.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum]

Paul Polink: I enjoyed my, you know, flying in, and ... listening to the stories. But, I could realize that ... being on one of those islands for long period of time, would be rather depressing.

Janis Kozlowski: So you probably stuck close to your plane after it landed, to make sure they didn't forget about you?

Paul Polink: [Laugh] Yeah, that's, that's for sure.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] [0:19:15] Do you remember what your impressions were when you landed at some of spots - at Attu and Shemya and Adak - what were your impressions of the islands?

Paul Polink: Well, they were very primitive at the time. And most of the runways were ... like at Attu, they had steel runways - where you landed on steel mats [Marston Mats]. And a lot of them are gravel ... just packed gravel runways. And most of the time, they were not the ideal conditions.... I consider myself very lucky.

Janis Kozlowski: Did you have some frightening flights down there, or landings?

Paul Polink: Yes, when I, [the] first time we when into Attu, the water was white with white caps, as we called them - knowing that the wind was high. And ... the pilot, I thought to myself, "He's not gonna try to land here." But, anyway, we practically went into the runway with full power. And then ... then of course, the plane, [Chuckle] we dropped, were able to drop it down. But ... the wind had a terrible effect on landing ... sometimes.

Janis Kozlowski: I would imagine. It gets pretty windy down there.

Paul Polink: Oh, it was. And it's ... we ... we were always concerned with the weather.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:20:51] Let's see, so what was ... let me go back to the types of missions you flew - you said you flew rations and went to weather stations. What was the nature ... do you remember what of kind rations, or was it, that you brought down? Or was it just pretty basic cargo?

Paul Polink: It was ... mostly materials for their.... You know, we didn't actually fly the food in for the base, but ... like I say - magazines, movies ... routine provisions for their PX's, and all of that kind of material - that was one of the missions. The other thing was the ... like I say, we had a mail plane that would leave everyday after the plane came in from Seattle with the mail. And then, medical trips, and ... those people that were going home on emergency leaves, and ... new personnel, sometimes, that were gonna be assigned to the islands - we would take them in to were they were going to be.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum] And when you landed on places, like.... Well, you never landed at Dutch Harbor ... is that right?

Paul Polink: I don't remember Dutch Harbor. Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: OK. So when you landed at places like Attu, where there had been a battle, did you ever see any evidence of it?

Paul Polink: Yes. But I really wasn't a history buff. I heard a lot of stories, and it was pointed out to me where the battles were and all that – [but] I learned more [Chuckle] on the history channel about it than I really heard about then. But I was 19 years old and not interested in history at that time.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah [Chuckle] that's understandable for that age for sure. [Chuckle] Can you tell me a little bit about your mechanics duties and what ... did you just work on C-46s, or were there other aircraft as well.

Paul Polink: 47s, they were 47s.

Janis Kozlowski: I'm sorry.



Paul Polink: Well basically ... if I had a flight out in the morning, I would go down and preflight the airplane and start the engine up. And there were certain tests that I had to go through to see if the aircraft was fit to fly. And then, later the pilots would arrive, and they would check the log on the plane. And we had a system where, if the plane was on my initial, it was ready to fly. If we have a "Diagonal" in the box, there was something mechanical wrong with the airplane. But, it could still fly, but the pilot had to be aware of it. And then, when we had it on they what call, "A Red Cross," then the plane was grounded – period - until somebody ... one of the specialists looked at it and [fixed] what it was. I, I never had any problem with that - my ... planes seemed to be ready all the time.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you don't remember having big problems with those airplanes?

Paul Polink: Well, I remember other people, discussing what ... what problems they had. But, I was ... very faithful to my inspections – I never penciled them in - I was faithful with my inspections and did everything I was supposed to do. And I really never



had any major problems. I would have a voltage regulator go out and burn up the battery, or landing lights wouldn't work. But, I was able to handle those things. But I was rather fortunate, because I never had any real major problems.

Janis Kozlowski: And after all your training and all, did you feel pretty comfortable working on the airplane?

Paul Polink: Yes I did. And ... [Chuckle] I felt that, you know, there was a lot of trust put in me, because there were ... things that if you didn't recognize, [that] could ... cause you a problem.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, that's kind of a specialty profession it seems. (00:25:02)

Paul Polink: I remember when ... at one point ... Alaska Airlines would have us do simple things, like changing spark plugs and everything. And even, we're talking about many, many years ago - they use to pay us, like, \$7.50 an hour.

Janis Kozlowski: Was that good money at the time?

Paul Polink: Oh, yes it was great! [It] bought a lot of good dinners.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did you work for Alaska Airlines?

Paul Polink: No, only as, like I say, "Part time."

Janis Kozlowski: Oh.



Paul Polink: We could sometimes, be available - they would advertise that they could use some mechanics during certain hours - certain days. And of course, they checked you out ... but ... not very often, but, often enough to make some money.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum] So, that was at ... the international, the Anchorage International Airport?

Paul Polink: I don't remember. But I doubt it. Because ... you know, were talking about 1945.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, right – it probably would have been, maybe Merrill Field - which is close to Elmendorf, but ...

Paul Polink: Probably.

Janis Kozlowski: ... a different runway?

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:28:38] Did you end up being an aircraft mechanic for your profession?

Paul Polink: No, I ... always wanted to be a coach and a teacher. I taught for like, seventeen years, and then I became a principal – I was a principal for about fifteen years. And then, the last four years of my career I was a superintendent of schools in my district. So, I chose the profession of education.

Janis Kozlowski: And which school district were you in?

Paul Polink: Well, I was ... I taught at a school called, “Brownsville,” for a while - its south of Pittsburg. And then, I became principal of a school district called, “West Greene,” in Greene County - it's the last county in Pennsylvania as you go toward West Virginia. And then I was a superintendent at the same district. And then I retired. And then after I retired, I filled in as a principal for a number of Catholic schools, and a couple of private schools whenever they needed somebody - when they ... their person retired rather abruptly, or left. So ... I filled in then.

Janis Kozlowski: So, was your mechanic ... the experience, or the training that you got in a military, was that helpful to you at all in life?

Paul Polink: No. My wife doesn't believe that I did this - she says, “I can't even hang a picture.” So ...

Janis Kozlowski: -So, so tell me, what was it like living at Elmendorf?

Paul Polink: Well, it was really nice because of the closeness of Anchorage - we got all the benefits of a pretty good size city and the number of restaurants available, and ... I was.... But, like ... some of the things that depressed me about Alaska was the daylight in the summertime. The.... Being close to Anchorage, and.... The amazing thing about the Matanuska Valley - the size of the vegetables, and all that bit. But ... I was not fond of the winter – darkness. Is it dark at, there now?

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, yeah. Yeah, you have to go out on your lunch hour to ... to see the daylight, or you miss it. [Chuckle]

Paul Polink: That's ... I remember that.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, that, that's probably hard to deal with. So, do you remember that, that winter that you stayed there? Was that a tough one for you?

Paul Polink: What was that?

Janis Kozlowski: Was the winter the winter, the winter up in Alaska, tough for you then?

Paul Polink: Well it really wasn't, because ... I was in and out. And like I say, I would, be gonna fly. But ... it was tough as far as flying - you, you never got to see anything. Like in the summertime, we would ... observe a lot of things - see some animals in herds, and all that bit, but.... But, in the wintertime, it was tough - it was dark, dark, dark.

Janis Kozlowski: And were you able to get off the base very much and see what Alaska really looked like?

Paul Polink: Well, I was not really interested much, except what I would see during my normal flights. Because, the pilot, or somebody would point out certain things about where things were, and ... But, I still wasn't very interested. I regret that now - that I didn't show more interest in some of Alaska's beauty. I did notice a lot of things, but there are many things that went unnoticed ... by a 19 year old.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, yeah – I, I can imagine. I don't remember what happened when I was 19. [Chuckle]

[0:33:15] So what, so what did you do on your time off?

Paul Polink: Well, they had built a new gym right across the street from our barracks, and I spent a lot of time in the gym ... doing, you know, playing scrub basketball against some of the guys. And I spent a lot of time in the room, I really was fascinated by music, and we had all the latest records of the day. And ... then, in the summer, I was really

engulfed in baseball – I loved baseball, and the 54th Troop Carrier had a lot of support. In fact, our whole squadron would go to the games. And Colonel Grossmith was a ... a real, real rabid fan of baseball. And we played three days on the Post league and three days in the city league of Anchorage – they called it a “USO League.” So we played, rather ... six days a week. And of course, when I made the baseball team, I was taken off flying status for the summer – ‘cause, they couldn’t have us out, you know, somewhere, and only have a half a team. But I remember some of the guys that ... that I played with. And, of course, I was the, like I say, the younger guy - I think most of them are deceased - I am 84 ears old!

Janis Kozlowski: You sound like you’re doing pretty well for 84.

Paul Polink: Ah, well, I, I only ... quit.... The last school district - they called me, I was 79, and I said, “No, I don’t think I’ll try it again.” Because, they all said, “Just fill in for a couple months,” and then it ends up one or two years. And my last school I went to ... and I didn’t need all the money, so, I gave them a break on that – I, I was there for five years, and [was] only supposed to be there a couple months.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, wow!

Well, let me ask you about baseball again – I have a book here that ... a guy wrote, about ... it’s called, “Walky-talky Fanning Bees.” It’s about ... it’s, “Baseball Ambassadors Visit Combat Areas in World War II.” And this man says that, “Stan Musial, Frankie Frisch, Danny Litwhiler, Hank Barowy, and Dixie Walker all visited Alaska.” Do remember bumping into them?

Paul Polink: Yes, I remember when they were there. And I would read it in the papers. Sometimes I was able to see them. But, if, if ever I was able to visit them, I, I certainly would. I was a, I still am – a rabid baseball fan.

Janis Kozlowski: Who, who ... which is your team?

Paul Polink: What’s that?

Janis Kozlowski: What’s your team?

Paul Polink: Well ... it’s terrible now, but it’s [the] Pittsburg Pirates – they’re not doing well, for the past 15 years, but it’s still my team.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, you still have to remain hopeful.

Paul Polink: That’s....

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] So, you didn't really get to meet any of the baseball ... the big guys that came through – they didn't come through ... well, they might have come through Elmendorf, but you didn't have an opportunity to meet them?

Paul Polink: Right, I did not have.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:36:45] And where did you play baseball?

Paul Polink: Well, I played for the 54th Troop Carrier. And then when I came home, I played at Saint Vincent College, where I went to College – I played a few games there.



But then, I got married and I couldn't afford the time. But mostly, it was just sandlot for my home town team. My older brother that I mentioned pitched in the minor leagues for years. And the minor leagues were loaded with talent at that time – there were only eight major league teams in each league at the time. That meant, like, 200 jobs, only. They didn't have all these other teams that eventually cropped up in different cities. But he wouldn't let me go to the minor leagues until, he said, "If you get a bonus," – [if] they'll put money in you, they'll see you develop. But, anyway, I never tried the minor leagues.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-K] And what position did you play?

Paul Polink: I was a shortstop ...

Janis Kozlowski: Ok.

Paul Polink: ... and had some really good raves in the 54th Troop Carrier - not boasting, but ... I did love baseball, and I played very hard all the time.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did they have a field right on Elmendorf Base where you played?

Paul Polink: Yes ... you know, Fort Richardson is located there adjacent to Elmendorf, you know, the army base.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Paul Polink: And then, we had a ... we had a field there, and we also played in the city of Anchorage. One of my thrills was the ... we went to Fairbanks and played a team from Ladd Field, and it [the game] started at midnight - in daylight, of course.

We were quite an athletic family - we all played football in high school, and baseball, and some of us played basketball. But, I never was much of a basketball player – I enjoyed doing it, but I was not really good enough to play on the varsity [team].

Janis Kozlowski: So, were there ... just the five boys in your family?

Paul Polink: We had an older brother who - he had high blood pressure - he couldn't join the service. And then, I had three sisters – we had a large family. So....

Janis Kozlowski: I bet your mom wanted you to play sports to run some of the energy out of you.

Paul Polink: That's right.

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh]

Paul Polink: We all were ...we all were pretty energetic, and played baseball.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did you play baseball your whole life?

Paul Polink: Well, I think I quit when I was about 30. But, then I was the baseball coach at ... for some 25 years in high school. And I really enjoyed that. I was ... I had an AA high school and we had some good ball clubs - which take good players to play.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum] So let me ask you, who was your opponents ... when you played up in ... at Elmen... or Fort Rich, or in Fairbanks, or whoever it was - was it all military teams?

Paul Polink: Yes, they were all military teams. And.... But, in the city league, the Moose had a team, and some other organizations would support a team. But, they were all military personnel.

Janis Kozlowski: Ok. [0:40:46] I know you were only up in Alaska for a little more than a year - maybe for a year and a few months. Did, was that enough time for you to actually make a lot of the friends with the guys in your squadron that you flew and worked with?

Paul Polink: Yes, I ... I really had a lot of good friends in the squadron. In fact, like I said, the morale was high, and everybody treated everybody with respect, and especially

flying personnel. I'm not saying we were elite, but were the purpose for the squadron. And we were treated very, very well by other enlisted personnel.

Janis Kozlowski: Were ... you were ... you were doing a great service to those guys down in the Aleutians – I bet they loved the 54th.

Paul Polink: Oh, yes, they ... they would meet our plane ... talk about how things were on the main land, and.... It, it was small talk, but you could tell that they were lonely. And , in fact, some of our planes used to take personnel up to see the sun - you know, they were clouded. The sun was still up there, but, it wouldn't burn through some days. And I thought it was rather funny at the time, but I could see that it wasn't quite so funny.

Janis Kozlowski: Really. So, they ... they just took them on a short hop in the airplane to get them out a little bit and [to] see the sun?

Paul Polink: Yes. And we ... we had, like the cooks and the bakers and the people in the mess hall, sometime, they would ask the colonel if they could take a trip down in the Aleutians with one of our airplanes. And of course, he would give them permission. And they, they did kind of like it when the ice was flying off the props and all that stuff. And ... they weren't thrilled - they didn't want to go back.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] Yeah, I imagine that would be a little frightening.

Paul Polink: Yes, to them it was.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:41:44] When you were stationed in Alaska, did you keep in touch with your family and did they know where you were?

Paul Polink: Well, really, my parents were illiterate. And I ... you know, people didn't have telephones like they do now. I would write home every couple weeks, but I never usually got any response, because there was nobody at home to write. And ... but, I got the local newspaper all the time when I was in the service and I kept up pretty much with what was going on in my hometown.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you had an idea of what was happening in other theaters of the war at the time from the newspaper?

Paul Polink: Oh yes, yes.

Janis Kozlowski: But you probably didn't know anything about what was happening with your brothers, specifically?

Paul Polink: No. I just had to hope and pray.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. Yeah.

Paul Polink: My brother that was on Okinawa went in with the first wave of the Marine Corps, and ... he was quite fortunate, because he had a number of close calls. And every once in a while, I'd get a letter from him and of course, they would ride me about playing baseball and having fun in the summertime.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] You probably wished he was up there with you.

Paul Polink: Oh, yes.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle]

Paul Polink: Yeah. Well, later on, we did play together.

Janis Kozlowski: How much older was he than you?

Paul Polink: I had a brother that was in the third Air Force in the states - he was two years older than me. Then, my brother on Okinawa, was four years older than me. And my other brother was ... he was drafted in 1941 when they first started drafting - he was a little older. And then I had a younger brother who was not in; well he was in the service about six months, so he ... before, and that was five of us, that were in service at the same time.

Janis Kozlowski: And later on, when you all got back, did you ever sit down and talk with each other about your different experiences in the war?

Paul Polink: Yes we did. And it was quite interesting. About ... I was going to write a book about - my brothers are all deceased at this point - and I mean, although I ... I know a lot about what happened to them, we, in their discussions. And I have my brother's metals and whatever, that he earned in World War II. And his squadron always had a ... a reunion. And my brother and his wife were killed in an automobile crash - they were coming home from Florida. And I was invited to one of their reunions, and ... and I met a lot of his buddies, and whatever, when we had that at Nashville, Tennessee. And, so I felt kind of warm about what he was ... you know, what he was involved with.

Janis Kozlowski: Um-Hum. Yeah, it sounds like that would make a wonderful story about the, all the five of you serving in World War II.

Paul Polink: Yes it would. I just never did it. My daughter keeps bugging me - she says, "You're not too old to do it now." I, I guess I'm not, but ... I don't think I'll do it now.

Janis Kozlowski: [Chuckle] Well, maybe she'll at least have your interview when we're finished here today, and she'll have that to remember stories about you.

Paul Polink: Well, maybe she will.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah [Chuckle]. Were there any particular experiences that you had during World War II that were, were memorable?

Paul Polink: I ... I don't remember much, except the 54th was the first time I had a permanent home, like, in the service. Because, most of my time had been spent in training - I went from the B-24, to the gunnery school, which I was not at very long. And, but ... the 54th was my great experience. And I was quite happy in that squadron and, with my duties that were there - it was fascinating to fly to all of those different islands and see how the other half lived, and.... But, I really don't have any great memories of, of things that happened to me, or whatever. So, it was exciting, yet there was nothing out of the ordinary that I really remember.

[0:46:59] I had taken some pictures, here, right now - I forgot to tell you - we were in on some emergency evacuations, also. I can't remember them all, but, I have some pictures that I took out of the cockpit, of a ship that ran aground - that's a normal habit, I guess, in Alaska.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. [Chuckle]

Paul Polink: And, we ... we dropped firewood for people who were on a camp called, "The Beaches." But, they were emergency personnel there that we dropped to and firewood, and.... Sometimes, I think ... I remember, one time on the island of Umnak, a volcano erupted, and they were afraid that it was gonna inundate the whole island, and then, we were on alert for several days to get all the military personnel off that island. And now I recall, that one time there was a doctor on one of the islands that had a heart attack. And we eventually took him out and brought him to the mainland for better medical attention, or whatever. But, there were a number of isolated cases like that ... we were, we had done.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum] So, so did the volcano ever ... present a problem?

Paul Polink: No. No. They had some geologist there, and they ... I guess.... I later on studied earth science, and whatever - I went to Michigan State in 1967-68. And we did a lot of studying about that earthquake that Alaska had in 1964.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, yeah.

Paul Polink: And the geologists on the island of Umnak, were studying the flame, and the color of the flames, and we never had to evacuate people. But, we prepared, we were prepared to.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:50:16] Do you think it's an important or a good idea, that the government recognizes ... the World War II veterans in places like the Aleutian World War II Site and [the] Valor in the Pacific, and others?

Paul Polink: I certainly do. Because they served also in ... under conditions, that were not, you know, glamorous. But still, they had to be there.

Janis Kozlowski: And, and people played a ... a significant role in the war, even if they weren't in battles.

Paul Polink: Right.

Janis Kozlowski: Right.

Paul Polink: I feel that the ... the 54th Troop Carrier – we were basically, the only way in and out of the Aleutian Islands, you know, especially during the winter months. And of course, it was high priority; you just couldn't get in there ... for anything. But we felt that we did a job too. And I read a little bit about the history of the 54th, and ... [Chuckle] putting it together, [there] really wasn't anything. I have a thing here - when I took a ... I don't know who this, but I took a picture of this ... plaque. And it said - and they do have a very nice display on ... at the Air Force Academy. It says, "Anna Merriam McCoy Penny, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Arthur Penney, and Lieutenant Colonel Harry Jessie Cobb [sp.?], without whose vision and commitment, this monument would not have been erected." I wonder if you knew anything about them.

Janis Kozlowski: No. Penney, Penney, you say?

Paul Polink: Yeah, Anna Merriam McCoy Penney.

Paul Polink: I did know who they were. But, you know, Lt. Colonel Grossmith became a Brigadier General during the Berlin Airlift.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, he did?

Paul Polink: Oh, yes. And ironically, he lived in Virginia, and that's not too far from where I live. My brother was killed about the same time he passed away, and I didn't get to go see him – pay my last respects to him.

Janis Kozlowski: Um.

Paul Polink: But, he was quite a man.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did ... did you kind of keep up on his career over time?

Paul Polink: Well, like, I noticed when he was ... the 54th left Alaska to, to go in the Berlin Airlift. And that was about two years after I left the squadron. If I'd a [have] known they were going to go to Germany, I might have stayed in - but you ... nobody knows that. But ... 'cause I always wanted to go to Germany.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you might have stayed in had you known that?

Paul Polink: Right.

Janis Kozlowski: [Hum]

Paul Polink: And that as very exciting - the Berlin Airlift. They had to bring everything in by air.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:53:26] I'm guessing that ... your squadron, if they, they canvassed the guys out in the Aleutians, if they, asked them ... about ... who was their favorite squadron, I bet you guys would have come up on the, on the top of their list.

Paul Polink: I think we would have too. Because ... I, the most of those guys were; understanding, that these guys were putting in some tough times. And like I said, we had Anchorage to go to, and restaurants and all the modern facilities. But, they, they had nothing, really.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I wish we would have known more about your squadron before we put the 2009 calendar together. 'Cause, we didn't really talk about the role that you played. And now I, I recognize a little bit more about it.

Paul Polink: Yes, we ... we were a very proud squadron.

Janis Kozlowski: And you were the "Eager Beavers," right?

Paul Polink: That's exactly right. We were well named.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, yeah, it sounds like it, really. [Chuckle]

Well, is there anything else ... that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to tell me about?

Paul Polink: Well, I just ... when I entered the service - whenever our wishes, and I'm talking about my age group, and we were the top five percent of our class in high school. We had all these dreams about being pilots, and commissioned officers, and so on and ended up with lesser positions on the airplane. But we were still glad to be on the airplane. But, it wasn't as fascinating as we thought about. But, I got over that because my job really was critical to an airplane being in flight, and staying in flight.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, and, and did ... Lt. Commander Grossmith help, help you young guys understanding that your role was important?

Paul Polink: Oh yes. He ... he even treated ... like I said, our cooks and bakers and people in the mess halls ... I don't know if you know what a mess hall is, but that's where we ate ...

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum]

Paul Polink: ... and talked. Anyway, he treated everybody with respect. And that's why he was so popular with the men.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, I think we tend to glamorize pilots, and they do have an important role in airplanes, but everybody is required to make that airplane fly and to keep it flying. So....

Paul Polink: Absolutely.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah, you guys were very important.

Paul Polink: I really was surprised at the trust. And ... you know, I was 19 years old, and I go up there and they handed the plane over to me, and.... of course they, I knew about the inspections that had to - full inspections at 25 hours, 50 hours, and 100 hours. And I did that religiously. And.... But I trusted the pilots, the pilots trusted me, and it was a trust all the way down.

Janis Kozlowski: [0:56:35] Did, did you always fly with the same pilot?

Paul Polink: No. They would be assigned to my, to the crew. And the radio operator wouldn't always be the same, I ... although I left with the crew from the United States, we would ... pilots would be rotated. And so would the radio operators. I never knew until the day before who I was ... who was going to fly the plane.

Janis Kozlowski: So, you felt pretty confident in any one of them that you flew with?

Paul Polink: Well, I, I never questioned any of them. I figured they had the same training I had. And they didn't question me, [Chuckle] so I didn't question them. Although, like, when you flew with Colonel Grossmith, or one of the other pilots, the pilots would have a, sort of, what they call, "A Green Card" - some of them were allowed to fly in any weather, and some of them were not. But, I didn't know all the details then. But, there, there was a, a few pilots that were better than others. But, everybody ... I can't complain about it, 'cause they all got me to back on the ground.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum] So, some you might have had a little more confidence in, but, you, you got on board with them regardless ...

Paul Polink: Oh, yes. [Chuckle] There wasn't anything else to do.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. [Chuckle] Except get yourself in a whole bunch of trouble, right?

Paul Polink: That's exactly right.

Janis Kozlowski: Now, when you were working on, when you got out of training, you said, you know, you hadn't really ... worked on airplanes before. So what, when you were training, what airplanes did they have you practicing on, or ...?

Paul Polink: Well, at first, first of all, I was on the B-24 – the bomber.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum]

Paul Polink: And then, when I moved to the troop carrier, I was on the C-47. And that's the last, the only two planes that I was familiar with - B-24 bomber and the C-47.

Janis Kozlowski: So, did your experience on the B-24 transfer pretty easily to the C-47?

Paul Polink: Well, they had the same type of engines on them, but that was about it. You couldn't ... you know, you couldn't transfer much more ability, 'cause they were two different planes, and designed for two different jobs. But, I ... I didn't particularly like the B-24 bomber. [0:59:14] And incidentally, that's what my brother flew too.

Janis Kozlowski: He was actually a pilot?

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: Oh, OK.

Paul Polink: He was a squadron commander. He, was pretty sharp - he had some college - he had a couple years of college when he was drafted. And he was drafted into the infantry, and somehow, he, he just ... he wouldn't have been very happy in the infantry. And he finally got into the Air Force and [it] was a little more glamorous, I guess.

Janis Kozlowski: Boy, that's, that's lucky. And he survived it. And he was in the 15th, you said, right?

Paul Polink: Yes.

Janis Kozlowski: They had some; they had some ... dirty business. [Chuckle]

Paul Polink: Yes. They did.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. [1:00:00] Um ... and let me ask you one more question ... did you have a ... were you ... did you have parts readily available for the planes you were working on, or was that, was that problem?

Paul Polink: No it wasn't. The navy had a ... navy was, there were a lot of navy planes in the Aleutian Islands. And sometimes ... many of the parts were interchangeable, and we relied on them a lot of times when we were in the islands. And of course, if you really got stuck down there, we, the 54th, would have some planes going through the area all the time, so if you really got stuck, you would get the parts. But, I never had any problems. But... Although we were quite friendly with the supply personnel on the islands, because we could get anything we wanted, or needed.

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum]

Paul Polink: And we would promise them a trip to Anchorage sometimes – the pilots would say, “If you ever need to go to Anchorage, well, we could take some people without them being on our manifest.”

Janis Kozlowski: And did you, did you ever have any ... breakdowns in flight, or when you got out to the islands, that, that you had a difficult time dealing with?

Paul Polink: No I didn't. I had some minor things, like ... there was a, in the tail wheel, there was a drift pin that would break before it would do any damage, and things. But, it was a simple thing to jack up the airplane, knock that one out, and put another one in. And we carried some of those things with us. But we ... we were like junk men, we took care of ourselves, we had some of the most common things that you would need. So, we would have some supplies on board.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, that's pretty amazing at 19, that you ... you thought to, to do that kind of thing and being prepared. Because you probably didn't have a lot of experience and age, and, you know, taking care of things. So, that's pretty admirable.

Paul Polink: Well, some of the old-timers would put a bug in your hood, you know, [they] said, “If you go down there and can't get this part, the ones that are not too bulky, take 'em with you.”

Janis Kozlowski: [Um-Hum]

Paul Polink: I listened.

Janis Kozlowski: Yeah. And was your crew older than you were?

Paul Polink: Oh, yes. They were; they were quite older. Like, my pilot and copilot were like, 27 years old - I was 19 of course.

Janis Kozlowski: Well, they were old men in comparison.

Paul Polink: They [Chuckle] sure are now.

Janis Kozlowski: [Laugh] But, so they were helpful to you? They probably mentored you a little bit?

Paul Polink: Yes, they were very helpful. And I always would listen, because, I didn't know everything. So I listened ... I was a good listener.



WINTER OPERATIONS

10 November 1942 is a red letter date, for on this day the Squadron crossed the border on its way to overseas duty. The first step was Edmonton, Alberta, Canada where the crews had their first real initiation to arctic operation. Several planes developed leaky brakes and cowl flaps, struts went flat on others, some iced their spark plugs, and jeep heaters, tire insulators, wing cover and similar equipment necessary to winter operations had to be used. At this point the Squadron obtained the help of experienced ATC and/or Ferry pilots refused to fly the airplanes with the accumulated 29000 to 30000 pound gross weights. Hence it was necessary to leave part of the load behind and return for it at a later date. Jeep heaters, para-racks, the occupants of one plane and other miscellaneous equipment of considerable weight were dropped for the time. The remainder of the trip was made in small flights of two or three airplanes each. All 13 planes came up the "interior route" to Fairbanks, Alaska, and thence to Elmendorf Field, Anchorage, Alaska, the ultimate destination. The last airplanes arrived safe and sound on 19 November 1942 but not until after having first overcome numerous mechanical difficulties encountered in the bitter cold of the "Interior".

Engineering promptly set up shop in a modern hangar shared with the 42nd Troop Carrier Squadron at Elmendorf and prepared for operation of the airplanes up and down the Aleutian "Chain". The task ahead was surveyed with considerable awe and attacked with undying determination.

The first trouble to concern everyone who had to fly in the airplanes, whether pilot, mechanic, radio operator, passenger or others was the bitter cold. The airplanes were equipped with a steam heating system which derived its heat from the engine exhaust. The system proved to be very unsatisfactory for arctic operation. The system had to be filled with hot water immediately prior to take-off but even this was no assurance the system wouldn't freeze up before the plane was off the ground. In the event it didn't freeze before take-off was accomplished, the water capacity was insufficient to last on the long trips made. The system was also subject to freezing in flight, especially if the plane made any long glides or descents. In all probability the system is thermodynamically impossible at very low temperatures in as much as the only heat available to keep the water from freezing in the return line from the radiator to the boiler is its latent heat. To prevent this mixture of alcohol and water were tried

with varying degrees of luck, but the fumes from the alcohol made everyone sick. This was greatly alleviated by installing a vent line from the vapor pressure relief valve to the outside of the airplane. The next improvement was an interior filling system which was necessitated by rapid expenditure of alcohol and water, this also worked to a minor degree, but as alcohol has a very low latent heat capacity, insufficient heat was obtained to warm the airplane even though the system was operating. Because the time element required for successful operation of the heater was nearly impossible under the operating schedules and the replacement of frozen and burst lines consumed so much time and labor, further attempts in using the steam heating system were dropped.

Heat is essential to aircraft operation as well as to life in the colder seasons of the year in the North. The bases on the Aleutian "Chain" were fairly new and part parts for the airplanes and field equipment were unobtainable. This necessitated carrying a large amount of equipment and supplies in order to operate. Hydraulic fluid, anti-icing fluid, airplane covers, brakes and cowl flaps hoses and spark plugs are but few of the parts carried. The jeep heater, a portable gasoline engine heater, had to be carried on each plane to heat the engines prior to starting at the outlying bases. The heat was not only necessary to accomplish starting the engine but to prevent engine accessory drives from shearing and oil coolers from bursting. Because the steam heating system could not be operated satisfactorily, the jeep heater was assigned the dual role of starting planes on the ground and heating them in flight. The installation was accomplished by extending and venting an airtight exhaust stack from the jeep heater motor to the outside of the airplane through a gun port in the window. This system worked quite successfully for several months. But this turned out to be the incorrect answer for jeep heater carburetor were not designed to operate at varying altitudes. Because of the improper carburetion mixture, a heater caught fire during flight and had to be thrown overboard into the sea. That ended the heat in airplanes for the remainder of the winter.

At that time winterization of aircraft had not been extensively developed and the principle of operation depended more on preventative methods than on mechanical combatants. Preventative methods actually had little effect and operation was dependent on luck more than anything else.

Among the more important continuous, annoying winterization troubles sufficient to ground

