

#225 PHIL RASMUSSEN: WHEELER FIELD

John Martini (JM): Today is December 8, 1991. This is an oral history interview tape with Phil Rasmussen, lieutenant colonel retired U.S. Air Force. We're at the Waikiki Park Hotel in Honolulu. My name is John Martini. This tape is being done in conjunction with the National Park Service, USS ARIZONA Memorial, and KHET television, in Honolulu.

On December 7, 1941, Colonel Rasmussen was a second lieutenant serving with the 18th pursuit, pursuit crew out of Wheeler Field. He was twenty-three years old at the time. Thanks for coming.

Phil Rasmussen (PR): You're welcome. Glad to be hear.

JM: All right. When did you get into the Air Corps?

PR: I entered the, into flight training in, I believe it was in September, September of 1940. I completed my training in the end of April, '41. And then immediately was transferred to my first assignment, which was to Wheeler Field.

JM: You immediately came out to Hawaii?

PR: Yes.

JM: Did you have a choice of what duty station you were going into?

PR: Well, I, I did have a choice, yes. And the reason why I had a choice was that at that time, all of my class, or much of my class was going to join Pan-Am because Pan-Am was in the process of expanding its pilots in support of us supplying Europe and sending, sending supplies over to Europe. And my roommate had been killed night flying and I escorted his body home, and I missed the opportunity to be, to be interviewed by Pan-Am. And when I got back, I was very frustrated about not having had this opportunity. And the Colonel Snead, the commanding officer said, "Well, I agree with you, it's not fair, so we'll give you the choice of overseas assignments, 'cause everybody else is going overseas."

So I said, "Well, what, where can I go?"

And he said, "There's Panama, there's Puerto Rico, there's Hawaii, and there's the Philippines."

And I thought, well, Hawaii and the Philippines are very romantic. I said, "But what do you suggest. I have no idea what these places are like."

And Colonel Snead said that he had been stationed in the Philippines and that he thought that Hawaii was pretty much the same as the Philippines. And I said, "Well, I think I'll choose Hawaii because that will, that's closer to my parents to come and visit me."

So that's how I ended up going to Hawaii.

JM: Did you like it?

PR: Loved it.

JM: Yeah?

PR: Absolutely. There was a fascinating experience to come to this, the first time I'd been out of the country, out into the Pacific, anyway. As a child, I had traveled to Europe. But it was my first experience with tropical conditions and I loved the, the ambiance of the area. I loved the, loved the nature and the weather and everything was just magnificent. and wonderful place to be assigned.

JM: With -- you were a second lieutenant especially, an elite, you know, pursuit pilot. Did you have like intro to activities, levels of society and meeting people?

PR: We had, yes, we . . .

JM: Could you go out on dates?

PR: We used to have the *Lurline* and the, and the *Matsonia* were a couple of tour, tourist ships that would come in and they would bring in girls from the mainland every week for a weekend of, of surf and sun, and so we, most of us were bachelors, bachelor pilots, and we hadn't been allowed to get married while we were in flight training, and we had to get permission to get married after that. And so most of us were bachelors so we were having a lot of fun entertaining these girls from the mainland, and that was just a part of the, part of the fun of the area. But we'd also fly to, to the other islands. There were airfields on all of the other islands, and we'd always make a point of flying to a lot of these airfields and on different types of, of missions.

JM: What was your stated mission at Wheeler?

PR: It was, we were called the pursuit squadron, the same as a fighter squadron is described today. And our, our mission was to defend against the airborne attack on the islands.

JM: Were they, did they give you specific training against who, who might be attacking or what a scenario might be?

PR: No. There was no, no mention of another country, but we all had, I'm sure we all had various feelings about the potential that we were going to be involved in a war with Japan. In fact, in my diary, I mentioned on December 2 that I had gotten a letter from my father and he thought that we'd be, that we were going to have trouble with the Japanese. And on December the fifth, I made a comment in my diary that, that the diplomatic efforts between United States and the President had failed, and it looked serious. But it, I don't want you to take that out of context, because we also at the same time were thinking we're 2,000 miles from the safe, we're 3,000 miles from Japan, how could anything happen here?

JM: You mentioned a pursuit group, which is pretty much same as the fighter group today. Was there any difference between pursuit groups and interceptor groups -- it seems to be two different . . .

PR: Oh, we didn't, we didn't have this type of breakdown. As a pursuit pilot, we were engaged in, in aerial combat. We were engaged in bombing. That, that about covered everything that we did. But we did everything except the stuff, what you'd call the serious level bombing, that was done by the bomber command.

JM: What kind of impression or briefing did you have on Japan's other capabilities?

PR: None.

JM: None?

PR: No, no briefing. We didn't know, we never had identification photos of Japanese aircraft. In fact, when we got in a fight and when a Japanese aircraft arrived, I was confused about which ones were fighters and which ones were bombers. And I think it was easy enough to, to understand that confusion because I'd never seen a profile of either, any of their aircraft.

JM: Had you heard rumors from SCHMALTZ group about the Zeroes?

PR: We had heard -- well, yes -- we had heard some, heard some rumors about the Zeroes being a very maneuverable aircraft, built very lightly and having pretty fair fire power, and that was about it. And maneuverability was the emphasis.

JM: Let me jump into what -- how did the morning of December 7 start for you?

PR: About ten minutes to eight, I was in the barracks for the, for the unmarried officers, and I was in, standing in the latrine, and looking out the window at the hangar line, which was about three, four hundred feet from where I was standing. And I noticed a aircraft dived down the hangar and pull up very sharply, and an object dropped from this plane. And then I saw this huge orange explosion of smoke and orange flames. And when this airplane pulled up, I saw the two meatballs, or the two round circles identifying it as a Japanese aircraft. I knew immediately that it was a Japanese aircraft.

JM: You recognized the insignia?

PR: Yes, I recognized the insignia.

JM: Uh-huh.

PR: And I yelled down the hallway -- I was in my pajamas -- and I yelled down the hallway that we were being attacked by the Japs. And I ran to my room and I strapped a webbed belt around my waist and, and a forty-five caliber pistol in my holster that was on my, on this belt, and put on a pair of shoes and ran for the flight line. And as I was running towards the flight line, aircraft was strafing -- well, I thought they were strafing and trying to shoot me, because I could hear these bullets whistling by me and I'm sure that they had far more serious objectives than hitting this lone guy running, running along down towards the flight line.

JM: Were you still in your pajamas?

PR: Yes. Yeah, I was in my pajamas.

JM: With webbing belt on and shoes?

PR: Yeah, yeah. And . . .

JM: That probably didn't look unusual.

PR: You know, it was -- well I had, I wasn't wasting any time and because as I, as I was running down toward the flight line, I saw the airplanes were in, in wingtip to wingtip, lined up. And they had, the Japs had started to bomb and strafe the aircraft at the end of the line, and each one was, each airplane was exploding and igniting the one next to it, because they were so close together. And there were a couple of, there were a few P-36s that were down closer to me, and closer to the hangar line, that were a little further away from the other aircraft. And I ran down to one of those, and jumped into that plane, got it started and then an armorer came over with a belts of thirty caliber and fifty caliber ammunition on his shoulder, then jumped on the wing. And I taxied over during, apparently, a lull there, because I was not, I didn't, as I taxied over towards the, towards the revetments, the earthen revetments surrounding the airfield, I don't recall being attacked as I, as I looked around. I didn't see any aircraft that looked like they were about to strafe me. And I got over -- pardon?

JM: I was going to say, so you just grabbed the first available plane that wasn't your regular ship?

PR: It was the first available -- it wasn't my airplane. The first plane I jumped into.

JM: What was your regular airplane?

PR: We, we didn't have -- the only people who had their names on the ships was the squadron commanders.

JM: Oh, okay.

PR: The rest of us peons, we, we took what was left over. And that, of course, changed during the war, then we got individual aircraft assigned to us. But I managed to get over to one of the earth revetments, and the armorer and I proceeded to load the P-36 with the thirty caliber and fifty caliber ammunition. The guns on the P-36 fired synchronously through the propeller, and the thirty-caliber was on the left side of the pilot, and the fifty caliber was on the right side. And they, when they, when you fired these guns, you think of a machine gun fire as being a very rapid sound, but because you couldn't shoot your prop, you had to shoot between the prop as the prop turned, that was the mechanical thing that handled that, why, it was sort of almost like a funeral cadence in speed.

So, but anyway, as we, as we assembled the four aircraft, Lou Sanders, the squadron commander and Gordon Sterling and John Backer and myself, we all had done exactly the same thing that I described myself as doing, when I taxied the aircraft over. And we took off in formation, headed towards Pearl Harbor, to make a turn to the north and we came around the field, circled around the field, climbing. And we headed north because along the whole mountain range to the east, the mountains, the clouds had built up over the mountains. And we were trying to remain BFR, remain out of the clouds, and climbed to altitude and just clawing for altitude, because that was so important to, in combat, to have altitude. We had that much sense.

And we charged our guns at this time, and in the P-36, you had a charging handle for each gun that you pulled back a lever, pull it back as far as your ear, and then you let it snap forward, and that arm would snap forward and put a bullet in your chamber. Well, I did that with the thirty caliber, and then I pulled the fifty caliber back and let it slide forward, and, and the gun started

firing by itself. So I had to pull it back and keep it cocked back to keep the gun from firing, without -- I, it had nothing to do with me depressing the trigger, because it was a solenoid that had gone bad on me, on that gun.

So we headed towards -- as we climbed, we kept heading, headed east, and we had received instructions shortly after being airborne, to go to Bellows Field. And we were climbing and then trying to get over in that direction as quickly as possible, and as soon as we topped the clouds, at about 9,000 feet, between nine and 10,000 feet, we had instructions to go to Kaneohe Bay. So we -- which was more or less on the way to Bellows anyway, same general direction.

And we got to Kaneohe Bay, we saw that it was under attack, and we saw about eight aircraft that were over land, making a turn, preparing to make another attack on, on Kaneohe Bay. And we dove down and were going to jump these aircraft -- in other words, attack them. And we intercepted them at about 6,500 feet. And I pulled up a little bit and one of these -- we had all separated in the process of, of making our attack, individually. And this one airplane came by from my right side to the left. And as he came by, as I saw him trying to come, I lit him with my fifty caliber and let the handle slide home and it started firing all by itself. And I could see the bullets stitching the fuselage, and from the engine aft, and he caught on fire and, and peeled down. And just at that same time, this other Japanese aircraft tried to ram me. I was convinced that he was trying to ram me and I pulled up very sharply to my right. And as I pulled up to my right, my airplane shuddered, and my canopy blew off and I lost control of the plane, momentarily.

I, as the plane was falling off, I managed to work the controls around and I found out that my rudder control would not work. The rudder, rudder would just slide in and out on either side, which meant that I still had some aileron control, and elevator control, and I ducked into the clouds that were below us, and in towards the mountains. And stayed in those clouds -- they were about eight to ten cloud covers, so that we were popping, I was popping in and out of clouds, trying to stabilize the aircraft, trying to find out whether I'd been hurt or not because I, I had felt this blow on the top of my head, and I had not worn a helmet. I just had a headset on and I gingerly felt -- when I had got the airplane finally straightened out a little bit, straight and level, I gingerly reached up to see if, how much was left of the top of my head, and all I found was a bunch of shredded Plexiglas in my hair, and I didn't have a scratch anywhere.

JM: When you, when you flew in, you came around over Kaneohe?

PR: Yes.

JM: Was there a lot of time for talk going into that, if there's a lot of them and a few of us, or was it all automatic?

PR: There wasn't time. Our actions were preceding our thoughts. That's almost the way I could just describe it. And everything was, was sort of programmed. Our actions were sort of programmed. It was a re-- a reaction to a situation. I think it's the best way I can describe it.

JM: Did, when you first went up against another plane, was it a different feeling than all of the practice dog fighting you'd done?

PR: Oh, oh my god, yes. Yeah. Yeah. It was sadly, the feeling of reality didn't come, come until my airplane was hit. And then all of a sudden, I

realized that I was in a great deal of danger, and that's the reason why I ducked into the clouds and tried to get out of that direction.

JM: Does fear kick in or is it still automatic when your plane's hit?

PR: No. Fear didn't, fear didn't kick in. I got, I got -- yes, when it, when it all, when all this happened, it's like, I guess, it's like an automobile accident. You suddenly crash into somebody and, and you have a moment's pause before you start thinking, and then you start, and then you get pretty nervous about the situation. But all the way back to the field -- I was so busy trying to keep that airplane in the air, that I didn't have time to think of anything else. I was, I had my, my stick, my control stick way over in my right hand corner of my cockpit in order to keep the airplane level and I was using my trim tabs like mad and trying to maintain control of the aircraft.

JM: And still, had your fifty caliber run out or were you still holding up there?

PR: Oh, it had run out. I had, when I let that, when I had let that slide in, I just, I forgot about it and I was shooting all over the sky, 'til I ran out of ammunition, after I had hit this aircraft.

JM: Heading back to, heading back to Wheeler, did you have any more encounters?

PR: As a matter of fact, I did. As I was heading back toward Wheeler, Lou Sanders picked me up and, and he pulled up close to me and was shaking his head and trying to find out what was wrong and I said, "Everything is okay. I'm all right."

And so he escorted me back to Wheeler. And we came back over Schofield Barracks, and as we came over Schofield Barracks, the friendly forces that organized themselves pretty well and was starting to shoot at us. But fortunately, they missed us. And then . . .

JM: The guys at Wheeler were firing, or at Hickam, or at Schofield were firing at you?

PR: Yeah. The men at Schofield were firing at us. Our, the Wheeler Field people identified, knew that they were, that we were friendly aircraft. And there were no more Japs around. Apparently we had returned -- this was fifty minutes later and there were no more aircraft around.

And as I turned on the base legs and put my view down, why, my, I noticed my indicator showed my gear was not down. So on final, I was pumping the emergency pump to hydraulic fluid to get the gear down and just before I touched down, I got the gear down, and I cut the engine and landed on the, on the wet grass. The dew was still on the grass. We had no runway, so it was just a grassy field. And we had a concrete ramp for parking the aircraft. But the aircraft just took over by itself because I had no brakes, my hydraulics had been shot out. I had no rudder. I couldn't control the torque of the airplane, and I just spun around a couple of times 'til it came to a stop. And then I sat there in, benumbed, really, and I noticed some men running over from the hangar line to see if I was okay, and I finally got up out of the cockpit and I was soaking wet and it wasn't just from sweat. And got on the ground and I looked at the airplane and just, I was just dazed a little bit. I think that's the only way I can explain it. I didn't have any coherent thoughts.

And I made, I went back to the barracks and took off my pajamas and put on a flying suit and came back down the line to see what I could do. Because the ammunition was still exploding in the hangars. All the planes that had, could be salvageable had been salvaged in that, in that period of time, and there were very few of them that were salvaged.

JM: Can we put up that picture of your dogfight?

PR: Sure.

JM: Can you describe it?

PR: Yeah. This painting that is shown here shows the, my combat and actually it shows the time that I was hit. Now you can see the bullet holes in the airplane here. The tail wheel is being shot off. My canopy is shattered and it was right after I had shot down one Jap aircraft and then, this aircraft tried to ram me, and I had pulled up to avoid being rammed by him. Also, you can see the Kaneohe Bay that was under attack over here, and this is John Thacker, one of our group of four pilots, whose guns were all jammed. He couldn't do anything. And this is Lou Sanders here, whose, who was after this Jap. And this is our fourth man, Gordon Sterling, who was on fire and was shot down.

JM: Is that, is that the first time that you've seen a, come head on with a Japanese plane when that one tried to ram you?

PR: Yes. Yes. In fact, when I, when I came back and described my mission to the intelligence officer, I had, I had mentioned that this was a bomber. It, it had the same profile, almost, as the fighter, as the Zeroes, but later confirmation but most historians believed that it was a Zero that I was, that I shot down that they were the Zeroes that we were engaged in combat with. And I had to do a, a article -- well, I didn't have to -- I did an article for People magazine. They interviewed me about this combat and after they had interviewed me, they called me and said, "Be sure to get the magazine because there's a surprise in there for you."

And I said, "Well what is it?"

"Well, you'll find out when, when the issue comes out."

This pilot is still alive. This Japanese pilot. He is quite ill, but he's in Japan and he describes how he tried to ram me.

JM: No kidding.

PR: And in my intelligence report, I talk about this plane that tried to ram me. So it sort of ties things together very clearly as to what happened during that combat and . . .

JM: And the artist worked closely with you to make this?

PR: Jerry Crandall, the artist who painted this thing, this painting, and of which there are a limited series of prints -- 1,200 of them -- being sold by the American Heritage Museum, for the purpose of obtaining additional World War II aircraft and reconstructing them so that they can be used as demonstration aircraft.

(Conversation off-mike.)

PR: This is on December the eighth, the next day. I asked the base photographer to take some photos of my plane, and this shows some of the damage. Here's a twenty millimeter cannon that ended here. My canopy, you notice, is missing. It was shot off, and the fairing, they had -- the wing was removed because the fairing here was all full of holes.

This, this shows me looking again at the aircraft, and you can see the tail wheel has been shot off. There's another, there's a twenty millimeter hole there. There's a twenty millimeter cannon hole there. And then the fairing has been shot off along here.

(Conversation off-mike.)

PR: Okay. This picture shows the, where my, I'm holding my rudder cable there that was severed. And you can see part of my hydraulic line there is, is gone as well. And that of course left me without control of the, of, pretty much without control of the aircraft. Well, minimal control of the aircraft. I'd lost rudder control. I had minimal aileron and elevator control.

--: Okay, hang on for a second. Okay, go ahead, the next picture.

PR: Okay, this shot shows, this is right in back of the pilot. And this shows the, this inside the fuselage and shows the hole made by the entry of the twenty millimeter and when it exploded, it, it -- these radios absorbed the shock and they saved my life because the radios being back up here, there was, I had no armor plate in back of me in these airplanes, and this is what saved my life, was these radios that absorbed the shock.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

JM: This is a, this tape we're hoping people will look at years from now and be able to get insight to what it was like. What would you like a researcher or someone looking at this long time ago to remember about aerial combat at that time, what it was like for the first time when your, you were a twenty-three year old going in, shooting up and getting shot at?

PR: Well, it, it's, it's like the age of chivalry, almost. With, with the knights and the way they were fighting and the combat that we engaged in, in World War II. That's something that disappeared like horse cavalry. It, no longer do we have, I don't anticipate, in any, any future, war that we're going to have this type of dog fighting that, that we had here. Most of the weapons that we use today are weapons that, that they fire at targets that are out of sight and are picked up electronically. So the likelihood of this type of combat, this is part of history.

JM: And your experiences were. And coming, coming back, is it like reliving it again? Is it hard, or what's it like coming back here after fifty years?

PR: I don't quite understand the question.

JM: Coming back to Hawaii were you . . .

PR: Oh, oh, coming back to Hawaii now. It, it was, it's a shock to come back. I had a very, it was a very emotional thing to meet a lot of those people that I had been involved with fifty years ago and not maintained contact with, almost,

almost none of them. And the meeting 'em and bringing back those memories was the, was a very exciting, emotional experience for me. And I'm very happy I came back here for that meeting again. And . . .

JM: We're just about out of time. I wanted to thank you very much for sharing. Thanks for coming.

PR: My pleasure.

JM: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW