

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Allan Bell  
Pilot, Army Air Force, U.S. Army, World War II  
2000

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**Bell, Allan** (b. 1919). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (c. 53 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (c. 53 min.); analog, 17/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 video recording (c. 53 min.); ½ inch, color.

**Abstract:**

Allan Bell, a Tomahawk, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the 11<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (Heavy), 98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron. Enlisting and entering the Air Corps in March 1943, he attended preflight school in San Antonio (Texas) with actual flight training in Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Bell describes his training, and relates that he first flew a consolidated B-24 Liberator upon return to Texas. Assignment of an air crew, and air crew training in California in the summer of 1944, preceded a flight to Hawaii for Gunnery School at Hickam Field. He provides an account of his time in Hawaii, and shares the story of a harrowing practice-bombing run. Bell and crew joined the 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb group, 98<sup>th</sup> Squadron on Guam. Bell describes living conditions on Guam, and efforts to protect against malaria. From there, missions took them to Iwo Jima, Chichi-jima, Ha-ha Jima, Marcus Island and Truk. Bell recounts their B-24 losing its hydraulic lines over Iwo Jima, the difficulties and dangers of bombing there, and reflects on their effectiveness. He offers his observation on the B-29 Superfortress. After Okinawa was secured by American forces on June 22, 1945, Bell and his crew were scheduled to be sent there, but as they had already completed all but one of their required missions they were held back on Guam. Bell remembers his surprise at reading of the first atomic bomb dropping on Hiroshima, Japan while in Hawaii awaiting passage to San Francisco. Desiring to raise a family, and “go fishing,” he returned to Tomahawk and his former job. Bell’s next job resulted in his briefly becoming acting commander stateside of a National Guard unit during the Korean War. For his World War II service he received seven Air Medals, and a Distinguished Flying Cross. Bell reflects on contacts with his former crew, and why war is only for the young. He does not regret that he never became a commercial pilot, as many of his old comrades had, preferring spending time with family to “flying in the soup.”

**Biographical Sketch:**

Lieutenant Allan Bell (b. 1919) piloted a Consolidated B-24 Liberator during World War II, serving with the 11<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (Heavy), 98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron. He was involved in the Pacific Theater, and flew missions over Iwo Jima, among other places. After the war, Bell returned to Tomahawk, Wisconsin, where he served briefly as the acting commander of the National Guard unit during the Korean War.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.  
Transcribed by Katy Marty, 2008.  
Transcription checked and corrected by Channing Welch, 2014.  
Corrections typed in by Jeff Javid, 2015.  
Abstract written by Jeff Javid, 2015.

## **Interview Transcript:**

McIntosh: Goin' [click sound].

Bell: Did you have a nice talk with Scotty?

McIntosh: Yeah.

Bell: He's a good fellow. I've skied a lot with him--

McIntosh: Have you really?

Bell: Yeah. And past years, he never talked at all. I didn't know he'd been severely wounded or anything. Never mentioned it at all.

McIntosh: Four wounds in two hours, I don't know how anybody survives that. All right. Now, this is the 11<sup>th</sup>, the 20<sup>th</sup>, no, 12<sup>th</sup> day of October.

Bell: Yup.

McIntosh: 12, October. The year 2000, talkin' to Allan Bell. When were you born, sir?

Bell: November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918.

McIntosh: Where was that?

Bell: Tomahawk, Wisconsin.

McIntosh: But you entered military service when?

Bell: October, 1942.

McIntosh: But you volun--?

Bell: September, 1942.

McIntosh: Okay. 9/42. You volunteered or enlisted?

Bell: I enlisted.

McIntosh: In the Air Force. Air Corps at the time.

Bell: Yes and I wasn't called in until October, no, March 4<sup>th</sup> of 1942. No, I'm not doing that right now am I?

McIntosh: No, think it's the other way around. Must have been '43.

Bell: March, 1943.

McIntosh: Yeah, the Air Corps, and where did you go first?

Bell: San Antonio Classification Center, then across the street to the Preflight School at San Antonio, Texas.

McIntosh: Is that when you had your first experience with airplanes?

Bell: Ah, I'd been up once in my life. There was no flying at San Antonio. It was strictly ground school.

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: We were there nine weeks in preflight, and then we went to Primary School in Sikeston, Missouri where we learned to fly.

McIntosh: Would you start out in a Piper Cub or something like that or --?

Bell: It was a Fairchild PT-19 [trainer aircraft].

McIntosh: Okay.

Bell: Low wing monoplane. We were there nine weeks, and then we went to Coffeyville, Kansas, and we were there nine weeks. We flew Vultee "Vibrators".

McIntosh: [laughs]

Bell: BT-13's there.

McIntosh: Right. How did those go?

Bell: They were much more powerful. I think they had a 450 horsepower engine, and they did vibrate.

McIntosh: That was a step up for you then.

Bell: Yes, it was. And then we went to Altus, Oklahoma which was a twin-engine school, and flew Curtiss there.

McIntosh: Oh, yes.

Bell: Again, it was a nine weeks course.

McIntosh: By that time they had divided you into single engine vs. double engine?

Bell: Right.

McIntosh: Was that a choice you made, or did they make it for you?

Bell: Both. My instructor in basic at Coffeyville, Kansas was a frustrated fighter pilot [McIntosh laughs] and he wanted all of us to be fighter pilots.

McIntosh: Of course.

Bell: He had to recommend you to be one.

McIntosh: Oh, I see.

Bell: But out on the flight line was an AT-6 [North American Aviation single engine trainer aircraft] sitting there with a little narrow landing gear, and that looked too tricky for me. The other twin engines had big, wide landing gears, and so unbeknownst to him--in fact we told him a lie because he asked us all, "Did you apply for single engine?" "Yes, yes, yes", but we hadn't. We all applied for twin engine, and so we got that. You didn't always get what you wanted either because I really wanted P-38's. That was twin engine, and a lot of fellas were sent to a center where they were just made copilots right away. They didn't get a chance to learn to fly anything else, but we were sent to Fort Worth, Texas and learned to fly B-24's [Consolidated B-24 Liberator, a heavy bomber] there.

McIntosh: That was the first time that you were had the 24's then?

Bell: Yes, in Fort Worth, Texas. In those days it was called Tarant Field, T-a-r-a-n-t, named after someone who had been killed. Later on it was changed to Fort Worth Army Air Base. What was kind of funny there, my instructor was a big, husky guy, looked like a football player. It turned out that he had been a guard for the Los Angeles Bulldogs, professionals.

McIntosh: [laughs]

Bell: And he would handle that 24 like nothing, like this. But he had five men, and we flew a lot at night it seemed, but we all got through all right.

McIntosh: Was the training difficult?

Bell: Um, --

McIntosh: I mean jumping from two engines to four engines.

Bell: Not really because this big, heavy thing was more like driving a semi-truck I think than anything else.

McIntosh: I see.

Bell: But his name was Floyd Beanblossom.

McIntosh: Oh, now, that's a name.

Bell: I've tried to find him since the war, and I couldn't. But a year and a little more later I'm almost through with my missions on Guam, and along comes Floyd Beanblossom with a crew, and he's still a second lieutenant. He hasn't gotten a promotion, but he finally got overseas and was going to get into combat, and he had some -- two real tough missions. They were shot down over Iwo Jima, and he had to bail out. The whole crew picked up by a submarine, and that was the end of his fighting. They sent him back to the States then. It was kind of funny, too. I always wanted to find him, but -- and I've looked in the LA directories and no success.

McIntosh: Oh, I see. So once you got a B-24, then did you form up a crew and --

Bell: Yes, went to Fresno, California, and they assigned a crew to you, and then we went to March Field in Riverside, California for another nine weeks of crew training. That was about --

McIntosh: Where are we now at time wise? This is --

Bell: June and July of '44. Then they sent us up to Hamilton Field [San Francisco] to await transportation to Hawaii, and we were there two or three weeks. They flew us across in a converted B-24 that had nice leather seats in it, but it was a long flight.

McIntosh: Oh, you didn't fly your own plane then?

Bell: No, they were short of airplanes apparently. It took about thirteen hours, and one of the --

McIntosh: To Hawaii?

Bell: Yes. One of the things I remember is when we got to Hawaii you were supposed to exchange your paper money for theirs, and they had Hawaii printed across the back of it, but I didn't even have a \$1 bill to exchange [both laugh] at that time. Anyway, they sent us up to a almost deserted base at Kahuku [Oahu, Hawaii] which is where the first radar interception of the Japanese were, but the base was almost deserted, and they gave us

an old shack that was just full of junk and everything else. We had to clean it all out, and two or three crews moved in there, and we were there about three months. Didn't fly at all.

McIntosh: I was going to say, you still haven't got a plane.

Bell: No, and they didn't have any planes there, for a long time anyway. So all we did was-- we could go swimming every day. We had to walk, we didn't have any transportation, but it wasn't too far to the ocean, I don't know maybe a half a mile, a mile. We were young, and it didn't make much difference then. Anyway, finally we did start to train again, and they sent us to Hickam [Field] to Gunnery School, which was interesting. I always liked guns, and we had to learn how to take machine guns apart and put them back together blindfolded. It wasn't difficult at all. And one of these stories I've got, I don't know how much you want me to tell, but -  
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McIntosh: Your personal experience is what we're looking for.

Bell: All right. Um, we were training, and they sent along an instructor pilot and an instructor crew chief who had completed their thirty missions and were just waiting to go home, but meanwhile they had to work a little bit, and so they had to go on a mission with us, and this was at night, and first we took off from Hickam Field or Kahuku -- Hickam it must have been and went and dropped practice bombs on the island of Kahoolawe [Hawaii], and then we went to Johnston Island which was, I don't know, four or five hundred miles from there, and they had a searchlight that projected straight up into the air. All we had to do was circle that searchlight and go back to Hawaii then. Well, after we turned and started home we decided to practice transferring gasoline from the bomb bay tanks into the wing tanks. We'd never done that before, and when my engineer twisted a valve all of a sudden number three engine quit.

McIntosh: Oh, boy.

Bell: And that wasn't real serious because a B-24 can fly pretty good on three engines, especially when it was empty and, without bombs, and so immediately what you do is increase the revolutions per minute on the other engines to maintain altitude and airspeed, and I pushed the thing ahead like that, and one of the other props ran away then. The governor gave out, and it started to scream out there, and if it goes too long it'll throw the prop off.

McIntosh: Damage the plane.



Bell: Yes, right through the pilot's compartment, too. So anyway, here's that prop screaming out there, and so I reached up and hit one of the feathering buttons. There were red buttons up here. There were one, two, three, four, and they warned us repeatedly to be sure and hit the right one, but I didn't, I hit the wrong one. So now I got three engines out, and the airplane isn't flying anymore, it's going down like this, and this crew chief is standing right behind me, and he says, "Thirty missions and now this." And you knew exactly what he meant.

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: Here he'd survived thirty missions, [Jim laughs] and now some dumb, rookie pilot like me --

McIntosh: Yeah.

Bell: Was going to kill him and everybody else on there. But anyway, my engineer got the gas back to this one engine that hadn't been operating and I quickly pulled out the feathering button and got that one going again, but the one refused to, ah, operate correctly and still screamed out there. So we had three engines anyway, and we had a choice then of going back to Johnston Island and landing there or flying to Hawaii and landing there, and I was kind of upset then so I decided it would be best to go back to Johnston Island. So that's what we did. We went back there, and we're going to make a three engine landing on this little tiny island which is just about the length, about a mile long and about a few hundred yards wide, just an airstrip. And they said be sure and not go around on three engines because it was too much drag with the landing gear down and the flaps down. Make it right the first time, but don't come in too slow either.

McIntosh: [laughs]

Bell: So anyway, I remember we came in plenty fast and, I couldn't get it down, and we just had to go around. That's all there was to it. So we pulled up the landing gear, and I said to my copilot, "Pull the flaps up." Well, you were supposed to take them up gradually like this, and instead he just give her a yank, and the flaps come up, and the plane goes like this, and, there we are shooting along just above the runway below the control tower, and they're in there with eyes this big --

McIntosh: [laughs]

Bell: And so are we. But we finally staggered around and came in and made a decent landing the next time. Stayed there overnight, they fixed the plane. We got the next morning and went home. Well, that was one of the things that you live through if you're lucky and trains you --

McIntosh: Oh, yes.

Bell: Because I think it was our second mission when we got to--we were over Iwo Jima, and we got an engine shot out, and I just as calmly as could be reached up there and --

McIntosh: You knew which button to push then, boy [laughs].

Bell: Pushed the right button, yeah. So it all worked out.

McIntosh: Wow, that was close.

Bell: It's funny afterwards; it probably wasn't funny then. And I have never seen that crew chief since that night. He never --, I didn't see him the next day or -- and I didn't want to either, of course. But I've often wondered who he was and what happened.

McIntosh: He's probably saying the same thing today [laughs].

Bell: Oh, boy, I'd have two black eyes I'm pretty sure.

McIntosh: Oh, my goodness. So this was your plane crew that you kept with you, other than him, or no?

Bell: Yes, yeah. We kept the same, with one exception. The same ten guys went all the way through.

McIntosh: Sure.

Bell: Our radio operator was an older individual, a fine man, did a wonderful job. But he was thirty-nine years old, and war is really a young man's thing--

McIntosh: No kiddin'?

Bell: Because you're not smart enough to be scared I guess, most of the time anyway. But after about twenty-five missions he broke down and --

McIntosh: Couldn't handle anymore.

Bell: They had to send him home so we got a different radio operator. And once in a while --, radar was brand new then. Once in a while they would send a radar operator along with us, and he would tell us if it was overcast. If we couldn't see the target he would --you could see it on there, and he would tell us when to drop the bombs.

McIntosh: Tell me now, where did you go when you left Hawaii with your crew and your plane?

Bell: Ah, they did give us a brand new airplane then. They took it away from another group that was in Hawaii, and we flew to Johnston Island first --

McIntosh: Again.

Bell: And then Kwajalein, and then Saipan, but they said no, you don't belong here. So we flew to Guam then which was just 100 miles or so south of there and to the 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron there.

McIntosh: The 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb --

Bell: 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, and we stayed there 'til we'd completed our missions.

McIntosh: That was on Guam?

Bell: Yup.

McIntosh: When I went back into the Navy, for the Korean War, I got called back in, I flew in a MATS [Military Air Transport Service] airplane from San Francisco to Hawaii, from Hawaii to Johnston, Johnston to Kwajalein, Kwajalein to Guam, stayed overnight, flew the next day to Okinawa --

Bell: Okinawa.

McIntosh: And then on into Japan, but I followed that same path, you know. We'd refuel at every one of them. It was eight hours on that DC-6 from Hawaii to Johnston, eight hours to -- you know we just kept on going. Interesting.

Bell: Ah, those flights, we did go back to Hawaii twice, once on rest leave and once because they were running out of targets, and the general wanted some things back in Hawaii, and we thought it'd be nice to go back and have some ice cream and milk and steak and things again, too, so we volunteered to fly the plane back.

McIntosh: Sure.

Bell: But it was a long ways; it was eight to ten hours between most of those hops.

McIntosh: Did you enjoy flying the B-24?

Bell: It was easy; I'd say that, but -- and the seats were very, very comfortable, but --

McIntosh: Didn't you put the flak protectors on the -- you sat on those, or no?

Bell: What do you mean sit on those [laughs]?

McIntosh: Well, those extras they came on with later in the planes. A lot of guys took those flak things on and sat on them.

Bell: We had kind of a flak suit. It was like a vest almost that we put on just before we got to the target area which was -- we went to Iwo Jima, we went to Chichi-jima, we went to Ha-ha Jima, we went to Marcus Island and we went to Truk [an atoll at the central Pacific Ocean] and most of us put this on and a steel helmet before we went over the target.

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: My copilot put his helmet right there [McIntosh laughs]. Now, I really don't remember, I think he wore his flak vest probably, but --

McIntosh: You were all this time based in Guam?

Bell: Yeah.

McIntosh: That was a permanent base for you?

Bell: We flew all our missions from there, right. We were supposed to fly forty missions but --

McIntosh: They said after forty you could take a rest and go home?

Bell: Go home, yeah.

McIntosh: That was set.

Bell: In fact, the crew that we went over with finished theirs in April and were sent back to the States and got out of the service right away.

McIntosh: Huh.

Bell: That early, but it was August before, no, it was July when we finished ours, the 1<sup>st</sup> of July we flew our last mission which was the 39<sup>th</sup>. Now, the reason was our whole group was going to move to Okinawa. They had just secured the island and so they were moving there to bomb Japan, but they didn't feel it worthwhile to take us there for one mission. So they left

us behind in Guam with a cook and some food, and twelve crews I think were in this same predicament, thirty-nine missions, but we were real happy to stay there, and all we had to do was wait until they had a MATS plane to fly us back to Hawaii. And we sat there two or three weeks.

McIntosh: So you didn't bring your plane back then.

Bell: No, no. They needed them, and some of them were getting pretty old over there. They had 100 missions on maybe or more, but the maintenance was wonderful. The mechanics were excellent and took real good care of them.

McIntosh: So tell me about some exciting missions here that you-- another where they were shooting at you.

Bell: Well, I think it was our second mission that, you know, you're just staying in formation and cruising along like you're supposed to in tight formation, and --

McIntosh: Excuse me, in groups of how many usually?

Bell: Usually twelve.

McIntosh: Twelve.

Bell: We weren't in a big outfit at all like over in Europe --

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: And when we would have a maximum effort they would put twelve planes from each squadron together so we might have forty-five or something like that because there was always somebody that had trouble and had to go home. But normally it was about twelve, and I think it was our second mission that we were over Iwo Jima and all of the sudden the engine got hit, and it knocked out a lot of the hydraulic lines.

McIntosh: From ground fire?

Bell: Yes.

McIntosh: Not Zeros [Japanese fighter plane]?

Bell: Yeah, it was shrapnel.

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: Now there were zeros but we never saw over three or four at a time, and although they did come in, and they would drop phosphorus bombs like this ahead of our formation. They'd come out of the sun, and you didn't see 'em, and all of the sudden here's these phosphorus bombs coming down like this, and the phosphorus was supposed to adhere to metal and burn holes in it. I don't know that it ever caused any serious damage, but it was scary to see those. And the --, but the Zeros later on in the war, they did try some suicide --

McIntosh: You, mean crashing.

Bell: And they hit a few planes, but again it was something that you couldn't avoid because all of the sudden there they were right there, and they would either pass you or hit you.

McIntosh: You didn't have any time to worry about them.

Bell: No, but anyway, we went back then on three engines. It was 700 miles from Hawaii to Iwo Jima. We flew nineteen missions there as I remember.

McIntosh: From Guam to Iwo Jima.

Bell: Mm-hmm. Any and then the flaps and the landing gear were hydraulically operated, and so -- but they did have a manual thing, too. Now, the engineer did crimp the hydraulic lines together, [McIntosh laughs], and the only fluid we had along was pineapple juice for our lunch, and he filled them up with pineapple juice. But the first time we tried to do anything they just exploded, burst open again. But we cranked the wheels down. One of them came down okay. The other one didn't want to come down so we had to rock the airplane, and finally it came down, and they both locked. We didn't have any flaps, but they rigged up parachutes in both waist windows, and we came in at a slow speed altitude or a slow speed and an attitude that was much steeper, and we stopped, and --

McIntosh: Deployed the parachutes?

Bell: They didn't have to pop 'em, no. We were slowed down enough but we taxied to the revetment [barricade against explosives] area, I remember, and you didn't have any brakes either so --

McIntosh: They were shot out also?

Bell: They had to -- well, because they were hydraulic, and so they had to check the wheels so the plane wouldn't roll away. It wasn't on a level, perfectly level surface, but that was quite exciting.

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: We didn't have an awful lot of fighter --

McIntosh: How high would the Japanese anti-aircraft guns shoot?

Bell: We did most of our bombing from 20,000 feet early in the missions.

McIntosh: Uh-huh. They could hit you at that level?

Bell: Oh yeah, yeah. Much higher, too. But later on because we weren't bombing quite accurately enough they did -- we got down to 12,000 feet, and once after the Marines were in Iwo Jima we did bomb ahead of their lines at 3,000 feet and when those bombs, when we dropped those bombs and they hit there was stuff --

McIntosh: Coming up.

Bell: Yes and I don't know if it was rocks, or what it was, but you could hear it rattling on the wings, and it was kind of scary to--

McIntosh: You were dropping 500 pounders?

Bell: Most of the time. We did drop 100's sometimes. We could carry a lot more 100's, of course.

McIntosh: The fragmentation type.

Bell: Once, this one that I told about in that story. Those were canisters of incendiaries or firebombs and they were real light. I don't know what they weighed, but the winds at Iwo Jima came out of the northwest and apparently it's the jet stream that we have today in our country, but it was very strong there. It was 100 or more miles an hour

McIntosh: Oh, boy (??).

Bell: And so it was real difficult to bomb and hit this little narrow part of Iwo Jima that was just below Mount Suribachi, and then it fanned out into this pork chop.

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: But the main airfield was right there in the base of Suribachi on a little narrow isthmus or something like that, and that's why a lot of the times the bombs fell in the water there, and -- but another time when we went to Marcus the lead navigator was off, and my navigator said all the time, he

said, "We're too far east, we're too far east." He said, "He's going to miss it, he's going to miss it." And he did, but we could see it down there, seventy-five miles away. Then we had to turn and go right into this wind. It took us an hour to get on the other side of the island, [McIntosh laughs] and going this way we were going only about seventy-five, you know. Our normal air speed indicated, loaded with bombs, was about 150 miles an hour. Now, it was actually faster than that because of wind or altitude, but the indicated airspeed that it showed fully loaded was about 150. But I remember we came back, as I say, about 300 across there that time. But you didn't have enough gas to do things like that. The emissions were gauged how many pounds of bombs you were going to carry, how far you had to go and that's how much gas they gave you so that there wasn't a lot to spare.

McIntosh: Generally your missions lasted how long?

Bell: Ah, the shortest ones were about nine hours; the longest ones were about thirteen and a half.

McIntosh: Those were long days.

Bell: Yup.

McIntosh: It must have been very fatiguing for you. You just, you know, tension in your shoulders and --

Bell: You could get up and walk around a little bit. Because actually, we did fly on autopilot a lot. You could trim this up, and the thing would stay right there, and it wasn't necessary for us as it was in Europe to stay in formation all the time. So we took off individually and headed for the target area and didn't form up until we got to -- close to the initial point which was a rock sticking up out of the ocean. It was called Minami Rock, but it looked like the Paramount Pictures rock that you --

McIntosh: The logo.

Bell: Yeah, and it was visible from, I don't know, fifty, 100 miles anyway. So then we would get together and only stay in formation until we were off the target area and headed towards home, and everybody would go home by themselves, try and get the airplane losing just the slightest bit of altitude. Then you would indicate about 180 miles an hour, and so it worked out much better that way. But some of the time we were instructed to fly back right on real low, just above the ocean, because there were so many B-29's that ditched between their bases and Japan. They had terrible engines to start with, and a lot of them didn't make it back.



McIntosh: The story of the B-29 was ridiculous. It wasn't even developed, and they had it in fighting and they were in the process of understanding it and then using it at the same time. It was ridiculous [laughs].

Bell: My understanding is that when they sent them overseas they carried an extra engine in their fuselage.

McIntosh: Right. And they had the engineers still with them.

Bell: They did-- there were some based in Saipan, some on Tinian, and some on Guam, which were all real close together, and they did come over one time. I remember and tried to get some of us to transfer to the B-29s but we'd heard too many stories, and a lot of went in on --

McIntosh: Engine troubles.

Bell: On takeoff. They'd go for miles and miles, they couldn't gain altitude. They were loaded so heavy, and if they lost an engine in they went.

McIntosh: They couldn't handle, go on three?

Bell: If they were up, yes, they could.

McIntosh: But many [unintelligible].

Bell: Now, later on when they had those problems taken care of it was really a fine airplane.

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: And it was so much bigger then a 24. Our navigator had a brother on Tinian and we flew over there one day just to visit him. It wasn't far, fifty miles or seventy-five, something like that, and he took us in, and let us look at a bomb bay of that thing. It was just unbelievable because ours was a skimpy little thing with a little narrow catwalk and --

McIntosh: Yeah, I've been in both [both laugh]. Did you have any trouble with fires on the plane, or was that much of a fire hazard?

Bell: Yeah, That was pretty [unintelligible]

McIntosh: Did you have any trouble with fires on the plane, or was that much of a fire hazard?

Bell: We were quite careful.

McIntosh: Other people I've interviewed said that they were real cautious about that.

Bell: We were worried about gas leaks.

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: And we hated to carry bomb bay tanks, but you had to on some of the longest missions. But you did have the bomb bay doors cracked a little bit on takeoff and if you were transferring gas, and although almost everyone in those days smoked no one smoked on takeoff or landing or when there were fumes possible, and so --

McIntosh: That's what I understand, that the fumes were there, and the potential of an explosion because of that leaking gas was such that most people took off with the bomb bay slightly open to get rid of that.

Bell: Yeah. Yeah. I've had people tell me that --; in fact one of these letters I got the other day mentioned a guy that was in our class, and he said, "I watched him takeoff and all of the sudden, 'Boom.' There was just nothing left, you know. I suppose that the slightest little spark would set off those fumes.

McIntosh: Wow.

Bell: But -- and I think about Joe Kennedy, Jr. who flew that bomber with all those explosives in it.

McIntosh: Right. I'm sure that's what happened to him. They -- so what else do I want to say? After thirty-nine missions then that was the end, and they sent you home?

Bell: We took a plane back to Hawaii, and we were only there a week or so, something like that, and what I was going to mention was about the atomic bomb. They dropped the first one while we were getting ready to leave Hawaii on the way home. It was in the headlines in the papers. None of us had ever heard the slightest inkling that we had a secret weapon, that there was a different bomb than anything else. And I say, our navigator's brother was on Tinian on this B-29s, but people really kept their mouths shut. It was a real secret that to my knowledge never leaked out. We came home on a Matson Line, [SS] *Matsonia*, I think was the name of it, and we were between Hawaii and San Francisco when the war ended. The day after they dropped the second bomb, I guess, on Nagasaki, but it was a very, very well kept secret. A week later I was out of the Army, and --

McIntosh: Oh, you got out quick.

Bell: Yup. San Francisco, train to Fort McCoy [between Sparta and Tomah, Wisconsin] out.

McIntosh: Did you join the Reserves after that?

Bell: It wasn't convenient. The closest thing was Madison, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and --

McIntosh: Which is quite a ways.

Bell: Well, at that time, I'd had enough flying to -- during, -- now--it's today it's just wonderful to be up there, to fly in that bad weather and to have to land in it, because you do have to come down, and it --

McIntosh: How did you deal with the pea soup?

Bell: Poorly. I wasn't a real good instrument pilot. I probably wasn't a real good pilot [laughs] after all in all, but to keep your eye on the instruments and not peek out was a difficult thing to do and to maintain airspeed and altitude.

McIntosh: The way they instructed you, though, was you keep your eyes on the dials and don't look outside.

Bell: Absolutely.

McIntosh: But that's easier said than done, eh? [laughs]

Bell: I made a lot of mistakes and was very fortunate. But one of them, we usually flew in four in a formation like this: the leader and then the two wingmen and then a man lower and behind, and then there'd be another one like this that would [coughs] so there was maybe twelve or sixteen. Anyway, I can remember one mission -- they always told us that any weather that you encountered that was similar to what they told us at briefing was strictly coincidental [McIntosh laughs]. And we get up there, and all of the sudden we're running into this big cloud bank, and the thing to do is maintain your airspeed and altitude, you know. So I'm trying to do that, and all of a sudden we break out, and where there had been three airplanes ahead of me there weren't any. Looked back, and I'm above them all, and they're all mine. Somehow or other I had gone up and missed those others. I don't know, but that -- it was funny; it was funny then.

McIntosh : [laughs]

Bell: But when you think, it wasn't really funny [coughs]. Excuse me.

McIntosh: No, it's terrifying.

Bell: But anyway, that was a poor, poor mission because this front -- we got up to 24,000 feet, I think, tryin' to climb above it, and we lost contact with all the other airplanes and just couldn't get out of it. Finally we were in a great big bowl, and this B-24 is just staggering like this, can't gain another inch of altitude, and it's still way above us, but I see another airplane way across this big bowl, and I try to catch up to him so there'd be two of us anyway. No way. So finally we're getting low on gas, and we've staggered around. I said to the navigator, "Get us as close to Iwo Jima you can." And so he said, "Well, we're pretty close right now." So we dropped the bombs through the overcast then and came home. My bombardier who was from Vermont and a real sharp individual, he said that that was really the turning point in the war because what we'd had done was sunk the ship that was bringing mail to the Japanese ace. His name was "Harajima". He named him of course and destroyed his morale and that was really the turning point, the end of the war [both laugh] because we'd sunk "Harajima's" mail ship.

McIntosh: [He laughs]

Bell: But it really isn't much fun to spend ten or eleven hours and not accomplish anything, and actually today I realized how little effect our bombing had on Iwo Jima. They were dug down in those holes, and it didn't do one particle of good I don't think, and maybe -- we did send -- we flew quite a bit of that what they called, "night snoopers". They would send us -- a plane out every hour, all alone, and you would go to Iwo Jima and drop your bombs. They would turn their searchlights on, and you'd drop your bombs and go home. The idea was to keep them awake so they didn't have a chance to sleep. Well, that may have worked, I don't know, but anyway in those holes that they were in--those poor Marines when they got there, that was just terrible. Now, those first pictures in that one book, that's the air -- or the ships that were in the invasion fleet because we went -- the day before the invasion -- two or three days before -- and I never saw so many ships in all my life. There were just thousands down there, and I couldn't believe that the United States had that many ships because they had them in the Philippines, they had them over in Europe, but there were just thousands in that invasion fleet. It was really something. But anyway, we dropped all kinds of bombs for months there, and I really don't think it did much good.

McIntosh: Did you bomb in the Philippine area?

Bell: No, but one of our -- the 11<sup>th</sup> Air Force did have some squadrons there also. It seems to me that they were on Palau or Peleliu, someplace in there. And some of them were in the Philippines, but I never got there.

McIntosh: Your station in Guam, was it well provisioned? Had a good mess hall?

Bell: No.

McIntosh: Not particularly?

Bell: No, ah, the Navy had all the food [laughs].

McIntosh: Huh.

Bell: That's the truth.

McIntosh: That's [unintelligible].

Bell: We ate C-rations all the time, and --

McIntosh: You didn't have a mess hall?

Bell: Oh, yeah. Yeah, but that's what they cooked in there.

McIntosh: Oh.

Bell: And we used to steal K-rations and cook them over a campfire every night almost. Eat crackers and cheese and whatever they had, but ah, we did not have good food. But the Navy, if we could get to a base you could eat there for thirty-five cents, have pork chops and steak and everything.

McIntosh: Sure.

Bell: It was good. But actually they -- on our missions for the food to take along on a mission they would send along one loaf of bread for ten people and one number ten can of Vienna sausages, and they froze always on the way, you know, and pineapple juice maybe. I've never eaten a Vienna sausage to this day since then [McIntosh laughs]. And that bread, when those guys would cut the bread you can imagine what it looked like after it was frozen and to cut it with our hunting knives but --

McIntosh: Didn't work out well.

Bell: You weren't hungry anyway. You couldn't eat on the way to the target, and on the way home --

McIntosh: Everybody smoke?

Bell: Yeah, you were too nervous, you know, and --

McIntosh: Everybody smoked?

Bell: Almost, yeah. Almost everybody.

McIntosh: That's my experience that in World War II everybody smoked.

Bell: On Guam there were no taxes. So cigarettes were a nickel a package, fifty cents a carton price at the -- you couldn't be a Scot and not smoke.

McIntosh: [laughs] Right, that's right. So, did you have trouble getting mail, or was that pretty regular?

Bell: No, that was good. We got a lot of mail. I got a letter from my wife every day almost.

McIntosh: Oh, really. That was wonderful.

Bell: Yeah. So it was important.

McIntosh: Certainly.

Bell: But our living conditions, we lived in a tent, and at first it was right on the ground. You had to sleep in netting, mosquito nets, mosquito bars [lightweight netting] because of all the mosquitoes, and it was awfully hot a lot of the time. It rained a lot. Then the sun would come out and dry things off. I heard that they raised three crops of corn there a year on Guam because of the rain and the heat.

McIntosh: Sure.

Bell: And I know the weeds grew in our yard in a hurry. But then they finally put some platforms down so that we had wood floors, but we lived in a tent.

McIntosh: I see. Did everybody stay reasonably healthy?

Bell: Yes. We took Atabrine.

McIntosh: Atabrine, yeah.

Bell: To keep off the malaria, and I don't know anybody that got it myself. But there were four officers in each tent, and our friends were in the tent right

across the little path, and they went home in April. The one of them had a helicopter's radio set that he could get anything on, the United States or Japan, you know and so we bought it from him for \$100. And instead of -- he had a big antenna up, strung around. So instead of moving that we just moved from our tent into theirs. That was the easiest way [laughs].

McIntosh: Right.

Bell: They had a parachute that was opened in there and hung so that you had a white ceiling, and the skinks [lizards] or the geckos would just run all over there. Of course we could hear the rats on the roof too, but --

McIntosh: They didn't seem to bother much.

Bell: No.

McIntosh: Did you join any of the Reserves when you got -- or you say you didn't join.

Bell: Never joined any.

McIntosh: Any veterans organizations?

Bell: I don't know why I didn't. I think they're fine organizations, but maybe I just didn't want to get involved any **[End of Tape 1, side A]** -- regrets, but all of the guys that stayed in twenty years later, they're lieutenant colonels and, or they're airplane pilots, ya know. But I just wanted to raise a family and go fishing and --

McIntosh: Get back home.

Bell: Yeah.

McIntosh: So what did you do?

Bell: I went back to the same job I'd had before. I clerked in a drugstore, and I went back to the same job and stayed there six or seven years I guess before I finally decided that I wanted to get outside and do something outside. So then I went and worked in a lumberyard, and carpenter work. I say I started at the top and worked myself to the bottom [McIntosh laughs]. When they started the National Guard in Tomahawk my friend that I worked with at the lumberyard had been a captain, and they asked him to become a commanding officer and start a new unit, and I said "All right, I'll be your executive officer." He asked me to be, and we started with thirteen, I think, former people. This is in June of 1950, and a week after we were federally recognized the Korean War would broke out. I

thought “Oh, my goodness, we’re gone.” This was a tank battalion. We didn’t have a man that had ever been in a tank. The closest was a man who’d been with a tank destroyer unit. But anyway, we did, I know now -- none of us knew anything. They wouldn’t of wanted us, but I stayed in a year then. We went to Camp Ripley [near Little Falls, MN] one year, and then I got out. But that was a -- my friend who had been the captain was not federally recognized because of a skin problem that he had, and so after a month all of a sudden I’m acting commanding officer. I didn’t want to be. I didn’t know anything about it, and anyway, I stayed in a year until we could get another commanding officer assigned, and then I got out. About forty years later through rather unusual circumstances I became the janitor at the National Guard Armory in Tomahawk [McIntosh laughs]. So I truthfully started at the top and worked my way to the bottom [laughs].

McIntosh: Oh, what a cute story. What a cute story.

Bell: But they were real good to me at the Armory. It was a part-time job, four hours a day and I --

McIntosh: You didn’t miss not being an airline pilot?

Bell: No, not really.

McIntosh: You could have done that easily. You’re certainly qualified.

Bell: Yes, yeah. What happened was a friend of mine who -- we built model airplanes together as kids, and we built bigger ones that we’d put on a wagon. He owned an airport in Beaver Dam. Just before -- during the war, I guess, or before it started he brought me up some papers on getting into the Aviation Cadets. And I had no intention in the world of going [laughs] into service if I could help it. But he left them with me anyway. He couldn’t get in because he had an eye problem. But he was an instructor all during the war, with glasses. Well, anyway, I worked in this drugstore, and I had to go to the bank every morning with our bank deposit, and the head man of the bank was also on the draft board. And one day when I went in there he said, “You know your name is coming up this Tuesday night, and you’re going to be 1-A.” I was 3-A; I was supporting my mother so I thought I was safe. He said, “We’re getting short, and we have to tap the 3-A’s now.” So I took the next day off and hitchhiked to Milwaukee and took the cadet exam. You either had to be -- have two years of college or pass this exam. That’s the toughest exam I ever took in my life. It took four hours, and I didn’t finish it, and I didn’t think I had a chance even, but a few days later they said, “Report for swearing in. You passed the exam,” and so that was, as I say, September of ’42, I guess it. And so we did -- I went down, got sworn in, and then they sent me back



home. This friend of mine is still around in Wausau, but he's the one that really was instrumental in getting me into the service.

McIntosh: Did your group win any decorations? Air Medals --

Bell: They gave you those instead of money.

McIntosh: Ah [laughs].

Bell: Yeah, I got a -- they gave you a Distinguished Flying Cross --

McIntosh: Oh, that's good.

Bell: For every twenty-five missions, and they gave you an Air Medal for every five. So I got seven Air Medals, a DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross], and then all the other, Central Pacific and things.

McIntosh: Theater ribbons --

Bell: This friend of mine, John Green, his name is.

McIntosh: Mm - hmm.

Bell: After the war, right afterwards, he said, "Why don't you come down to Beaver Dam someday, and we'll go to Milwaukee because to get your commercial license all you have to do is fill out a paper. Your instrument rating is still in effect and your pilot's rating and everything." And so I said, "All right". So I drove down to Beaver Dam one Saturday morning. We got in his plane and flew to Milwaukee, and the FAA office is closed on Saturdays. So I never went back, and that's why I never kept up my license.

McIntosh: Well, you don't regret that do you?

Bell: No, no, I don't. If I had to do it over again I'd do everything the same.

McIntosh: The worst part is being away from home and flying in the soup [laughs].

Bell: Yes. We came home from Truk [site of a major Japanese naval and air base, in the Caroline Islands] one time. I was leading that mission, and we were always so happy when we got home that we would zoom the runway, and really we could take that big 24 [B-24] around pretty steep and come in and land. And so in I come and land, and there's nobody behind me.

McIntosh: Oh, my.

Bell: And the tower says, "How come you landed downwind?" Well [laughs], I got chewed out for that. That's the first time that we'd ever landed in a different direction on that runway.

McIntosh: You don't know why you did?

Bell: Well, I wasn't paying any attention, you know.

McIntosh: Oh, I see.

Bell: But one of the other times we came in, and the weather was just terrible, and we get down and were just turning our landing lights on, and the tower says, our number, "B-24, go around," and they turned the runway lights off.

McIntosh: Oh, my.

Bell: And my copilot says, "Turn those goddamn lights on."

McIntosh: [laughs]

Bell: They said, "B-24", number so and so, "go around." And by that time our landing lights had shown -- and here's a 24 cracked up on the runway right ahead of us, and so we went around, and we had to go to another field in fact then and land.

McIntosh: They couldn't clear it in time?

Bell: No, but ah --

McIntosh: That was close.

Bell: You were expecting to land, you know, and, as I say, the weather was just terrible. It was raining, and you couldn't see hardly at all, and you're drained from being on a mission, and so we went and at the other field --

McIntosh: Flew over the next day?

Bell: Yeah.

McIntosh: Generally, when you flew a mission were you off for a day or two?

Bell: Yes.

McIntosh: They didn't make you go day after day then?

Bell: Well, we usually flew every second or third day, and so a lot of guys finished their missions real quick. I mean, it didn't take long. But at the same time you were pretty well drained I would say. When we had about twenty-five or something like that, twenty-seven, we had an opportunity to go back to Hawaii on rest leave, and we took a vote, our whole crew, and they all wanted to go so we went back and spent a week or ten days there. They had a rest camp right on Waikiki Beach [Honolulu], and as I say, the food was just wonderful, and really what people, what we wanted more than anything to drink like alcoholic beverages was milk or ice cream, and we didn't care about booze. We wanted milk or ice cream.

McIntosh: Do you think that was of great value to your crew --

Bell: Yes.

McIntosh: That respite -- was it three or four days?

Bell: Oh, it was more than that. We went there between a week and ten days.

McIntosh: But that refreshment was worth the --

Bell: Yeah. We needed a rest.

McIntosh: Right. Now you mentioned that your navigator, was it, or engineer couldn't handle it after --

Bell: That was the radio operator.

McIntosh: Radio operator.

Bell: But, as I say, here most of my crew was nineteen, twenty, twenty-one something like that.

McIntosh: And he was older.

Bell: I was twenty-six then, but he was thirty-nine, and he'd also had his marriage broke up while he was overseas. He got one of these "Dear John" letters, and here I am the old man [McIntosh laughs] that they come to with their problems, you know.

McIntosh: Twenty-six.

Bell: Yeah. But it was a tragic thing, and I'm sure that had something to do with it, too.

McIntosh: Did you ever keep track of him?

Bell: Oh, yeah.

McIntosh: He straightened out after he got home?

Bell: Yeah. He remarried, and he sold wool sweaters, and he was in the apparel business and doing very well, I think. But after he died I went and visited his wife and his daughter in Cincinnati, Ohio one time, and we had a real nice lunch together. But, no, I liked him a lot. He was Jewish. The only one we had on the crew, but he really knew how to get things done and was very efficient, a fine radio operator.

McIntosh: And the rest of the crew, where are they now?

Bell: Well, five of them are dead and there's five of us still alive. Most of us keep in pretty good touch. My navigator lives in Modesto, California, and he's been to Tomahawk. In fact, Don took us on a pontoon boat up the river here some years ago. Maybe ten years ago. But I've been to California two or three times, and we've taken trips together, and I talked to him just the other day on the phone.

McIntosh: Wonderful.

Bell: Ah, bombardier's dead, lived in Vermont. Copilot lived in Missouri, he's dead. Ball turret gunner lives in a suburb of Buffalo, New York, and he's been here, too, and we've been together and had a lot of fun at some of our reunions, but he's not a good correspondent. I haven't heard from him now for quite a while. One of the waist gunners lives in Newark, Delaware and he writes every month, real deep letters, over my head. And another one of the men lives in Bishop, California and he writes once every two or three months. So we've kept in pretty good contact.

McIntosh: Well, that's terrific.

Bell: And I just went to a town near Dubuque, Iowa last week to meet a navigator on another crew that I knew real well that I correspond with all the time. He had to come to Iowa to sell a home that his son had owned, and so we got together for lunch.

McIntosh: How nice.

Bell: A little town just south of Dubuque, Maquoketa.

McIntosh: Hey, that's wonderful. Now, does the 98<sup>th</sup> Squadron have reunions?

Bell: 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb group.

McIntosh: Oh, the 11<sup>th</sup> Bomb group.

Bell: They've had about thirty-eight or forty of them, I guess.

McIntosh: That's excellent. Better than most.

Bell: And they decided to quit two years ago. We had the last one at Washington, D.C. And they folded -- well, they ran out of money and so they just folded everything up. But what happened was that they all weren't willing yet -- now, some of them, you know, have to come in wheelchairs and canes and all this. But they all weren't willing. So some of them got together, and they had a reunion in -- where was it? Las Vegas last year? And they elected some new officers. This year they had one in Colorado Springs [Colorado], and they're going to have one next December, the 60<sup>th</sup> in Hickam Field [Pearl Harbor], because they were there at Hickam Field when it was bombed, and then the next one is already planned in Philadelphia, and they're gonna --

McIntosh: So it's got new life.

Bell: Yeah. They're going to go to Gettysburg [Pennsylvania] and other points of interest around there. So I'm going to try and go to Hawaii. I've never been back since, but we did have a reunion in Hawaii every five years since they started it, oh, I don't know, about 1960, I guess.

McIntosh: Sure. Well, that's wonderful.

Bell: Because they were there, and so on the anniversary date every year they've gone back. But it's -- there's so much attrition. But they had a newsletter. It came out three, four times a year so you found out who died and --

McIntosh: Who's dead, right. Well, that's wonderful. Terrific, thank you.

Bell: Yeah, I've -- there's a picture here, too.

**[End of Interview]**