

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#371

PHILIP MARTIN RASMUSSEN

46th PURSUIT SQUADRON, WHEELER FIELD

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 1, 2001

BY ROBERT P. CHENOWETH & WILLIAM R. SCULLION

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Robert “Bob” P. Chenoweth (BC): [*The following oral history*] interview was conducted by Bob Chenoweth and [*William R.*] “Bill” Scullion for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial at the Hilton Hawaiian Village, Tapa Room 329 on December 1, 2001 at about 8:30 a.m. The person being interviewed is Phil Rasmussen, who was a pursuit pilot at Wheeler Field on December 7, 1941. Phil, for the record, please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth.

Philip Martin Rasmussen (PR): Philip Martin Rasmussen, born in Boston, Massachusetts, May 11, 1918.

BC: What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

PR: Boston. Jamaica Plain, a suburb of Boston.

BC: What were your parents’ names?

PR: Alfred and Ane, A-N-E, Rasmussen. They were both immigrants from Denmark.

BC: How many brothers or sisters did you have?

PR: I had one brother and two sisters.

(Conversation off-mike)

BC: Where did you go to high school?

PR: Jamaica Plain High School.

BC: And also did you go to college prior to...

PR: Yes, I did. I was graduated from Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

BC: And where did you enlist?

PR: While I was at Gettysburg, an enlistment team came through for pilots and at that time, college graduates were, well, the only ones accepted for pilot training. And I felt that we were going to get into the war eventually and if I passed the physical, I probably would go into pilot training. I had conviction that we'd get into the war and I thought, knew with this way I can select what I want to do, not be drafted subsequently.

BC: Coming off that discussion, could you talk a little bit about your training and what were the circumstances that eventually brought you to Hawaii?

PR: I was called into training and started my primary training at Tuscaloosa, Alabama at Van de Graaff Field. That was in June of 1940. And I spent three months there in primary training, flying PT-11s and PT-13s. My basic training was at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama, where I flew B-13s. And my advanced training was also at Maxwell Field, Alabama, and there I flew the AT-6 and the BC-1A. Shortly, before we completed our training, a Pan-Am[*erican Airlines*] was scheduled to come through and most of the class was expected to be accepted into Pan-Am training, because they were expanding their routes, supporting the efforts in Europe. And when my roommate, Bob Thompson, was killed night flying and I was directed to escort his body back to Andover Campus in Massachusetts, where he lived, his family lived. And while I was gone, the Pan-Am people came. And when I came back, I was very frustrated about that because I hadn't had an opportunity to be interviewed.

BC: Now, excuse me, were you going to fly as military pilots?

PR: No. It's Pan-Am.

BC: With Pan-Am?

PR: They would take us out of it and become Pan-Am. In fact, many of those pilots accepted became chiefs and vice presidents of Pan-American Airlines.

BC: Oh.

PR: Many of my friends.

BC: Okay, the frustration makes sense.

PR: So I went to Colonel Snead, my commanding officer, and I said, "I was very upset that I hadn't had an opportunity," was there any way that I could get interviewed by Pan-Am?

He said, "No, they've left." He said, "But I'll tell you what. You did a good job on your escort duties and all the rest of you are going overseas. You're going either to Panama, or you're going to Puerto Rico, or you're going to the Philippines, or you're going to Hawaii."

Those were where the rest of the class were to go. And he said, "I'll give you your choice of where you want to go."

And I said, "Where did you come from?"

He said, "Well, I came from the Philippines."

And I said, "What was that duty like?"

He said, "Oh, that was great duty."

And I said, "What about the Hawaiian Islands?"

He said, "Well, I was never stationed there but it's very similar to the Philippines."

And I said, "Well, my family will probably come and visit me and the Philippines are just too damn far away. So I'd like to go to Hawaii."

So that's how I ended up going to Hawaii and [*I drove my 1940 Chevy convertible*] to San Francisco, to the Presidio and we got aboard the old US Army transport, *Grant*, USAT *Grant*, and sailed to Honolulu, where I was subsequently assigned to Wheeler Field.

BC: When was that? When did you come to Hawaii?

PR: I arrived May the first.

BC: Of '41?

PR: In '41.

BC: Forty-one. Now, had you had any experience flying pursuit aircraft up to this time?

PR: No, this is my first introduction to pursuit. The last airplane I flew was in advanced training, in T-6s, and BC-1As.

BC: Okay, you get to Hawaii, you're assigned to Wheeler Field.

PR: Yes. There was seven of us that came over to Hawaii, and Gordon Sterling and I were assigned to Wheeler Field and the others, Bill Cope and another pilot, were assigned to Bomber Command at Hickam Field.

BC: And what squadron were you eventually assigned to?

PR: I was assigned to the 46th Pursuit Squadron.

BC: Could you tell me a little bit about the organization of the pursuit squadrons at that time at Wheeler?

PR: Yes. The 14th Pursuit Wing was commanded by Brigadier General [*Howard C.*] Davidson and the base commander was Colonel [*William J.*] Flood. And the squadrons, fighter squadrons based at Wheeler Field were the 45th, 46th, 47th, and the 72nd [*Pursuit*] Squadron[s]. The aircraft we flew were P-40s, P-36s, and P-26s. Those were our primary combat aircraft. We also had some post-World War I bi-wing wooden airplanes that we were, [*Brigadier*] General Davidson was desperately trying to get rid of those, out of the inventory, you know, to get so they wouldn't have to maintain 'em. They had no parts for them. So he left the word out that if some of these airplanes were accidentally damaged, that there wouldn't be much of a pilot inquiry about how they were damaged. So promptly, [*Second Lieutenant*] George [*C.*] Welch dumped one in at the beach at Haleiwa. And that was a total loss, of course. And the claim was engine failure.

I was flying one, a bi-plane. I can't remember the model. It was a bomber, open cockpit, two-seater and everything was wooden and linen. And I landed in a crosswind at Wheeler Field, and it was just too much for that poor, old, tired airplane, the stress of landing in the crosswind and the landing gear collapsed and the top wing fell down on top of the bottom wing. We were totally uninjured. We landed at about forty miles an hour. And it was just something you put a match to and have a nice fire. I was not charged with any pilot responsibility in that aircraft.

We flew mostly the P-26s were exciting to fly. They're very snappy little, like a wasp, whipping around all over the place and open cockpit. When we flew those, we had these nice long, white scarves, flying out behind us as we flew them.

And the P-36 was a rugged, radial engine airplane, with very little firepower. It had only one thirty caliber and one fifty caliber firing through the prop. So the firing of the machine guns in the P-36 were not at all like you think of a machine gun fire, going, "Brrrr." It sounded more like a funeral cadence, "Bup, bup, bup," as it went through the, fired [*between*] the [*propeller blades*], so they wouldn't injure the propellers.

We had a total, I think, on December 7, we had almost a hundred P-40s and we had thirty-nine P-36s, and I don't remember the number of the P-26s and miscellaneous aircraft that we had there. And a few of these aircraft on December the seventh were at Haleiwa Air Field, which was a gunnery field where we did practice. And the 47th Squadron was doing the practice at that time and had some airplanes down there.

BC: Was the 44th that was at Bellows [*Field*], were they also part of the pursuit wing?

PR: Yes, they were.

BC: Okay.

PR: They were on temporary duty over at Bellows Field.

BC: So could you talk a little bit about the intensiveness and the type of training that you were involved in just prior to December 7. I mean...

PR: Yeah, we were...

BC: ...you obviously were aware...

PR: ...we were intensely engaged in dog fighting. A lot of cross country work, altitude work, gunnery, both towed target gunnery as well as ground targets. And a third form of gunnery was where we'd have a [*paper*] sack of aluminum powder, and the leader of the team that was going out to do gunnery would fly down close to the water, open his canopy and toss out this paper bag full of aluminum, fine ground aluminum. And it would form a slick circle on the water. And we would fire at this circle. It was a dangerous practice doing that, not so much the firing, but I experienced a very life-threatening thing. As I had this bag in my hand, maybe three pounds of aluminum in it, and as I opened the canopy, the aluminum burst in the [*cockpit*] and blinded me. I was almost totally blinded and as my tears ran, I eventually could see where I am. Fortunately, this was right off of the end of Haleiwa, [*where*] were doing our gunnery training. And the people on the ground had seen this explosion in the cockpit and thought there had been some sort of an explosion. I was able to make my way down and land at Haleiwa, with the flight surgeon pursuing me in the ambulance. As he finally came to stop, and my face was all shiny, like I'd been burned, but it was actually the aluminum powder that had clung to my face. I was unable to fly for a few days while they flushed out my eyes. But we also had a lot of dog fighting and that about comprised all of our training.

BC: On, leading up to the attack, could you explain to me what you were doing. You had mentioned that you were coming off a six-day exercise, five-day exercise and...

PR: Yes.

BC: ...then explain what your experiences were.

PR: Yes, we had [Lieutenant] General [*Walter C.*] Short had ordered a full one week combat exercise where we had all the aircraft loaded with ammunition.

And this exercise, practicing intercepting aircraft coming in to attack and this exercise ended on the sixth of December. And usually, at the end of the week, on Saturday mornings, we had a formal inspection of both the pilots, the crews, and the aircraft. And the aircraft were lined up wingtip-to-wingtip and the pilot and the crew chief standing in front [of each aircraft] while [Brigadier] General Davidson trooped the line. This was done Saturday morning, perhaps about nine o'clock. And then the troops were dispersed and we went off, mostly to the beaches, picnics and then that sort of thing, getting dates and what have you.

And this particular morning, of December 6, we did not disperse our aircraft, even though Colonel Flood had requested from [Lieutenant] General Short that we do disperse our aircraft. And the reason, by dispersing our aircraft, I meant putting 'em out into earthen revetments surrounding the airfield. [Lieutenant] General Short, told Colonel Flood that he could not disperse his aircraft because they were in Condition One, which was anti-sabotage, which meant that they had to have guards at all the utility stations and water stations and other utilities. And there were insufficient guards to protect the airplanes if we put 'em out in a perimeter of the field. So we left the airplanes lined up wingtip-to-wingtip on the apron in front of the hangars. And that was a very unfortunate thing that happened.

BC: So on the morning of December 7, where were you? What were you doing?

PR: Well actually the night of December 6, [Second Lieutenant] Joe [H.] Powell, another pilot, and I had dates. We'd been swimming and dancing at Trader Vic's, the only nightclub downtown. And we were headed back to Wheeler Field about two o'clock in the morning of December 7. And as the road proceeded from Honolulu to Wheeler Field, it went up along the mountainside and you could look down and see the whole of Pearl Harbor. Joe was asleep over in his corner of the car and as I looked down at the sight of Pearl Harbor, I was so impressed with the number of lights on the ships. They had a practice of lighting up the ships on weekends for publicity purposes. And [that] was [a] very impressive sight. And this particular night, I was so impressed with the number of lights that I saw, which indicated of course the number of ships in the harbor, that I nudged Joe awake, and I said, "Joe, look down there. Did you ever see so many lighted ships at Pearl Harbor?"

And Joe looked over the fleet and he said, “Jesus, what a target that would make!” and went back to sleep again.

And fifteen minutes later we arrived at Wheeler Field and we went to our barracks and in the morning, about just shortly before eight o’clock, I had a nature call. I was standing in the latrine at the bachelor officers’ quarters. This building was about 1,800 feet from the hangar line and it overlooked the hangar line. And I was standing in the latrine, looking out the window at the hangar line, very peaceful scene, beautiful morning, typical Sunday morning, very quiet. And I saw this airplane dive down and drop an object and pull up very sharply. And when the object of course landed it exploded in a huge orange flame and as the airplane pulled up, I saw these meatballs, these red solid circles on the wings and I immediately knew it was a Japanese aircraft. And I yelled down the hallway that we were being attacked by Japs.

One thing that’s rather amusing is that for a [*split*] second I thought it was a navy aircraft that was simulating attacking our field, which because the navy had been doing this to us, we’d been doing to them, beating up, what we call beating up the field, and carrying these little sacks of flour and we’d toss it out the cockpit and open up the cockpit, toss ‘em out. And they simulated bombs and they’d land most anywhere. And of course, I knew it wasn’t when I saw the airplane and the bomb explosion.

And I put my boots on. We didn’t have flying boots like you have today, specialized shoes. And our [*flight suits*] were tailor-made for ourselves by Japanese tailors. And I was in pajamas and I didn’t take time to more than put [*shoes and*] a web belt, and a forty-five caliber pistol on my hip, which we had been issued for the maneuvers and they hadn’t been returned. And I ran outside to the flight line. I didn’t have anything particular in mind except that these airplanes were lined up wingtip-to-wingtip and if one exploded, it would ignite the next one to it, like a bunch of Chinese firecrackers.

And my first thought was to try to salvage one of those airplanes. Get down there and get it started, taxi it out of the way, at the end of the line. And running down there, I was shooting with my forty-five at the aircraft as they

were still attacking the field. Not only would they drop the bombs, but they also did some strafing.

And I got down to one of the aircraft and it happened to be a row of P-36s that had missed being bombed. And jumped into one of those and the gunner was on the wing. Came out of somewhere, this gunner came out and climbed up on the wing. And he had fifty-caliber and thirty-caliber ammunition hanging on his shoulders. And I taxied the airplane over to one of the revetments. I was not attacked during that period of time [*as*] it was a lull between the attack[s.]

BC: Do you have an idea of how many aircraft—how many aircraft did you see? How many were involved in the attack?

PR: I...I don't know how many were involved. I probably saw, during the time that from the first bomb that was dropped until the time that we took off, where there was another lull when we took off, which was probably about twenty minutes. I imagine it was about twenty minutes. I wasn't looking at my watch. (Chuckles) And we had gotten loaded and [*three*] pilots were able to get it, do the same thing that I did. And we took off in formation and made a turn to the south, towards Pearl Harbor, climbing, and headed towards Koolau Mountain Range, where our radio told us that Bellows was under attack and we'd go over there to intercept the attackers at Bellows.

BC: Now this was a radio transmission you got...

PR: Yes.

BC: ...in the airplane?

PR: This was a radio transmission. Now, I was wearing just a headset. Just two wires with a headset. I was not wearing a helmet of any kind. And I was listening to the communications between my squadron leader, [*First*] Lieutenant [*L.M.*] Sanders, and the base. I'm not sure where the source of the directions came from, but we were directed.

As soon as we took off, we charged our guns and there were two charging handles in the cockpit, one on the right side and one on the left side. And

you pulled back the charging handle up to your ear, which was a distance about [30 inches.] And then you let it slide in and it puts a bullet in the chamber. I did that with the thirty-caliber and I pressed [*the trigger*] to fire it, to test it. It wouldn't fire. I pulled it again it wouldn't fire. So my thirty-caliber was not firing. My fifty-caliber, I pulled back and let it slide in and before I could start pulling the trigger, it started to fire by itself. So I knew that I had, what we call a runaway. So I pulled it back again and left it in a cocked position, so that if I had to use it, I'd just let it slide [*in*] and it would start firing.

And we climbed out over the Koolau Mountain Range and about, I think probably around 9,000 feet, there was some, there was about four-tenths, cloud cover at about 6,000 feet, I think. And we climbed through those and up to about 9,000 feet where we intercepted some Japanese aircraft, Zeros. At that time I did not know, I did not identify the aircraft too well. I was not familiar. We had not had any real identification [*programs*.] All we had was word of mouth and stories told by the Flying Tigers that had been passed on to us. But they were Zeros, subsequently we found out. I misidentified the one that I was engaged, involved in.

Well anyway, we had a dogfight there and as one of our own aircraft was being pursued across, perpendicular to my flight—we had exploded when we met the Japs. Everything, everybody went in their own line. And this friendly aircraft, one of ours, went across in front of me and right behind him, maybe 300 yards behind him, 400 yards behind, was this Japanese Zero in pursuit. And as he was coming right across, in front of me, and as I released the fifty-caliber, I led him by two plane lengths. And I saw bullet holes, I saw puffs of the bullets striking the fuselage. And he started smoking. And then just at that time, when I ceased firing at him, this other aircraft came head on towards me and I thought he was going to hit me. I thought he was going to ram me and I pulled up very sharply to avoid being struck by him and missed him. And at that time, my plane was struck by another Zero.

My canopy was blown off. My rudder cables were severed. My hydraulic lines were severed. And I lost control of the airplane momentarily. And of course lost altitude in the process. And as I tumbled down towards the clouds, I regained control of the aircraft and got straightened out and I was

popping in and out of the clouds and no other aircraft were attacking me. I couldn't have done anything anyway to defend myself.

I finally got the airplane straight and level and headed back towards Wheeler Field. Well that must have been the final attack of the Japs, because they had departed. I saw no more Jap aircraft. And as I flew back towards Wheeler Field, I had felt, when the canopy exploded. Something [was] on the top of my head and I thought maybe I was badly injured on the top of my head and I reluctantly put my hand up to the top of my head to see how it felt, and all I had was a bunch of crumbled Plexiglas mixed up in my hair. I didn't have a scratch. I was very lucky.

And came back to Wheeler Field. On the way back, [*First Lieutenant*] Lou Sanders, my squadron commander intercepted me and pulled up beside so closely I could see this great look of concern on his face and I [*signaled*] him I was okay. I was all right. And together we headed back towards Wheeler Field. And we passed over Schofield Barracks in the process, because it's right next door to Wheeler Field. As we passed over Schofield Barracks, they had gotten themselves fairly well organized by that time and there was some pretty heavy machine gun fire. But they were lousy shots. They didn't get us. They didn't hit us.

And as I turned on the base leg, I put my gear handle down and my gear indicated my gear was not down. At that time, I did not know I had no hydraulic[s.] My hydraulic line had been severed. The rudder cable I knew had been severed because my rudders would slide in and out by themselves. I had no control over them. And as I came on final, I was pumping, madly pumping my hydraulic to put my gear down and just as I touched down they locked in position and I landed. I had no control. I cut the engine, but I had no control over the aircraft and no brakes and no rudder and ground looped a couple of times. The grass—it was a grass runway and the grass was still wet with morning dew. And I ground-looped twice and every time I added throttle to it, it would spin around again. Gotta gain a few feet spinning on it and gain a few feet, spin around. I finally got it off the field a little way and I got out of the airplane at that time. And it was a hot day and I was also very sweaty. But it was very possible not all of that wet was sweat!

And I made my way back to my room and I took off my pajamas, put on my flying suit, came back to the line to see what was going on. We expected another attack. And we were trying to cob together the aircraft that were remaining on the field, which were very few. And we launched aircraft but of course the Japanese never came [*back.*] We had all been issued carbines and we were also issued rations [*as*] we intended to [*defend ourselves*] we tossed those in the trunk of our convertibles. Every pilot had a convertible.

(Conversation off-mike)

PR: As soon as he graduated from flying school.

(Conversation off-mike)

END OF TAPE #1

TAPE #2

(Conversation off-mike)

BC: Okay, you can start again.

PR: When I, after I landed and had gotten into my clean flying suit, I went back to the line. The aircraft was still burning and the P-40s that were lined up, looked as though their backs had been broken. All of the engines were facing up to the sky, the tail part was all burned out, sitting on the burned wheels. To get back to my aircraft, I didn't know until later on that some of the bullets had struck my catwalk on both sides of the cockpit. In the process it had also blown off my canopy and my right wheel main gear had a hole in it from 7.7 [*millimeter machine guns*], so it was flat when I landed as well. And subsequently some people counted the bullet holes in the aircraft and they got to around 500 holes that they found, both from bullets, 7.7 millimeter and twenty-millimeter [*cannon*] shrapnel. Everything was gone on the aircraft, [*it*] could not be [*used*] again, except the engine, which they tried to salvage.

The hangars were still afire and the aircraft, a lot of the aircraft still burning. As I looked south to Pearl Harbor, it's about nine miles as the bird flies from Wheeler Field. And I could look down that way and the whole sky was filled with black smoke and very reminiscent of the Desert Storm fires that the Iraqis ignited down there when they ignited the oil fields. Very, very similar, I got that same impression you saw the red flame bursting up occasionally. You saw this huge ball of roiling black smoke [*covering*] up the whole horizon down there.

And around Wheeler Field we were gradually gaining control of the fires and after we had gained control of the fires, we salvaged what aircraft we could, loaded 'em with what ammunition we could. And when I say that, it's because all the ammunition was stored in one of the hangars that was very badly hit and so we lost an awful lot of ammunition in that process. They were picking up whatever scraps of ammunition they could find that had not exploded and were filling aircraft that were left with that ammunition.

And the pilots were taking off. As soon as we [*got an*] aircraft in condition, a pilot would take off and be sent off on patrol to Kaena Point or Waikiki or some other points, looking for a possible more aircraft coming in. We had no idea where the aircraft had come from, whether they came from the north or the south, east or west. But we maintained patrols, twenty-four [*hours*], all night long, for two days. We were waiting for a follow-up. We were waiting for troopships to land and there were rumors flying all over the place, that troops had landed here and there on the island. And if we had had any sense, we'd realize that these airplanes came from carriers, which troop carriers could never have followed as rapidly as them, so there wouldn't be. But under those circumstances, we...

BC: You had every...

PR: ...cautious. Yes.

BC: And...

PR: We continued this patrolling for several days until we were convinced that they were not coming back. And then we just kept trying to salvage more

and more aircraft out of parts and waiting for new aircraft from the Mainland.

BC: Initially, how many aircraft were serviceable? That you're aware of.

PR: I think perhaps there were no more than twenty aircraft that were serviceable. And that was all kinds of aircraft—P-26s, P-36s, some P-40s, mostly P-36s.

BC: So the pilots that had flown from Haleiwa, did they eventually come back to Wheeler and settle in at Wheeler?

PR: Yes. Yes.

BC: So were there any aircraft remaining at Haleiwa, as far as you knew?

PR: That I don't know. I think it's very possible we did keep some aircraft there because the Japs had not hit Haleiwa. Apparently they didn't know about it because that would've been another one of their targets. They never strafed Haleiwa during the attack.

BC: Could we back up for a minute and I wanted to ask you a little bit about the painting and the marking of your aircraft prior to the attack? Now the photographic evidence indicates that the planes were in the process of being re-painted from their natural metal finish...

PR: Well we got...

BC: ...to camouflage.

PR: We got a lot of P-40s, they had some maneuvers in the States, I think, with the Louisiana maneuvers, it was called. And we were, we got a lot of airplanes in battle colors, gray, gray-brown color, that had been painted for that purpose. Now I do not believe any of the P-40s were re-painted. I think they left 'em in their...

BC: They came in the olive drab finish.

PR: Yes, yes. The P-36s came clean.

BC: Right.

PR: And they were just aluminum. And they remain that way. And the only change that were made so far as the designations on the aircraft are concerned, was that they put these huge numbers on the side of the aircraft, which were called buzz numbers. And the reason why they call it buzz numbers was because in their exuberance, the fighter pilots would buzz the, maybe their girlfriends' houses or in chasing one another around to get as low as they can and buzz over fields. There were lots of pineapple and cane fields around there so we could get that low enough that we sometimes pick up some cane shreadings in our oil scoops and get our engines all heated up.

But we also had a practice, which I am kind of reluctant to mention. We had—the [Matson] Line had the *Matsonia* and the *Lurline* were these cruise ships that were carrying girls from the Mainland to Hawaii for romance. When these ships would [get] to Diamond Head, from Diamond Head on they would slow down and it would take 'em about two hours before they finally docked. So all the passengers could get a good view of Diamond Head and Waikiki Beach and all that. And when one of our aircraft spotted one of those ships off of Diamond Head, those pilots that were available and were interested would go over to Wahiawa, which was a little town right next to Wheeler Field and would buy *pikake* leis and orchid leis for twenty-five, thirty-five cents a piece. We'd buy half a dozen of these, jump into our airplanes with the leis and fly down and buzz the ship. Make a few passes at the ship, open up the canopy, we'd toss the leis out, hoping that they'd land on the ship. Then we'd whip back to Wheeler Field, jump into our civvies and race down in our convertibles to meet the ship at the gangplank, as the gals came off the [*ship*.]

Well, in those days, they had a hostess that would take care of the girls, part of their duties. And the pilots would see some gal up there, looked pretty interesting and tell her, "I'd like to meet that gal," and we did this fairly often.

And of course the ships came in on weekends, so that was all right. It didn't interfere with our combat training.

We also would fly to the other islands frequently for weekend flights to Hilo, to Barking Sands on Kauai. Those were our two favorite places to fly for weekends. It was a pretty loose operation in peacetime flying. In between though, we were intensely training.

BC: Could you talk a little bit more about that training? You had mentioned about some of the gunnery training.

PR: Yes.

BC: Maybe in a little bit more detail about the kind of training that you were involved in and what your expectations were. What were you told about the near future or the types of aircraft that you might be training to encounter?

PR: Well, we kind of worried about the war preparations from our squadron commanders. We didn't, we weren't assembled as a huge group and told by the [*Brigadier*] General Davidson anything, but [*First Lieutenant*] Lou Sanders, the squadron commander, I remember him saying, "Look, you guys, we're training for war. We're going to get in the war someday and we want to be in shape to be able to fight in this war, so I'm going to be working your butts off," which he did.

We did and we would go and do a lot of dog fighting. Do a lot of formation flying. That improved our skills a great deal, tight formation flying, where we'd fly loops and do Immelmans and do various acrobatic exercises, glued to the wing of the airplane leader. And what we call rat racing was another thing, where we would follow the leader and do whatever he did. Dive down and lots of times; this is where that buzzing came in.

And in our gunnery, we would tow a flag. They'd tow a banner with a roundel on it, a target. And we would be making passes and firing our guns at those targets and then come down and evaluate our accuracy because each ship had a different painted bullets, and so we knew which aircraft had hit the target and how many times it hit the target. We did a lot of that towing.

Occasionally the tow ship would get its tail shot [*up*] a little bit. A bullet hole here or there in the process.

And then the other form of gunnery was against ground targets where we had the bull's-eye and earthen embankments in back of it. We did a lot of that over near Bellows Field

And the third form was where you drop a bag of aluminum powder on the ocean and dive down to shoot at that target. We did some high-altitude, quite a bit of high-altitude training and in those days we had something that looked like a cigarette holder that we gripped in our teeth and we had a little control [*when*] we turned on the oxygen. So we had pure oxygen blowing against the back of your throat when you're at an altitude any time above 12,000 feet. And when you came down from one of those, invariably you'd have a sore throat from the cold oxygen burning the back of your throat.

That's about all the training that we did.

BC: Uh-huh. After the attack, could you briefly describe what your experience was? I know you went on to fly in the Pacific, in New Guinea for several years.

PR: Yes.

BC: Could you talk a little bit about that deployment? And were the squadrons reorganized and sent out to the Pacific?

PR: Yes.

BC: What exactly happened?

PR: I was getting a little unhappy because I felt that we were in the back part of the war. We're not getting involved in it. And [*Second Lieutenant*] George Welch felt the same way. So we both volunteered to go to New Guinea, to go overseas and we didn't know where we were going to end up, but somewhere in the Pacific. And there were some troop carriers coming through that were en route to New Guinea and we flew as passengers on these troop carriers. They were C-47s and in order to extend their range, because we'd fly all the way to Midway [*Island*] and to Canton [*Island*] and to Christmas Island and to Nandi in Fiji, and [*New*] Caledonia and then to

Brisbane. And then finally from Brisbane to Townsville, and Townsville up to Port Moresby. That was our route that was taken by all of these C-47s. And the whole interior of the fuselage was filled with these huge collapsible tanks, leaky tanks. Very leaky tanks. So the odor of gasoline was intense in that airplane when you were flying. And George Welch was a heavy smoker and he was sitting—we would be sitting—the only place to sit was on the fuel tanks. And we'd be sitting on the fuel [*tanks*] and he'd be smoking and scared the hell out of me! I'd tell him, "George, what are you trying to do? Blow us up?"

It took us about a week to get to Port Moresby.

BC: When did you go to Port Moresby?

PR: In April...

BC: April of '42.

PR: ...of 1942.

BC: And who were you assigned to and who did you fly with?

PR: I was assigned to the 8th Group, Pursuit Group, the 35th Pursuit Squadron. We were flying P-39s at that time at Port Moresby. And then we were transferred from Port Moresby to Milne Bay. And our major operation was to escort the troop carriers. At that time, the Japanese were almost overthrowing us, chasing us out of New Guinea. The Owen Stanley Mountain Range runs the whole chain, whole length of New Guinea. And the Japanese had sent patrols that actually had gone on the down slope, towards Port Moresby and towards Milne Bay, down on the east side. And we were getting quite desperate about it.

And an interesting little story in that respect was the Australian patrols were encountering these Japanese patrols. The Japanese patrols were very extended and they were very hungry. And the natives were not cooperating with them at all. And there wasn't much food available for them, so they were very, they were starved. Well, they attacked [*an Australian*] patrol. The lead patrol, [*(Japanese)*] the furthest patrol attacked the Australian

patrol. And the Australians, they had, their main food was bully beef, cans of bully beef. Well they didn't want to leave any food, for the Japs, so when they fled and left there, they bayoneted all the bully beef cans and all the food that was canned and destroyed the rest of the food. And they retreated down towards Port Moresby.

A new patrol was sent up a couple of days later to try to intercept these Japs and they found 'em all dead. They had died from food poisoning, from eating the contaminated beef, bully beef cans. And that was the furthest advance that the Japs had made over the Owen Stanley Mountain Range.

BC: Now did you fly any kind of support missions for the Australians or for the Americans that were...

PR: Well not for the Australians.

BC: Mm-hmm.

PR: By that time we had B-25s. We had B-26s first, which were starting to attack Rabaul and starting to attack Wewak. And now, the whole situation changed. We were pushing the Japs back. And we were trying to get control of what was called Markam Valley, which was a huge valley on the north side of New Guinea, where Finschhafen, and Nadzab and Dobodura, naming some of the towns up there in that valley, Markam Valley. We [*escorted*] troop carriers over there and they dropped paratroops. And then we also made a landing from the sea. For days we escorted the troop carriers over there. And finally they secured Nadzab and Dobodura and we went over there, we were able [*to land,*] they had scraped out a landing field for us in the Markam Valley and we landed in those fields and eventually established ourselves on the north coast of New Guinea.

BC: Now when did you return to the United States?

PR: I was there for two and a half years. So in late '43, I was sent back to the States for a bond tour and I was assigned to Secretary of War Patterson. And I flew with him around the country, giving talks, telling, stimulating people going to factories and places like that to tell the people the stories about the war.

BC: Had you been credited with any other aircraft destroyed by that time?

PR: Yes, yes.

BC: Could you talk about that for a second?

PR: I destroyed, I shot down a Tony [*Kawasaki Ki-61, fighter*], which was a Japanese fighter plane, just south of Rabaul. And I shot down a George [*Kawanishi NIK1-J or NIK2-J, fighter/interceptor*], was a radial engine fighter plane, over the Kyushu Island, southern island of Japan. I was credited with three aircraft.

BC: This was the George must have been in '45 when you came back. Is that right? When you were flying P-47s?

PR: I didn't understand that question.

BC: I was wondering when you had shot down the George.

PR: The George, I reversed myself there. The George I shot down south of Rabaul. And the Tony I shot down over the southern Kyushu Island.

BC: Oh, okay. So you, after returning to the States...

PR: After returning—yeah, I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit.

BC: Okay.

PR: Yeah. When I was in the States until January of 1945, at which time I came for the invasion of Saipan and subsequently, the invasion of Okinawa. We were stationed in Saipan in a place called Magicienne Bay, which we could look over and see Tinian, the island of Tinian. Tinian was where the B-29s were launched, and where the B-29 that was used to drop the first atomic bomb took off from. And we were on the slope of a hill looking down into Magicienne Bay, living in tents along the perimeter. And every morning, pre-dawn, the B-29s would be taking off and inevitably, every morning, one of them wouldn't make it and would explode in the bay and light up the

whole area there, waking us. They lost a lot of B-29s taking off from Tinian.

BC: So who were you flying with at that time and what type of aircraft?

PR: I was back again with the 7th Air Force. In New Guinea, I'd been with the 5th Air Force, and when I came back from the States, I was assigned to the 7th Air Force, excuse me. And I was back [*under*] the command of my old squadron commander, Lou Sanders, with whom I had been in combat on December 7. And that was at Saipan that I had joined them and then we continued on. Now we're equipped with the P-47N, the long-range P-47Ns and we were able to make very long missions. Eight, nine-hour missions in those aircraft and they carried a tremendous load.

During the time that we were in Okinawa, the kamikazes started to attack — our ships—[*We*] had been assembling ships in Okinawa for some time, preparing for the invasion of Kyushu. And these became a prime target for the kamikaze aircraft. So they would come down there early in the morning and dive in. I saw, time and again, I saw them dive into the ships and explode. And they were very successful. They were so successful that the Marine commander in charge of the whole area of Okinawa insisted that we go up, that the Army Air Corps fly its P-47s up and maintain patrol at night time and the early dawn over the island of Kyushu to suppress the Japanese aircraft, the kamikazes from taking off. These were hazardous missions because this is the time of the year when the weather was very bad. And we had, we lost quite a few airplanes. I volunteered for the first mission up there to see if we could do it. I told the Marine general that we were not night trained for flying and they had no airplanes available there that were capable of doing that. Navy didn't have any, Army Air Corps didn't have any either. And so there were few of us that had any night training because during the war we didn't do any night fighting. The only night training we had was when we had it in peacetime.

So I, being one of the more experienced and older pilots that had night training, I offered to take the first mission up there...

(Phone rings)

BC: Oh, I don't know.

(Phone rings)

BC: Sorry. Hello...

(Taping stops then resumes)

BC: Have him talk a little bit about the photographs.

PR: Okay, I will. But briefly I wanted to tell you the rest of this.

BC: Okay.

PR: So we loaded our aircraft with ten five-inch HVAR rockets. We had two 165-gallon tip tanks. And in these tip tanks we put what are called igniters. In other words, when the tip tank was almost empty, maybe ten gallons were left in it, when we dropped the tip tanks, when they would hit they would explode and there'd be a great, big explosion. No damage, but there'd be a big explosion. And we carried a 500-pound bomb plus our eight fifty caliber guns. So we were very heavily loaded and we went up there and we would spend the night up there, loitering around, hitting different targets, dropping and firing a rocket here, firing a rocket there at different air fields to [*keep*] the kamikazes on the ground.

I lost my wingman in the bad weather up there and came back again. We did that for a few missions and every time we did that, we'd lose a wingman, or we'd lose both of them. It was very dangerous.

(Conversation off-mike)

PR: Weather, this was the time of the year when the weather was very, very bad. And we had no radio aids to direct us back. It was all dead reckoning.

BC: Do you want to change the tape? Because I think we should spend a few minutes with this...

(Conversation off-mike)

END OF TAPE #2

TAPE #3

(Conversation off-mike)

BC: Okay, this particular photograph is—could you explain what that is and...

PR: Yes.

BC: This is not the aircraft. This is not even an aircraft from your squadron. Is that correct?

PR: No, this is my, this is the aircraft that I was flying on December 7.

BC: Right. But it—was it one of the aircraft from your squadron...

PR: Yes.

BC: ...from the 46th?

PR: It was one of our 46th [*Pursuit*] Squadron aircraft.

BC: Okay.

PR: And on the tail there is an indication of what squadron it is from. I'm not sure where it shows it. Maybe on the tail somewhere.

BC: Well, it's right here.

PR: Yeah.

BC: This...

PR: Forty-eight.

BC: Forty-eight.

PR: Yeah.

BC: And then 15th Pursuit Group.

PR: Yeah, the forty-eight, I think is the aircraft number and it does not designate the squadron.

BC: Right. Right.

[Note: Philip Rasmussen will now describe various points of interest in some photographs that he has with the interviewers.]

PR: This shows the damage that was done by a Japanese Zero on December 7. It shows two twenty-millimeter explosive cannon. You can see the two holes here and here. And what those cannons did are shown in this aircraft here. This shows the shrapnel holes plus 7.7 millimeter holes that are on the other side of the aircraft, from the entry of the twenty-millimeter cannon.

BC: These are all the holes, right around here?

PR: Yes.

BC: And probably the shrapnel holes and the exit holes...

PR: Yes.

BC: ...twenty millimeter.

PR: Yeah, they were both. The rounder holes are the bullet holes. The slash holes are cut holes of shrapnel.

(Conversation off-mike)

PR: This shows the radio compartment and in those days, we had huge radios. They were right in the back of the pilot. And they absorbed most of the

shards from the twenty-millimeter shell. Had these not been there, I was the next one to get 'em. In other words, they absorbed the [*shrapnel*.]

This shows a twenty-millimeter hole here and it shows bullets along the cockpit, going up here. That's when my canopy was shot off.

In this picture, I'm showing the severed rudder cable and you can see the broken hydraulic line, the two ends of the hydraulic line, which left me without rudder control and without hydraulics. That meant that I had no brakes. And incapable of enough hydraulic pressure to operate all the things that the hydraulics operated.

This is the last P-36 in the world that the U.S. Air Force Museum found and they reconstructed it and put the same numbers on the [*plane*] as were on the airplane that I flew on December 7. Exact replica of it. It shows me in my pajamas getting into the cockpit. I'm looking up for [*Japanese*] aircraft that may be threatening me before I enter the cockpit.

Here's a side scene of the same airplane at the Air Force Museum.

This is taken by the Japanese during the attack. And it shows the area that here where my aircraft was located. The rest of the aircraft were burning, as you can see there. And also you can see some aircraft that are coming into attack, some Japanese aircraft are coming in attack. Then there are two that have completed their attack and are leaving the scene. I taxied the aircraft from here over to an earthen revetment where we loaded it with ammunition.

Now I'm doing something more peaceful. These days I teach watercolor. And this is one of my students took a picture of me after I done a demonstration.

Bob Scullion (BS): Can I bring you back to the recognition training? You made an interesting comment concerning the navy brethren at the time about your aircraft identification problems. Apparently you did not have aircraft identification...

PR: You mean...

BS: ...prior to December 7?

PR: You're talking about the buzz numbers?

BS: No. Actually identifying the Japanese aircraft that were attacking you. You made earlier reference to you weren't quite sure what aircraft you were dealing with when you took off and apparently some other branch of the services apparently had some information that would've been helpful. Is that true or not? You made a comment the navy, that the navy had information that might've been helpful on December 7.

PR: Well, through the years, through the last perhaps fifteen years, I've been interviewed occasionally and I've frequently been asked the question, which is rather a common thing, apparently—do I, did I think that Roosevelt knew about the attack? And my—I'm always reluctant to answer that question because I felt it had serious consequences. But I always had a gut feeling that somebody up there in control knew about it, knew about this attack. It just didn't, things didn't look right to me, the fact that they would have surprised us like this when we had such good intelligence. We knew that we had good intelligence. We had broken their code. We knew that. But yet we were not warned in any way about what happened.

BC: Were you actually aware that codes had been broken?

PR: Yes.

BC: Did you have knowledge of that at that time?

PR: [*No.*]

BC: How did that come about?

PR: I don't know the circumstances of it. We knew that they had broken the code. I think it was...well...come to think of it, it was right, we knew after, shortly afterwards that they had broken the code. Shortly after the war started. But we didn't know to what extent the code had been broken.

BC: Well, Bill's question specifically was about the types of aircraft, about the recognition training that you had been given...

PR: Yes.

BC: ...to identify enemy aircraft. And you had mentioned that the navy, you thought that the navy had better intelligence about the aircraft types that were available to the Japanese and how you learned that recognition system.

PR: Well we first, my first was by word of mouth. We heard from the Flying Tigers about the aircraft that they had intercepted. And particularly the characteristics of the Zero and how not to tangle with a Zero. Hit it and keep going. Don't try to turn with it. It was a very maneuverable aircraft. It had very good firepower. It was twenty-millimeter cannon. And the—I would say perhaps three months after the war started, we started to get these little descriptive pamphlets, showing us the other types of Japanese aircraft. We had shot down some Vals and some different type of other dive-bomber and a torpedo bomber, so we were able to get that information. But up until then, we didn't know what type they were. We knew they either had their fixed gear or they had retracted gear, and that's about all that we knew about 'em. We had limited knowledge. And but of course that knowledge became very intense after that period of time.

BC: Anything else?

(Conversation off-mike)

BC: Okay. I think we'll conclude and I want to thank you very much on behalf of the National Park Service and the country, because I know, we, the Park Service, had not done this with you before. And this is a great opportunity to be able to sit and talk with you about your personal experiences and...

PR: I'm glad to be able to provide my experiences.

BC: Well, we appreciate it very much.

PR: I'm glad to be around to do it!

BC: We're very glad that you're around to do it too! Thank you again.

PR: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW