

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
BURT S. AVEDON
Pilot, Navy, World War II & Korean War.

2001

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Avedon, Burt S., (1923-). Oral History Interview, 2001.
User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Videorecording: 1 video cassette (ca. 90 min.)

Abstract

Burt Avedon, a New York native, discusses his service as a pilot for the U.S. Navy during World War II and the Korean War, his involvement in the Israeli War of 1967 and the development of “Top Gun” school. Avedon talks about learning to fly by the age of twelve while a military school student and subsequently joining the American Volunteer Group (AVG) in China in 1941. After returning from China, Avedon describes joining the Navy, completing naval flight training, and moving among different aircraft carriers during World War II. He recalls several stories of putting flight instructors to the test when they didn’t know about his flying experience. Avedon provides detailed descriptions of many types of aircraft including F4U Corsairs, F6Fs Hellcats, F9s Cougars, F8Fs Bearcats and his experience having to ditch a plane in the water. Avedon discusses the conditions and quality of the Japanese pilots and criticizes the accuracy of the movie “Pearl Harbor” (2001). He expresses second thoughts about killing others and describes himself and others as political pawns in wartime. Avedon describes one incident that got him in trouble which resulted in the punishment of towing targets for anti-aircraft batteries and several times his aircraft was shot up and he was forced to land. As a member of the active reserve, Avedon was called back for service during the Korean War flying around 300 missions. Upon returning from Korea, Avedon describes serving in Europe and his involvement in the Israeli war of 1967. He describes completing test pilot school, conducting tests and compares other airplanes to the U.S. models. Avedon discusses the situation that led to the formation of “Top Gun” school, his involvement in the development of that program’s syllabus and retiring in 1972 after thirty years of service. Avedon mentions his graduation from Harvard Business School in 1950 and working for a company that was bought by Lands’ End that brought him to Madison (Wisconsin). During the 50th anniversary of D-Day, Avedon describes his participation in an NBC supported dogfight re-enactment. He recalls volunteering for Vietnam, but not being allowed to go and explains why he doesn’t attend reunions.

Biographical Sketch

Avedon (1923-) served with the American Volunteer Group in China before joining the Navy . Avedon served for 30 years as a pilot in the Navy encompassing World War II, Korean War, and the Cold War before retiring in 1972. He graduated from Harvard Business School and works for Lands’ End.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, 2002.
Transcription edited by Hannah Gray & John McNally, 2007.

Burt Avedon: -- right outside of [?], and raised in California.

Dr. James McIntosh: Oh, when was that?

Burt: 1923, yeah.

Jim: What month?

Burt: April 15th.

Jim: Oh, you're older than I am. September. [Laugh.]

Burt: Yeah, you interesting younger guys.

Jim: Yes, right. And so what were you doing when you first heard about the Pearl Harbor attack?

Burt: I was in China.

Jim: Okay. Now we have to back up. You were in China as a civilian?

Burt: No, I'd volunteered to join the American Volunteer Group in China. Let me quickly backdate you. Because what I basically did was when I – I was sent to a military school right out of grade school, because I was not a very good guy and I was a guy who had an uncontrollable temper –

Jim: Oh, my!

Burt: -- and drove my parents nuts, and I was always in trouble, so they sent me to military school. I learned to fly in military school. I joined up for the Aero Club. You know, for five bucks a month you could get all the flying time that you want and you could get instruction. That's how I learned to fly. I got my license when I was twelve.

Jim: Twelve!

Burt: Yeah. That was the Department of Commerce –

Jim: How was that possible?

Burt: Oh, it was easy, because my uncle was a governor –

Jim: Of California?

Burt: No, he was the governor of Florida. Part of my family was Florida, part of my family was California. And I was born in New York. So. But that doesn't have

anything to do with anything. I was a cross-the-U.S.-er. And so having had my license, I became – as well as educating myself – I was becoming an airport bum. You know.

Jim: At twelve?

Burt: Yeah. Well, I got a waiver from the Department of Commerce, 'cause I'd soloed at twelve. And basically that's the background. I – My father used to have to take me to the airport every weekend, and I'd watch the airplanes and I could tell all the flight characteristics of each airplane: what it was, who it was, etc. And so I had already worked my way up – I had over six-hundred hours as a civilian when I was sixteen, so.

Jim: Flying what, primarily?

Burt: Anything I could fly. Anything anybody would give – single, multi, whatever.

Jim: Multi? They allowed you to get into a multi-engine aircraft?

Burt: They did. I qualified as a multi-engine pilot and got my instrument ratings.

Jim: At sixteen?

Burt: At sixteen.

Jim: That's incredible!

Burt: Well, it isn't incredible, because I had already been in the airplanes when I was a kid.

Jim: I'll be damned!

Burt: It was sort of a very singular focus, and that's basically how it all happened. And I volunteered for the American Volunteer Group. The American Volunteer Group were all military.

Jim: Now don't go too fast here. Now how did you find out about that? How was it publicized?

Burt: I heard about it – Every guy that you ever knew, you know – airport information, gossip circulated all the time. And so basically I had heard about the group, and I heard Clair Chinault was running it, and he wouldn't accept any civilians – he wanted all army pilots or Navy pilot. And so I was the brash young kid who said, "What the hell? I have more hours than most of those guys anyway."

Jim: Sure.

Burt: I went over there with the group on November 15. I didn't get very far, I got into Ru –

Jim: Which year please?

Burt: 1941.

Jim: '41.

Burt: Yeah. But you have to understand: November 15, 1941 was before Pearl Harbor.

Jim: Well, I understand, yes. You just came over as a civilian.

Burt: As a civilian. Mercenary. I had to get checked out in military aircraft, military tactics, P-40s, to learn how to fly that nose-heavy, under-powered [laughs] –

Jim: Yeah, I've talked to a lot of guys who flown that. They say you're a busy pilot, flying that thing.

Burt: Yeah, you were. It didn't want to fly – it was a brick. It did everything not to fly. And it loved to tip up on its prop, because it was so nose-heavy. Anyway, I was just getting checked out in Ragoon at their school – they had a little training school, where they trained some Chinese pilots, who were hopeless, and put them in a piece of machinery: they didn't know what they were doing. We have an advantage – we grew up with machines.

Jim: Right. Most American boys do.

Burt: Yeah, we worked on our own cars, you know, we build our own stuff, and, you know, I worked with all the mechanics and I knew flight characteristics and I knew stall levels and, you know, all of that stuff. It became native. And when you're a kid, you absorb that like a sponge.

Jim: I have to ask you now: did they agree to take you before you left the United States or did you have to get approval here before you got there?

Burt: Well, actually I had to get approval here, but they said you're going to pay your own expenses and you're going to go over, because you're an experiment. You're not our prime candidate.

Jim: And you were sixteen when you arrived there?

Burt: Yeah, and I had saved all my money – I had it in the bank, and, you know, so it wasn't that difficult a thing to do. And I just got through – didn't even finish the flight training when December 7th happened, as you know. And it had actually already happened, and they didn't know what the hell to do, you know, where they were going to go, whether the group was going to be disbanded. Whether the group was going to continue. Whether it would be sanctioned, unsanctioned. And that

wasn't resolved until almost July. But I had already headed back, because lot of the guys basically said they weren't going to be folded into the 14th Air Force.

Jim: They didn't want to do that?

Burt: No. Some of the guys took it – The guy who was the recruiting officer was really – and he should remain nameless – was a real SOB. He looked down his nose at the whole group, and he would allow them to join, rejoin. And of course it set the bad environment for most of the guys. Most of these guys --

Jim: Had you known some of these people?

Burt: Yeah, I had.

Jim: You had?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: And was that -- Did you get into combat?

Burt: No, I did not. I was still back. It's an interesting vignette. When I came back, my family were Navy, so naturally I went into the Navy aspect of it. Went through naval flight training. But the first flight – I'll never forget this – I was at the naval air station in Grand Prairie, Texas. 1942 going through primary training.

Jim: In Estermann?

Burt: In Estermann. And I get up with the instructor – he had not read my file, didn't know that I had ever flown before. And he was determined that he was going to see if I, you know, if I was chicken or not chicken. And we got up to about 3000 feet and he'd done a few snap rolls, slow rolls. And he rolled it over on its back and, of course, it quit, you know, because it was a straight-forward carburetor. It wasn't a down-draft carburetor, and when you turn it on its back, it's going to quit. So then he tapped his head, and said, "It's yours."

Jim: Upside-down?

Burt: Upside-down. He was really –

Jim: That's a shitty thing to do.

Burt: Naw. He was a smart ass. So I just left it upside down. And I left it upside down, went down to 2000, 1500, 1000, 500. And I've still got it upside down. And I know he's just going to – I can see his face beginning to grimace a little bit. So I, you know, went down to 250 feet, and then we go down to 200 feet, and then we go down to 150 feet, and then I rolled it over and landed it – dead stick. 'Cause I had the field spotted and I knew what the glide ratio was. And he said, "You've flown before!" And I said, "Yes, sir, go look in my file."

Jim: Oh, that's terrific! That's terrific!

Burt: Anyway. Let me tell you a cute primary training story. I had an instructor whose nickname was Thirsty. And I found out why his nickname was Thirsty. 'Cause he was an alcoholic of the worst kind. And every time he got up he was scared to death of airplanes. And, you know, he went through phases – but one time he came out to the aircraft, and of course the steersman has a bucket seat and you sit on your parachute, and that's basically what you do. And he didn't have his chute on. So he climbed in the forward cockpit, and of course he sinks right to here. And he's looking around. And he says, "There's something wrong with the seat. There's something wrong with this seat – I got it full up, and I can't see above the cockpit cow." And I said, "Sir. You don't have your chute on." "What?" I said, "Sir, you don't have your chute on." "The hell I don't!" Well, it took me a while to convince him, but he just climbed right out of there and showed up about fifteen minutes later with his chute on.

Jim: Oh, boy!

Burt: He was a nice enough guy. When we went from stage to stage, he took you to the Oak Club – let you come into the Oak Club and have a drink with him. But it wasn't one: it was about five martinis.

Jim: Right.

Burt: Anyway, go ahead – I got you off track.

Jim: So you're eighteen years old now. Being born in '23, and in the fall of '41, you're eighteen years old. And this is after Pearl Harbor now, so –

Burt: I came back –

Jim: When did you get into the Navy?

Burt: In July of 1942.

Jim: So we're coming up to nineteen years of age, okay.

Burt: I would have gotten my – My mother signed all the waivers anyway. She signed the waivers for me to go overseas.

Jim: So after primary, where did you go?

Burt: I went through the whole Navy curriculum in six months, because I'd had so much flight time. And I got fighters, and I got carrier-qualified, and went out to VF-6. You know, into combat.

Jim: Yeah. Which was the carrier?

Burt: Essex.

Jim: Just thinking about the Essex now, where it's been and who I've interviewed from the Essex.

Burt: Well, as a matter of fact, you don't stay on a carrier too long. You stay within a group. The air group moves. The carrier is – You could get moved, and we did get moved. We were on the Yorktown –

Jim: You were on several carriers, you mean?

Burt: Yeah, absolutely. I was on the Essex, the Yorktown, the Enterprise and a night-fighter squadron. So. Your group moves around and gets disbanded, reformed as a different air group, you know. Then they also did – Towards the end of the war, they basically took you as a combat team leader and sent you back to pick up six or seven guys, or you trained as a combat team, and you were the combat team leader, and then the team moved out as a unit. So within the particular air group, instead of using replacement pilots per se, that combat team system was installed. And you'd come back to the United States, you'd train with these guys for about four weeks, five weeks, and then you'd go on back out.

Jim: And you'd be part of a group squadron?

Burt: You'd be part of a squadron.

Jim: Did you just fly fighters? Starting with a F4F and moving right up?

Burt: I flew F4U Corsairs, I flew F6Fs, I flew Wildcats as well.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Burt: F-4F?

Jim: Yeah.

Burt: Little Wildcats.

Jim: Yeah, now the Wildcat grew into the Hellcat. Was there a great improvement?

Burt: We used to call it the Grumman iron works.

Jim: The old one?

Burt: No. The F6F was a piece of Grumman iron, 'cause it was basically very heavy for what it was. Not very maneuverable. The Wildcat was more maneuverable but underpowered as well.

Jim: That was the thing that the new one had was more power.

Burt: Much more power. It had an R1815 in it versus a 1215. And you had – Then you went up to 2250, and toward the end of the war there were F4U Corsairs with R2850.

Jim: The Hellcats and the Corsairs, I think, were the ones that destroyed the majority of Japanese aircraft.

Burt: Well, you have to understand: most of the Corsairs were unsuccessful aboard carriers when they were first initiated. They had problems with oleo-struts. They would bounce when they hit the deck too much, and, as you know, the “V”, weighing the gull wing, was to protect the big prop from the big engine. And that’s why it was there, and of course if you bounced you plopped right into the deck –

Jim: -- and that was the end of that.

Burt: -- you had a sudden stop, and the engine had to be replaced, and so forth. So they took them off carriers and gave them to the marines and said, you know, “Til we get this thing straightened out –

Jim: Take them out of line. And the marines loved them there.

Burt: Oh, yeah. Great airplane. Well, it’s difficult to fly that thing aboard a carrier, ‘cause you had a boiler there out in front of you. You had no visibility, and –

Jim: You couldn’t see the deck until you touched down, right?

Burt: Basically. You had your head out the window.

Jim: There’s a guy named Russ Sullivan –

Burt: --out the cockpit, because --

Jim: That’s what he said. Russ Sullivan said, “I came in like at an angle. And just at the last second I straightened it out.” It was so goddamn hard to see where you were going.

Burt: Right. You had to. It’s like having a nice boiler right out in front of you, that goes forever.

Jim: You feel like Lindbergh. [Laugh.] Out the side window.

Burt: You had to bring it aboard at 85 or 90 knots, and you got your head out the window and your goggles are not –

Jim: From what I read, the Japanese were more terrified of that plane than of any other fighter. Was there any reason for that?

Burt: Yeah, basically because you could – because of that dihedral [formed by having two plane faces: dihedral angle] on the wing, you could pull out left and right almost equally. In combat. Whereas the F6F Hellcat wanted to pull out to the right. You were overcoming torque if you pulled out to the left. So basically this pulled out almost equally to the left and right, so it had far greater maneuverability. You had more speed, of course, and if you shoved over in a dive, you'd leave the Japanese behind. Then you could bring it back up and –

Jim: Your position [?]?

Burt: Yeah, because you have inertial energy, which is what you don't have –

Jim: Oh, that's right. In the [?]

Burt: Oh, absolutely.

Jim: That's a good point – hadn't heard of that before.

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: Something about the noise it made. [Burt laughs.] Something about the noise that aircraft made apparently terrified the Japanese. Is that --?

Burt: Well, it had a whistle to it.

Jim: A whistle to it?

Burt: Because the air scoop in front.

Jim: Must have created that sound.

Burt: It did.

Jim: So when your first carrier group – your first group got to the carrier: that was the Essex?

Burt: Yes.

Jim: Where was that at and when?

Burt: Well, this is just pre-Guam. Pre-the invasion of Guam. We went Guam, Ulithy, Anawetok. Then from Anawetok into the Philippines. Philippines into Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima into – Then we started to raid Japan per se.

Jim: Your first combat mission – tell me about that. First air combat – where was that?

Burt: [Laughs.] There's a funny vignette about this. We had a guy in the squadron, and his name was Radar Rukin. Why did we call him Radar? Because when we were

ashore, he could pick up anything. We used to send him down on the street corner to pick up all the girls. And Radar was really true to his name. He was – He had a 100% hit rate. I mean, there were no nulls in his radar at all. He was singularly ugly. So that disarmed the women. So he could approach them, and they felt non-threatened. Little did they know. Anyway, the first mission that we went on, which was what they usually do, is strafing, you know, for – just to get you to feel that you had control of the aircraft. You strafed one of the dead islands somewhere along the way that had maybe a few aircraft, and that was basically what you did. But of course you were still nervous and anxious and so forth.

Jim: Exactly. Wondering how it was going to turn out.

Burt: So the reason I mentioned Radar is he got back to the carrier early. He went down to the ship store and bought boxer shorts for all the guys and strung them in the ready room. And worked out with the combat intelligence officer. They have all the pilots report to the ready room and strip. Anyway, that's basically what happened. I can remember my knees knocking like hell.

Jim: Sure.

Burt: I think probably the worse time I ever had was when I was in the shower and all lathered up. I went in, and General Quarters sounded – and all pilots report to the ready room, and I'm just soaked with soap, and you got like ten or fifteen seconds before the water-tight doors are going to close. So basically, I went up, threw my flight suit on with all the lather and everything else and run up to the ready room, and they said, "Get in that F6F of yours! You're on combat air patrol now!" So they launched me from the deck, and my knees were shaking like nobody's business. Because I wasn't mentally prepared for anything. And, ah, but thank god I had CAP [Combat Air Patrol], and we had no problems that day. Combat Air Patrol flies over the air group to intercept incoming Japanese aircraft.

Jim: In fact, the group was diving –

Burt: Yeah, and every other day you usually had a combat air patrol. So you'd have one strike mission one day, and you had a combat air patrol the next. So you alternated like that. So that basically was –

Jim: So do you run into Japanese some of these times?

Burt: Yeah, we do.

Jim: And what's that like?

Burt: Well, what we basically did the first time is we had position on them, because we were up sun, and we had altitude, and you have the advantage immediately. When you've got the sun behind your back and you've got the altitude, and of course your combat information centers giving you all the vectors.

Jim: Right.

Burt: And that gives you a tremendous advantage. And all you're going to do is make an overhead pass, and then you're going to come back up and make an underpass and move away, because by that time you've probably used a good two-thirds of your ammunition.

Jim: You fought in groups of four?

Burt: We originally fought in groups of four. And then Jimmy Thatch created what was called the Thatch weave. And Jimmy was a good friend. He was kind of a sea pappy for me. And we used to basically criss-cross, and your wingman had to cover your rear end. Except one time my wingman – I was shooting a guy down, and the wingman moved in front of me [laughs]. He almost got it, but I pulled my thumb off the button.

Jim: Was it easy to shoot them down once you got them in your sights?

Burt: Not really. They were far more maneuverable than you were.

Jim: Even though they weren't protected well.

Burt: No. The one advantage you had was that they had no wing tanks. No tanks that were self-saving. So if hit them, they blew up. And that was the real advantage.

Jim: No parachute either.

Burt: No parachute in many cases.

Jim: Strange.

Burt: Well, by the time we got – After the Mariannas turkey shoot, there weren't really any good Japanese pilots left. And it was really duck shooting at that stage.

Jim: That was one of the critical mistakes the Japanese made, is not bringing back their experienced pilots from Pearl Harbor and putting them in training. These guys just went on fighting the war. They had no thought of that, you know – And most guys kept on, quality pilots, you know, continuing to produce. But they never did that.

Burt: No they never did that. And they didn't sustain very many losses – Did you see the movie "Pearl Harbor"? Well, that was very theatrical, but not very true. Only two B-40s did get off the ground, but they didn't see anything. Basically, the Japanese pilots – There were some who were excellent, but most of them were maybe kids with maybe two-three hundred hours.

Jim: Very few with flight time.

Burt: They had very little flight time, very little combat experience. You know, if they got through the first one – They used to say to us the same thing: if you get through your first five missions, you're going to be in good shape.

Jim: So did that work out for you?

Burt: Yeah. That's why I'm here!

Jim: Yeah, right. Okay. So how many opportunities did you get to shoot down Japanese planes?

Burt: Well, I have thirteen "victories." When it became politically inexpedient to call them "kills", why, we changed the nomenclature to "victories." And you know, funny – when you're young it seems so black and white: they're the bad guys, you're the good guys. But then, as you get older, you realize that you've killed somebody. And they had a family, and they had kids, and they had a wife, and they had parents. And you begin to have second thoughts about all the things you did.

Jim: That's called growing up.

Burt: Yeah, it is called growing up. And the reason I never talk about this – and I don't know why I'm doing this now, because I had a rule that I never would, because I never go back to reunions, I never go back to any of that stuff. 'Cause basically, I think of the guys who are not there. And that affects me more than anything else. I don't want to make money or do anything off of the fact – You know, they didn't get a chance to have kids or family or whatever. And why should I exploit that? I have a very hard time with that. And so I just said: forget it. 'Cause I went to one. I said, "I can't do this. Can't do this." And it is not "good guys-bad guys." I mean, we were all political pawns, being told what to do. And we believed in what we were doing.

Jim: Everybody did. Both sides.

Burt: Sure. No question both sides did.

Jim: So you stayed on the Essex how long roughly?

Burt: Three-month tour. The you go to R&R, and you come back.

Jim: Usually that was where?

Burt: Barber's Point, Hawaii.

Jim: Yeah, I've been there. On my way home. When I went to Korea.

Burt: Really?

Jim: Yeah, it was my first stop, Barber's Point.

Burt: Yeah, we got in real trouble. My wingman and I. We went to North Island to the Oak Club and had a little too much to drink.

Jim: Sure.

Burt: You know the mule engines they have over there for moving the ammo trains and all that? We managed to get them started. [Laughs.]

Jim: Jesus! They probably didn't even cashier [dismiss] you.

Burt: No, as a matter of fact, they said when we went up before captain's mast the next morning – they said you got two choices, both of which are terrible. And you guys deserve whatever you're going to get. The fact that you're seasoned combat pilots – we sort of not going to throw the book at you. They said, you're going to get the chance to tow targets.

Jim: Oh, boy!

Burt: For anti-aircraft batteries and for new carriers that are coming out that need some gunnery practice. So at 04.30 in the morning, here's where you report. And you got two F6Fs and you're going to drag your stuff from behind. And Ed and I reported at 4:30 in the morning, got our briefing – 5:15 we took off, just at dawn. And the first time we did it, we reported in to anti-aircraft batteries. Over the island, you know, shore-based. And we reported in to the range officer and the battery officer, and he said, "Permission to fire, sighting-in shot." "Permission granted." So Ed was first. They fired a sighting-in shot that went just by his window and exploded about 300 yards over him. And he got on the VHF and he said, "Sir. Would you tell these boys I'm pulling this thing, not pushing it?" So we went through that day, and we had the next morning. Ed had a – He was more irreverent than I was. Anyway, we did that for the next two or three days, and the next – four or five days later, we had a carrier, who was coming out on its shake-down cruise and going to report into Fifth Fleet. And we towed down the port side and we towed down the starboard side, and they threw everything at it they could -- And they weren't coming anywhere near it.

Jim: What was the target – a balloon or –

Burt: No, it's like – it's really a tube. It's like a wind-sock. You tow it 300 yards behind you.

Jim: So it had some width to it?

Burt: It has a lot of width to it, etc. But you can tell when it's been hit. It's like being hit – And we'd look at each, and check each other's targets. And this finally got to the point of being absolutely ridiculous.

Jim: They couldn't hit anything.

- Burt: So Ed said, “Can I speak to the combat intelligence officer or the gunnery officer on board?” And they said, “Just a minute – we’ll get him on the VHF.” So they – The gunnery officer reports and he says, “What can I do for you?” Ed said, “Well, sir, if you can turn that carrier into the wind, we’ll land this thing on the deck, and you can beat it to death with swabs.” Well, our duty got extended another week.
- Jim: That wasn’t well received?
- Burt: That wasn’t well received, ‘cause when they reported that information back to command, we were in trouble – we were in deep trouble. And they said, “Are you guys ever going to get off tow duty?” I said, “Well, one of these days if we keep our mouths shut, we will.” Anyway, just a little vignette of funny things that happened.
- Jim: You were on the Yorktown when it was damaged?
- Burt: Yeah. The Yorktown II, actually.
- Jim: Oh. Not the original. Tell us about that.
- Burt: In the – I was flying an F6, and it was all shot up, and that scenery footage, where the aircraft breaks in two, and I go into the [unintelligible] – that was me.
- Jim: Oh, really??
- Burt: Yeah. And what --
- Jim: Really?
- Burt: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: You mean in the official film. Not from the –
- Burt: Yeah, from the official film.
- Jim: Yeah, the one you see all the time when they do old movies.
- Burt: Yeah, that’s it. What happened is –
- Jim: The ship broke in half.
- Burt: Yeah, right behind the armor plate. That was a weak spot on the aircraft. The technical representatives of Grumman looked at the footage and said, oh – What happened was when they originally done the aircraft, the stringers did not calculate for the additional weight of the armor plate. And so that was a point of weakness. When you hard-landed and you had no flaps and you not supposed to come aboard –

you're supposed to ditch in the water. I had an aversion to water. Though I ditched once in the water.

Jim: You did?

Burt: One of the reasons for that was basically is that the LSO [Landing Signal Officer] – I said I got my gear down, guys, and I can't get it back up: I've got no hydraulics. So they said, okay, you can bring it aboard. And I came aboard fast, because I didn't have any flaps. I had a quarter flaps instead of full flaps. So I'm coming aboard at 95-100 knots –

Jim: Instead of 80.

Burt: Yeah. And that's enough to just put extra stress on the airplane.

Jim: Well, that's an impressive sequence, hitting that island.

Burt: Yeah. And this tooth went out from the gunsight. And, you know, the gunsight had a rubber pad on it.

Jim: I don't remember that.

Burt: Yeah, it has a rubber pad on the gunsight, and wham! You know, this whole side of the face – whoosh! Took out a tooth. And I went down to sick bay – Oh, basically they told me I had no right to come aboard, but I said, wait a minute --Wheels down, I go in the water, I'm a dead man. And you gave me permission –

Jim: Flip you.

Burt: Flip you right away, and there's no way I'm gonna get out of that airplane. So, they said yeah, you're right. So basically in the hearing, which they have, you know, the accident hearing –

Jim: Every time you have an accident, you have a hearing?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: So on the Yorktown was that any different than it was on the Essex?

Burt: It's all the same thing. They're all CVEs [Escort Carrier?] or CVs, right, yeah.

Jim: The Enterprise was a little newer?

Burt: She was a little newer, and the first night-fighter group was aboard.

Jim: Oh, really? What did they fly?

Burt: F6s with a radome [radar dome?].

Jim: Oh, I see.

Burt: You know Butch O'Hare was killed on the first night flight in a Wildcat. Yeah, he was probably shot down by one of his own airplane, by one of his own aircraft.

Jim: Oh, that was early, early in the war. Flying at night, that's it. Was the man experienced?

Burt: No, not at all.

Jim: Jesus! So that was a bad scene.

Burt: But there were, as you know, as everybody you've probably talked to told you, that there were tons of accidents of that nature.

Jim: But the opportunity of a carrier deck from the states is just enormous. There are so many people involved that could make everything go sour in a hurry. It's almost impossible not to have accidents.

Burt: Well, I progressed up through Korea, flew F9F Panthers, and Cougars and Corsairs in transition to jets. And in Korea – you were probably in Korea?

Jim: Yeah, I was on a hospital ship.

Burt: Were you? I was in the Boxer. And our mission really was to support the marines, close air support. 'Cause the missions north of Rialu [?] were all F86s and all Air Force – we weren't allowed to go up there. Remember?

Jim: I didn't remember that, but I saw – The Navy was cut out of that.

Burt: Oh, yeah, we were told not to go up there. That was Air Force territory, and mind your own business. You stay down south. And you stay and do close air support for the marines, and that's basically what your mission is. Destroy targets. Bombs and rockets. And strafe.

Jim: At the end of World War II, you became a civilian?

Burt: I did become a civilian, and then I got called back for Korea.

Jim: Because you were in the active reserve? Or inactive?

Burt: Yes, active. I was flying out of the naval air station in Squantum, Massachusetts. And the Bridges of Toko Rhee film, the guy who talked as Brubaker was the squadron commander of that squadron.

Jim: That's a good flick – I've seen that movie many times.

Burt: It's very real.

Jim: It looked like it was. Well, we talking about the airplanes now as you progress in more – How was it like in a jet, for instance? Let's get through that one.

Burt: Well, you have much greater sink rates, you have slower reaction times, as far as the engine is concerned. And again, underpowered. The Panther and the Cougar –

Jim: The Panther or the F9?

Burt: Yeah, F9. It was underpowered. Talk to anybody that flew it. Then the Cougar came along, and that had more power and was much better. But then the FJs came along and all of that sort of stuff. And the Navy was always behind the Air Force in terms of development until McDonald-Douglas and the Navy developed the F4.

Jim: Then, of course, the Air Force stole it!

Burt: That's right. That was a great airplane.

Jim: Yeah, I've met a couple of guys who've done that and did two tours in Vietnam flying that plane.

Burt: Flying F4s. It was the backbone of the Air Force –

Jim: [?] airplane.

Burt: It really was. And it had the right power plants with J-47s and all of that sort of thing. It was just a very versatile form of aircraft. And when you realize that that aircraft at the time of Vietnam was almost twenty years old.

Jim: Right.

Burt: I mean, it's still active in a lot of Air Forces, and now, I think it became operational in – if I'm not too far wrong – in the early sixties.

Jim: Incredible. Almost forty years.

Burt: Yeah, it was so far ahead of its time that it was – Then of course the F-14s: I never flew them. I was aboard as a guest one time, and I watched them come aboard – they looked like a turkey. [Laugh.] With all the automated systems, you know, automatic compensators, it's just unbelievable. Then I did –

Jim: The man I was talking to just as you came into the museum flew a hundred missions in Vietnam.

Burt: In the Air Force?

Jim: Yeah, and he also did – flew in Korea, flying an – F84?

Burt: F84s?

Jim: Yeah, taking pictures.

Burt: Recon war.

Jim: Yeah, flying out of Japan and Korea. Long experience.

Burt: That was the terrible incongruity about Korea. That basically you could be in Japan and civilized, and everything was perfect, and tomorrow night you could be – your ass is grass. That's the thing that – It was a mind warp that was very difficult to adjust to.

Jim: Very often I think Vietnam was like that – you just barely survive in an ambush, and suddenly you'd come back to wherever you were and pick up the phone and talk to your wife at home.

Burt: Yeah, I know.

Jim: And you'd say, Hi, hon. I had a busy day. What's going on? Some asshole tried to shoot me.

Burt: Thank god he missed.

Jim: I mean it doesn't make sense.

Burt: No, it doesn't.

Jim: So, you know, down in Pensacola – you know, that beautiful museum they have there – they have an F8F, you know: the last propeller plane. Did you ever see that?

Burt: Oh, yeah. Huge, huge air plane. That's the R2850.

Jim: Is it?

Burt: Well, go and look at the Corsair – the F4U5. It had the same engine.

Jim: Oh, really!

Burt: That thing – the torque tab on the rudder was half the size of the rudder.

Jim: You'll have to explain that – I don't know what that means.

Burt: Well, to offset on takeoff the torque – the aircraft trying to rotate – you compensated with a tab on the rudder that would tend to auto-direct the airplane to a straight line. You know, the Corsair was called by all of us “the ensign eliminator,” “the widow-maker,” because it was a hairy airplane to fly.

Jim: And certainly to land, with that long –

Burt: So basically you get new kids into a Corsair, and the thing that you always warn them about is: apply the pressure, apply the throttle slowly, otherwise she's gonna get away from you and she's gonna want to rotate. And she rotates, you've lost it.

Jim: If you're close to the ground, it's all over.

Burt: It's all over. So if you slam that throttle on the fire wall on take-off, she's gonna – whoosh! Do this, and start -- Hello! Now, that airplane is not something that you toyed with. You had to have a lot of experience in my book to fly it. And I think everybody who flew it had a great deal of respect for the airplane. It's a great airplane, if you felt comfortable in it and once you got comfortable in it. You had a tremendous advantage in that airplane, because of its speed and diving ability. Yeah, it's the first airplane the Navy ever had or anybody ever had that went over 400 miles an hour straight and level. By the time they hung rocket racks on it, all the other stuff on it, you couldn't cruise it above 160. [Laughs.]

Jim: That'll slow them down, right.

Burt: Economical cruise, if you out 160 you were doing well.

Jim: When you fought in Korea, then you had to call back -- did they send you right over or did you have to do something?

Burt: I went through transition, and then I went over.

Jim: Big jets?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: Was that hard?

Burt: No.

Jim: Most guys I talked to said – I always assumed there would be a real problem. And airplanes are airplanes –

Burt: Airplanes are airplanes. They just had a faster sync rate on landing and a slower take-off rate until you get up enough speed and engine, and you could kick in and you could –

Jim: Then you had the advantage.

Burt: Then you had the advantage of speed, that's right.

Jim: So in Korea, then, you'd usually bull-doze, straight-hanging [?] –

Burt: Close air support, basically, targets, you know – aircraft on the ground. Anything we could find.

Jim: No opposition in the air?

Burt: Very little.

Jim: So it was the triple “A” [anti-aircraft artillery?] that was your problem.

Burt: Absolutely. And there was a lot of it, lot of it.

Jim: [?] plenty effective.

Burt: It was effective. It was all clustered, and you’d have to fly through the clusters. ‘Cause they knew very well what your target approaches were going to be.

Jim: Well, there so many valleys and things like that, you know. And so –

Burt: You’d fly down a valley – whoosh!

Jim: There was no question of where you were coming from.

Burt: No. None. It’s either that side or the other side, but it’s going to be –

Jim: And that gave the advantage to the guys on the ground.

Burt: No question.

Jim: I might have said in Vietnam this fellow I talked about mentioned that in reconnaissance at night they had to be careful because they’d get down in a valley, and the minute they passed a point, the lights would go up, and these flares would signal down to the other end of the valley that they’re coming. And so he said [they would fly] out as quickly, as fast as they could, because by the time they got to the end of the valley the triple “A” was right there to meet them.

Burt: Oh sure. Like a wall of it.

Jim: Yeah, so did a lot of the mates get shot down?

Burt: Yeah, and that’s one thing I never got used to. Coming back to the carrier, and the bunk below you – the guy isn’t there.

Jim: Did they pick any up?

Burt: Oh, yeah, often times. Actually they had a wonderful system. They had either destroyers and they had submarines on guard duty.

Jim: And you could radio in, before you were ready to hit –

Burt: Or your radioman could, if you were shot up pretty bad. And we had a doctrine that –

End of Side A, Tape 1

Burt: -- whichever guy had to ditch, that his wingman or somebody else in the squadron would stick around, circle and basically keep radioing your plane guards.

Jim: Yeah, you got a helicopter relief from this? They were overland not too far away from the DMZ?

Burt: That's right. And in WWII, of course, you didn't have helicopters. You had submarines and you had destroyers.

Jim: That service saved a lot of guys. Where was your base in Korea?

Burt: We operated – We were aboard ship. We always – Rest and Recreation was Japan. We were aboard ship all the time.

Jim: Which base did you use when you got back to Japan?

Burt: One up in – is it Okaida?

Jim: Okaida. Oh, that far north. And how many missions would you say you flew there?

Burt: In Korea, about 300 and something.

Jim: You'd fly every day?

Burt: Every day.

Jim: Four or five hours?

Burt: Yeah, your cycle time was a little than in World War II. Because in World War II, it took a hell of a lot of time to get to the target and a hell of a long time to get back. And, no, your cycle time increased, and now your cycle time is an hour-and-a-half, instead of three or four. And sometimes it's 45 minutes to an hour. It's kind of like the Israeli Air Force, you know – they just get off and get back in twenty minutes. They're off and back in twenty minutes. [Laugh.]

Jim: Yeah, it's really strange, how quick it can be.

[PAUSE]

Burt: Went back, and then I went through test pilot school at Pawtucket River, Maryland.

Jim: Oh, they never let you out again?

Burt: No. I didn't want to get out again.

Jim: Oh, you wanted to make it a career?

Burt: Hell, I'd spent half of my life doing it. So I went to Packs River – it's in Maryland, outside of Washington, D.C., about sixty miles.

Jim: And what was there?

Burt: Test pilot school.

Jim: Oh, what's this like?

Burt: It's tough. You go through all the test pilot procedures, you qualify as a test pilot – there're tons of disciplines that you have to learn. You get more into the fundamentals of aeronautical engineering, and you have a bunch of ground school courses that you have to pass. Very difficult. And then you have all the flying that you have to do in different aircraft.

Jim: So each day you might have a totally different aircraft?

Burt: Yep. And you'd have the manual the night before.

Jim: Study like hell?

Burt: Study like hell. [Laugh.] Where's the door? I mean, how do I punch out of this?

Jim: Right. That would be a good one. Chapter 3 is important.

Burt: Read that. That's –

Jim: That's difficult, by the way. Picking an aircraft you'd never laid eyes on. And they figured –

Burt: Well, what we all used to do is taxi on the ground, then when we got them up in the air, we basically would do our procedures – landing on clouds, doing all those kinds of things to determine their sync rates, idiosyncrasies –

Jim: It was a standard discipline, in other words –

Burt: Oh, yeah.

Jim: That means you went from one to two to three.

Burt: Checklists. That's what you do.

Jim: Right, and so when you're satisfied you've got the ship maneuvered on the ground to everyone's satisfaction. And then, pick it up and –

Burt: Well, you were videotaped anyhow, all the time anyway – on the ground there was direct communication between you and the – But it was visual communication.

Jim: Did they wire [?] you too?

Burt: Oh, yeah. Oh, hell, yeah. They sent six of us out to do some laser test work out at Channel Lake, which was kind of a secret base, which is now no longer – Secret 'cause that's where Top Gun is.

Jim: Right. Now laser work – you're talking about direction finding for –

Burt: Laser bombs – smart bombs. That kind of thing. And they had, you know – They were testing a lot of different weaponry, new weaponry. They wanted actual pilots to use the weaponry.

Jim: So did you have a chance to fly some F4s there?

Burt: Yeah. I had flown F4s before anyway.

Jim: Is there anything you haven't flown.

Burt: Not a lot. I haven't flown F14s or F18s or F16s. That's another story. That basically was what we did. And then I came back to the air group and they were forming Top Gun out there in California, at Miramar, because of the loss ratio in Vietnam of Mig21s versus F4s.

Jim: Were the newer Migs were suddenly superior to our Air Force?

Burt: Yep.

Jim: Make it simple for me -- in what regard?

Burt: They could out maneuver, they were faster.

Jim: They replaced the Mig19?

Burt: Right.

Jim: We could beat those, but this was something else.

Burt: Absolutely right.

Jim: Faster?

Burt: Faster, more maneuverable. Better radar systems than we had – they could look up and down, we couldn't. We could look side to side. They had more efficient radar, and the radar would – if there were two of them, they would both be transmitting each other's radar to each other. We didn't have those systems.

Jim: They could zero right in on you.

Burt: Yep. And the ratios – I don't remember the exact numbers – but we were used to kill ratios of one to ten, one to eight, you know. That kind of thing. And I think they got to one to one, and that's when we said, wait a minute – there's something wrong. The other aspect was: F4 pilots weren't taught fighter tactics, because everything was missile guidance systems and, you know, intercepts that were thirty miles away, and things of that nature. But when you got into air-to-air combat, we weren't as good at air-to-air combat, 'cause we'd lost those skills. We had not done – we hadn't kept up, because we went to electronic warfare. And it became hand-to-hand combat. Gladiator against gladiator again.

Jim: That sounds -- The Top Gun school, then, was involved because of this situation?

Burt: It was formed because of that situation. I was assigned to work on the original syllabus. I was assigned to fly the Aggressor Squadron in F15s and we wore Russian uniforms and we had Russian flak

Jim: What was the point of dressing up like that?

Burt: Well, the whole thing, it was just – it was real. Attitudinal. And that – One time I was flying in a Phantom. I was flying on the other side – I was flying the good guys versus the bad guys. And one of the kids got on my ass with an F15 – no, a Northrop F5 – and then what I did, I told my radio in the back seat, "Hold on, 'cause I'm gonna pop gear and flaps." And I did that – I popped it. And he flew right by me. And I flipped them right back up and just picked him off. And when I got down, the tech rep – who was not Kelly McGillis, incidentally –

Jim: Not half as good looking?

Burt: No. Coke-bottle eyes –

Jim: Clipboard, taking notes –

Burt: Whole thing, looking at the video clip, saying, "That aircraft is not stressed for that. You cannot ever recommend or do that maneuver." I said, "If I'm about to get a plane, I'm gonna do anything, and I'm gonna test that aircraft, because I'd like to keep that rear end of mine virgin." And he said, "That is not a recommended doctrine – you cannot do that. This cannot be part of the curriculum – you cannot do that. This airplane – I said, "I said I heard you the first time."

Jim: It's history now.

- Burt: It worked, didn't it? You know, well, anyway, that's part of what got into the Top Gun movie.
- Jim: Exactly. That same type of sequence, right.
- Burt: But the technical representatives, when they came out to the fleet – this was in 1943, late '43, early '44 – they said, “What has your experience taught you for the next generation of fighters?”
- Jim: You mean, '53, don't you?
- Burt: No, no. I'm regressing to World War II. They had technical reps come out. Interviews. Oh, sure. Engineers and everything else. What do you want? We said, we'd like a fighter. We'd like an airplane that flies like a fighter. You've got this thing like a fighter-bomber and carries five-hundred pound bombs and has rocket racks and that kind of thing. We want a fighter. We'd like to have a fighter. You see the Zero. It's small, compact, maneuverable, etc. Can we go back to a fighter?
- Jim: You mean, back to the F4F?
- Burt: No, what we did was they build the F8F – the Bearcap.
- Jim: Yeah, but they never flew it.
- Burt: Never flew it in combat. But what a great airplane. I mean, boy, was that a great airplane!
- Jim: You had a chance to fly it alone?
- Burt: Oh, yeah. About 30% of the lift came from the prop, you know. That thing could just take off like a –
- Jim: Huge engine. Just standing next to it –
- Burt: Well, if you go out to the Reno air races, they're still racing in the Reno air races.
- Jim: So there are some that survived?
- Burt: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: There must be been some kind of – I haven't been up – I haven't seen one at EAA [Experimental Aviation Association, a yearly event in Oshkosh, WI], I've been up there a couple summertimes – I've never seen one up there. I suppose there are.
- Burt: Ah. There are a few up there. As a matter of fact, one was destroyed at the Oshkosh air show last year. Was it last year or the year before?

- Jim: Oh, really? So once you got out of the test pilot, when was this that you were a test pilot then? After Korea?
- Burt: After Korea.
- Jim: So that would be '53, '54?
- Burt: '53, '54.
- Jim: So how long did you do that?
- Burt: Til about '56. And then I went back out in the fleet.
- Jim: Well, back to the -- sorry. You had [?] up again, and now you were going to be a career man.
- Burt: Right. And then I got sent over to NATO in Europe, because I spoke languages. I was one of the strange breed of fighter pilots that spoke languages. I was the only F4 pilot that spoke foreign languages, so. They sent me to NATO. I have an affinity for languages. You plop me in a country, and in three months I speak the language. So they sent me there – I was in Italy.
- Jim: Not on a carrier now?
- Burt: No.
- Jim: Where were you stationed?
- Burt: I was stationed in Naples.
- Jim: But you were still in the Navy?
- Burt: Oh yeah.
- Jim: Even though they – okay.
- Burt: Commander Fleet Air Mediterranean was there. Prior to that I had been in London and SINCUSNAVEUR, working for my ex-boss, Jim Thatch. And because I did speak languages, he called me when the Israeli war broke out – '67, was it? And he said, "I've got orders cut for you. I want you aboard the America, as fast as you can get there. They'll pick you up in Greece with a Cott [?] aircraft. And I want you to listen to what's going on in terms of radio communication between the pilots." I said, "I don't speak Russian." He said, "But you understand more than we gonna understand, and we don't have any Russian-speaking F4 pilots. So just try to record it for us and give us your interpretation, and then we'll get it officially translated. And the Israelis are communicating not only in Hebrew, but they're also communicating in English – in the pure English language." Twenty-four hours later I was cat-shot off the America in an F4 recon aircraft, with all the listening gear in

the world I could get, and I did that for about three or four days. What I found out is there were about – Russians were the Egyptian frontline fighters. Okay? And they were coming up against the Israelis, and they lost apparently, near as we could figure out, about 17 or 18 pilots in the first three days. Coming out against the Israelis. And the orders came from Moscow, “Get the hell out of there.” You know, ‘cause the Israelis – you have to understand – hadn’t, the Israeli Air Force (if you’ve ever read the book Zanek) had more flight time than anybody else. 92% of them were flying at an incredible rate per month. So they were totally, totally, you know, flying tuned to the edge. And they didn’t have navigation problems. They didn’t have anything of that nature. They stripped all the navigation gear off of the aircraft, made it much lighter, so it was far, far better. The Egyptians and the Russians never did that. So they made them about 4000 pounds lighter. That helps. And they were flying scooters, you know, little Douglas A4Ds. And that airplane carried its own weight in munitions practically. It was a just an incredible little airplane, built by McDonald-Douglas. Very maneuverable. Subsonic. Quick turn ratios. Fast as hell, you know, in acceleration. And this one Russian got behind one. And this guy got down on the deck and started flying between the dunes. The Russian couldn’t handle it – went right into the sand. And, I mean, that’s what they used to do. They used to try to take them right down on the deck, where, of course, they were lumbering – they didn’t have the performance that they have at 35 or 40,000 feet. So. Interesting little insights.

Jim: So you did that – you were on that mission there with the air [MUD?] for how many years?

Burt: I was there for almost three years in Europe – three to four years.

Jim: ‘67 to ?

Burt: ‘67 til I went to Top Gun.

Jim: Was that ‘70?

Burt: ‘70.

Jim: ‘70 you went to Top Gun?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: They had just started that school?

Burt: They had started the school. ‘71 I left Top Gun, went back out and became commander of the air group on the Kennedy.

Jim: Oh, really?

Burt: And I retired in ‘72.

Jim: Oh, that's thirty years.

Burt: Yeah, it's an interesting story though. Remember five or six years ago they were doing this D-Day revisited thing? It was the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day?

Jim: Yes, well, I've got a lot of that stuff on tape.

Burt: Yeah. And I got a call from NBC, and they said, "We're trying to get a Navy pilot, a Navy ace, and an Air Force ace, pit them one against the other, get two 70-year-old farts, and see whether they've still got it in them." I said, "Well, wait a minute. First of all, there was no close air support by the Navy at D-Day. There wasn't any. It was all Air Force and RAF. So how do you position this one?" And they said, "Well, however, we gonna take a little artistic license anyway."

Jim: A little?

Burt: And I said, "Well, okay. Who am I going to fly against?" I said, "You know, I haven't flown for 22, 23 years. Thirty years – I don't know. 28 years." And they said, "Well, we're not going to tell you." I said, "I got the smell that the deck is stacked here."

Jim: What was the station that arranged this?

Burt: NBC. The National Broadcasting Company.

Jim: You were going to do this at an Air Force base?

Burt: No, no, no. We were going to do this at a place called Fighter Pilots USA. Or you can check that in a Marquetti [Italian plane manufacturer] and then you can do air-to-air combat, and they do it all on video –

Jim: Marquetti?

Burt: Marquetti, which are NATO Advanced Trainer Close Air Support.

Jim: [?]

Burt: So. And they have all the same characteristics as the F16 – all the same flight characteristics. Exactly. So I said, "When am I going to fly again?" And they said, "We're not telling you." And I said, "When does this occur?" And they said, "Week after next, and you have to be here." I said, "Okay, so I'll do this." So I called Chuck Gaiter, who's a friend of mine, and I said to his secretary, "Where's Chuck?" And she said, "You know, Burt – he's out hunting." I said, "Two-legged or four-legged?"

Jim: Right.

Burt: She said, "Both." I said, "You know him very well." So it wasn't him, and I got down there, I see this guy – he was about 6'3" or 6'3'-and-a-half or 6'4". And his name was Bruce Carr. And he's Colonel Bruce Carr, had 24-and-a-half kills in Europe, flew 500 missions in Korea up above the Yalu, 300 missions in Vietnam, and he was still plying the P-51, which was across the field. I said, "You guys kind of stacked the deck, didn't you?" So I meet Bruce and we get briefed. I see he smokes a ton. And by the nose I knew he drank a lot, so I thought this guy's going to black out fast. So that's an advantage I wouldn't have in aerial combat. [Laughs.]

Jim: He had not flown the same as you had not flown?

Burt: No. He was still flying a P-51 – he was still current. He was still current.

Jim: That's unfair.

Burt: It is unfair. Then I put it all together. The check pilots were all Air Force. The guy flying the helicopter chase was Air Force. The cameraman was Air Force. The guy running the sound system -- he was Air Force. I was the only Navy guy in the group.

Jim: And you were the goat.

Burt: I was, you know, the real goat. And they took us and they said, they briefed us, and they said, "No head on. Don't come within 300 yards of each other, you know." And basically all the rules of the aerodynamics of the aircraft. And they took you out and you flew the aircraft. They checked you out, and that was fine.

Jim: How'd that go?

Burt: Well. It came back in a way that just amazed me. And when I did a 360 and came back inside my own prop wash, beside my own jet wash, rather, he said, "Jesus, that's a perfect turn." Piece of cake.

Jim: Trained in the Navy, right?

Burt: That's right. Piece of cake. I found out afterwards, we did three air-to-airs, okay? And as we were taking off, we both looked at the other, and go like this. To hell with all the rules – this is going to be a dogfight. So we go up to the area, and we're up there in a squirrel cage, going for about twenty minutes in the first fight. And he got me in a snapshot in about a second-and-a-half. And it shows up in the video that [?]. So the second fight, fight's on – I got him in my sights for five full seconds. And the third fight, I have him in my sights for fifteen seconds.

Jim: He couldn't get away?

Burt: Couldn't get away. 'Cause I got him into tight G-turns, and I knew he was going to black out, 'cause I watched him slack off and I knew what was happening. So when

we get down and do the debrief, all these guys from the Air Force from the first fight cheer like hell because he got me with a snapshot of a second-and-a-half. So they say, "Victory!" The second one, there was silence. The third one, they just stood there and they said, the check pilot said, "Burt, you wrote his name 'Bruce Carr' all over that airplane." But I got to talking with Bruce, and he's a wonderful guy. He was heading to England to be feted by the queen at a luncheon as a hero – he was given the Order of the Empire or whatever it was. And I found out that he was shot down three times. He had his group commander shot down from under, you know, twice he had two new group commanders in one day, 'cause each one was shot down. The third time he was shot down, he was shot down in Czechoslovakia. As he bailed out, he realized he was bailing out near an airfield – a German airfield. And it was dusk. He lands in the forest right near the airfield – they couldn't find him.

Jim: Oh, my!

Burt: So they held off the search. He crawls to the airfield, looks at all the airplanes, sees them refueling an FW190. He says, "I'm stealing that plane." He says, "They're going to go to breakfast about four or five in the morning. I'm going to get in that thing – it's full of fuel, and I'm going to take it back to England." Four or 4:30 the breakfast bell rings, everybody goes in for breakfast – there's nobody on the line except one guard, and he's guarding the whole damn thing, and he's half asleep. So he climbs in the cockpit, starts the damn thing up and takes it off and flew it back to England. And this is all documented. He got the gear up, but the FW190 has a very strange system – you've got to pump the hydraulics to drop it down. So he couldn't figure it out. And he couldn't get the gear down. Then they started shooting at him. He says, "Shit on this!" Pardon me. He lands the thing right beside the runway.

Jim: On the belly, you mean?

Burt: On the belly. The MPs come out, pull him out of the aircraft, take him back to headquarters. The commanding officer comes out and says, "Carr, where the hell have you been?"

Jim: If I told you –

Burt: --you wouldn't believe me. "Where the hell did you get that?" And that's a true story. It's documented. He's just a great guy. Unfortunately, I said, "Okay, Bruce. You got a challenge. When we're both eighty years old, I'm gonna hump your ass again."

Jim: When you did these air combat things for NBC, what did they fly?

Burt: They recorded it in helicopters.

Jim: In helicopters?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: How could they keep up with you? They only photographed you when you came together.

Burt: When we came together.

Jim: Well, tell us where the helicopter was.

Burt: Well, they were over the aerobatic – the aerobatic zone has a name, I forget it right now. But it was really a lot of fun. And of course, they started driving and said, “But maybe pilots can’t land. Look at your landing.” And my landing – I bounced the hell out of my airplane. And I said, “Yeah, but we’re not used to ten thousand feet of cement.” [Laughs.]

Jim: And you were flying this Italian plane?

Burt: Yeah, Marquetti. Nice airplane.

Jim: And he was on a [P]51?

Burt: No, he was on a Marquetti also. All Marquettis. At least that was even. He had to fly a Marquetti and I had to fly a Marquetti.

Jim: That was a single-engine aircraft?

Burt: Yeah. Nice airplane. I’d love to own one, but –

Jim: That was a prop?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: And when was NBC going to use this?

Burt: They used it as part of the whole D-Day thing they were doing. Remember the guys who were seventy years old and bailed out – this was all part of that same thing.

Jim: [?] should be some of that sequence in there then.

Burt: It should be. It depends. I don’t know whether the stations carried it or didn’t carry it – who knows?

Jim: So when Vietnam, you never –

Burt: I volunteered for ‘Nam, and Admiral Thatch and the guys in NATO said, no way. They said, you’re qualified, but we don’t have anybody who speaks languages, can sit in on NATO planning sessions and can understand what the side issues are, so you’re gonna stay. I volunteered three times, and Thatch said, “If you do this one more time, I’m gonna send you –“

Jim: Send you home?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: What kind of duty was this? I mean, sitting in on these conferences.

Burt: Well, actually what we did is we – They adopted a lot of our equipment. Somebody had to teach them how to use it.

Jim: Oh, and explain it to them in their language?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: What kind of equipment are we speaking of? Whole airplanes?

Burt: Phantoms, whole airplanes, whole weapon systems, how to operate it. And you'd take them through –

Jim: In Italian?

Burt: And then speak to the Spaniards in Spanish. And I'd speak to the French in French. And the French, you know, hated how I'd butcher their language.

Jim: Oh, the French complain about everything.

Burt: Oh, yeah. And they were only associate members of NATO.

Jim: Well, yeah. That's right. DeGaul wouldn't let France be part of NATO.

Burt: No, absolutely not. Had to maintain their Frenchness.

Jim: Yeah, the French have always been a pain in the ass.

Burt: Have they ever.

Jim: They never want to cooperate at all.

Burt: But, you know, they don't even get along with each other. So why should they get along with foreigners? The Germans were the backbone. I didn't speak much German, but I knew enough to get along. Very difficult language.

Jim: So you did this for how long?

Burt: About four years. I married an Italian.

Jim: Oh, you did?

Burt: That was par for the course.

Jim: You get to pick one?

Burt: I didn't know. I've been through two divorces. Most Navy fighter pilots have.

Jim: Did you finally find somebody you got along with?

Burt: No, I finally found somebody who would tolerate me.

Jim: Oh, that's nice. Well, so then –

Burt: Frankly, I couldn't afford to get divorced.

Jim: That's what I was going to say.

Burt: I've gone broke twice, and still struggling to keep alive.

Jim: Did you retire then from this job with NATO? That was your retirement then from that point.

Burt: After I served on the Kennedy. That was kind of a token – you've been a good boy.

Jim: So what did you do when you got back home?

Burt: Well, I was sitting on a lot of boards of directors, 'cause when I was at Squantum –

Jim: Aircraft companies?

Burt: No, strangely enough, business companies, 'cause when I was flying at Squantum, the Navy had sent me to the Harvard Business School, 'cause I was a budding admiral, so I had two years of duty there. '48-'49. I graduated in '50.

Jim: From Harvard?

Burt: From the Harvard Business School. And I had a lot of buddies, and they asked to be their token representative of the military on the board. You know, that kind of thing.

Jim: Right.

Burt: So I got back into business.

Jim: Where was this? Where were you living then?

Burt: I was living either in Europe or I was here in the United States. It depended.

Jim: So that's the only thing you did was just living and serving on boards?

Burt: No, I started getting active in running companies.

Jim: Like what kind of companies would you run?

Burt: Consumer product companies. I had majored in marketing when I was in b-school, and actually they even asked me – they asked the Navy for me to have a leave of absence for six months to work on some work I was doing with Neil Borden, who was the professor of marketing. And I also worked on the Harvard Business Review, which was the business publication.

Jim: So where were you working? In New York City at the time?

Burt: Yeah.

Jim: So how the hell did you get to Madison, Wisconsin?

Burt: That's an interesting story. One of the companies that I wound up running which kind of paralleled my background was a company called Willis and Geiger. To make a long story short, Willis and Geiger, old expedition outfitting company, dating back to 1902, outfitted Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Hemmingway, Teddy Roosevelt – all of these very high profile adventurers and who had done most of the expedition work. Clothing and all that stuff. And had made Navy flight suits and had made Navy flight jackets and army flight suits and army flight jackets. They were a highly technical company at that time. And one of my Harvard Business School buddies said, he wanted to buy the company. And he said, I'd like you to study it, to take a look at it and make a recommendation. I was sitting on his board, so I looked at it and I said, it's a hell of a buy, it's not a company at this stage – it's shrunk down to nothing. If you can buy it on an asset basis, it would be a good deal. And if you can pay 10-15 cents on the dollar, you're in fine shape. And they said, we're not buying it unless you run it. And I said, why? He said, because you've got the background for this company. And I said, okay. We'll do a joint venture. Got some money from a banker – 'cause I had just gone through another divorce – and the banker friend of mine, Danny Callahan, was running the American bank and Riggs Bank in Washington, D.C.: he lent me money. Bought the company, built it back up, sold it to Lands' End, Lands' End moved me out here. That's the long and short of it.

Jim: So now you work at Lands' End?

Burt: No. They closed the company after five years. It was a very successful catalogue. And the reasons aren't very clear to anybody why they closed it, except that they had a bad year, and they got rid of Territory Ahead, they got rid of Montbelle, they got rid of a start-up project and they got rid of us. And it didn't carry the Lands' End name, so. We were only scheduled to do about 34 million dollars from standing start, and they said, what are you going to be when you grow up? And we said, maybe 68. And they said, peanuts. Not worth our time. They – The story goes that they were going to sell it themselves, they weren't going to let brokers in,

etc. And they wouldn't let investment bankers in to sell it. They decided they were going to – They did a kind of amateurish brochure. Put it on the market for a couple weeks via newspapers. They got 48 signed confidentiality agreements from people like Sears, the Gap, and it began to scare them. So they pulled it off the market. We wound up seeing two or three companies that they pre-selected, and they got low-ball bids, and so they said, the hell with it. And they've kept the name – I've tried to buy it. No way would they even talk to me. So it sits there warehoused. The name.

Jim: It's strange.

Burt: It is strange to – and I'll never know the answer and nobody ever will.

Jim: But they've had internal problems at Lands' End, plenty of them.

Burt: They always do.

Jim: 'Cause this one guy, you know, all of a sudden up and quit or almost fired or something like that. That was about two years ago.

Burt: Bill Aynd [?], and then they put – David Dire, who's now the present president and CEO of Lands' End, was one of the bidders. And the reported conversation was, from Gary Comar, who's the majority stockholder, "I wouldn't trust that guy in a million years. I wouldn't sell it to him if he was the last guy on earth." A week later, he's the president and CEO –

Jim: [?]

Burt: No, he didn't sell it to him. He appoints him president and CEO. Who knows?

Jim: This Comar has just made himself a very rich man.

Burt: Oh, he has. And he deserves it. You know, he was innovative, he did a great job –

Jim: He made the company.

Burt: He and Dick Anderson. They built that company. And they were in the right place with the right idea and the right time.

Jim: So here you are and now you're running out of things to do.

Burt: Yeah – No, I'm a consultant, and I have a lot of clients. Not enough! But I've got a lot of clients.

Jim: You mean in business?

Burt: Yeah. Do everything in product development, long-range planning, strategic planning, you now DNAs [Department Network Administrator?] for companies.

Jim: You still flying around?

Burt: No. Well, flying on United, Air Wisconsin, which is a third world airline – it's the worst airline in the world. I think Air Nairobi –

Jim: Worse than Northwest?

Burt: Northwest? No. It's much worse than Northwest. It is the worst airline that god ever created. I had – Out of twenty flights, one left on time. I missed connections time and time again. They are the most overextended, undermanaged company I've ever seen. And everybody says the same thing. And they're not doing a service to Madison. I was with Jerry Fratschi the other day –

Jim: This is the one that's based in Milwaukee?

Burt: No, that's Midwest Express – they're very good. This is, I think, based in Appleton.

Jim: That's right.

Burt: It is – We kid: we say Air Nairobi or Air Ghana would be better than this one, you know. It's the worst.

Jim: Do you do any flying yourself?

Burt: No more. No more. I'm one of these guys who's a perfectionist – you either do it, do it all the time, or don't do it.

Jim: Yeah, and particularly flying – it would be a risk not to.

Burt: When I was a kid, I met Jim Doolittle, who – The role of Jimmy Doolittle who was played in that movie was the only logical one that was reasonably technically correct. The rest of it was just Hollywood fluff. And Jim – I flew with the Bendix trophy races and the Thompson trophy races out of Cleveland out of Cleveland – and I've got to go, 'cause I've got to take my wife to the doctor – And I always stayed in touch with Jimmy because he was always sort of my hero. He's a wonderful, wonderful man – great feisty little character. And I remember four years ago before he died, I made a special pilgrimage out to California to his place up in Carmel. And we had lunch together and reminisced for quite a while. And he always liked his champagne before lunch, so we went and had champagne, and champagne at the house. And, you know, we were happy. That's what it felt like. And he said the same thing. He said, "Burtie, are you still flying?" And I said, "No." And he said, "You're smart. How many of our friends thought they're still as good as they were and ain't here anymore?"

Jim: That's right.

Burt: And I said, "You're absolutely right, Jim." And I sort of remember talk about how you keep proficient when we were youngsters. And if you're – You just can't pick up and do this. It's a skill level you have to keep and cultivate. And I'm never going to get behind, you know, in the cockpit again, unless – If I went to start flying again, I'd go back to primary training and start all the way – I'd pick up the steersman and go into yellow peril and start the whole thing. Start it all over again. Because that's the only way you can do things – do them right, or don't do them. And when I was doing test work, you were assigned a crew chief, and the crew chief had a little plaque made for me. And he stuck it on the instrument panel. And it said, "Remember – this thing can kill you."

Jim: This thing can kill you? Oh, that's good.

Burt: I appreciated his sentiments.

Jim: Yeah. Well, thank you. I appreciate your coming. I'll take these home.

Burt: I appreciate the time.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1 -- END OF INTERVIEW