

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Donald R. Denman  
Radio Operator, Army Air Corps, World War II

2005

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**Denman, Donald R.**, (b. 1922), Oral History Interview, 2005

User copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

**Abstract:**

Donald R. Denman, a Horicon, Wisconsin resident, discusses his experience in the Army Air Corps as a radio operator with the 27<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Squadron in the China-Burma-India Theater during World War II. Denman touches upon growing up in Gary (Indiana) and graduating from high school in Hobart (Indiana) in 1940. Denman comments that, because it was the Depression, his goal after graduating was to get a job and that his father was able to get him work at U.S. Steel. Denman worked in Gary at the steel mill for two years. After Pearl Harbor, Denman tried to enlist in the Army Air Corps. Denman reports that he was initially rejected because he was colorblind, but that in 1942 he was drafted and assigned to the Air Corps after all. Denman refutes the popular belief that colorblindness made a person ineligible for the Air Corps, explaining that for every pilot there were ten to twenty support crew on the ground. Denman provides an overview of his training: he went through basic training in Atlantic City (New Jersey) and Radio Operator School in Sioux Falls (South Dakota). In March 1943, Denman was assigned to the 27<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Squadron in Austin (Texas) where he flew on cross-country flights with General Robin Olds. He explains many of his buddies from Radio School went on to Gunnery School, but he was assigned to a troop carrier squadron because he was colorblind. In December 1943, with thirteen new planes, Denman's squadron was deployed overseas to India. He outlines the trip via Puerto Rico, British Guiana, Ascension Island, and Africa to Karachi, India (now Pakistan). Based in India, Denman explains he flew on missions to China and Burma, dropping off troops or air-dropping supplies to the Chinese troops and their American advisers on the Burma-China border. Denman states he flew 223 combat missions and around 500 combat hours between late 1943 and November 1944. He clarifies that he earned so many flight hours because his missions over the Hump, a passageway through the Himalayas, were short. Missions lasted two to three hours, roundtrip, and Denman's crew made several trips in a day. He also describes towing gliders into Burma on a classified mission to support the troops during the Invasion of Burma. Denman comments that his C-47 aircraft was "was one of the thirteen originals" to fly to India with his squadron. He states that the C-47 was a safe aircraft and that only one plane in his squadron was shot down by enemy fire. Denman comments that "our biggest enemy was the mountains and the weather." He illustrates how pilots flying through valleys in the Himalaya had nowhere to land if the airplane ran into trouble. In November 1944, Denman was grounded because he had flown so many missions and he was reassigned to an air-to-ground radio station in China. He explains that his Military Occupational Specialty was "frozen" in spring 1945, so he was unable to return to the U.S. until October 1945. After the war, Denman married and attended two years of college at Indiana University Extension. In 1948, he

moved to Madison (Wisconsin) with the aim of getting a degree in forestry at the University of Wisconsin. UW-Madison did not have a degree in forestry at the time, so Denman took night classes and worked for the John Deere Corporation in Horicon (Wisconsin) as a designer and supervisor in drafting. Denman reveals that after his retirement in 1982, he became more involved in the VFW, the American Legion, and reunions. He mentions he attended reunions of the 27<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Squadron in various American cities for eighteen years in a row and that he hosted the reunion in Oshkosh (Wisconsin) in 1993. He also mentions that the veterans' families attend the reunions as well and reflects that his own family did not seem interested in World War II until Denman retired: "My scrapbook was in a corner someplace. My family paid no attention. Now, they practically wore it out, looking at it. All of a sudden, then, they became interested and wanted to know where I was."

**Biographical Sketch:**

Denman (b. 1922) was born in Gary (Indiana) and graduated from high school in Hobart (Indiana) in 1940. He worked in Gary at the U.S. Steel Mill for two years before he was drafted into the Army Air Corps; ironically he had tried to enlist in the Air Corps the year before but was rejected because he was colorblind. Denman served as a Radio Operator with the 27<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Squadron in Karachi (India) and China. He flew 223 missions over the Himalayas and earned an Air Medal and a Distinguished Flying Cross. After the war, Denman attended Indiana University Extension for two years then moved to Wisconsin where he spent 35 years working as a drafting supervisor at John Deere Corporation in Horicon (Wisconsin). Denman is a member of VFW and the American Legion and actively participates in reunions.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2005.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.

Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2010.

**Interview Transcript:**

John: Okay, this is John Driscoll, and today is June 30, 2005. And this is an oral history interview with Don Denman, a World War II veteran of the U. S. Army.

Don: U. S. Air Corps.

John: Air Corps. I am sorry. I stand corrected. Very important. And we are at the Veterans Museum in Madison, and Don, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview and good morning.

Don: You are welcome.

John: Why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

Don: I was born in Gary, Indiana.

John: When?

Don: The 15th of March, 1922.

John: And family?

Don: Well, I have a brother and two sisters. My brother is since deceased. But my two sisters are still alive. And I went to school in Hobart, Indiana. Graduated from high school there. Went to work in the U. S. Steel mills in Gary, Indiana till the war broke out, and then I entered the service. When was it? The fourth of November, 1942.

John: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

Don: I enlisted. Both. No, I tried to enter the Air Corps and they wouldn't take me because I was color blind. So I decided to wait until I was drafted, but I couldn't wait, so I went down to enlist. And while I was enlisting, I did get my draft notification. So, indirectly, I was drafted. Somehow or other, after I was processed through the induction center, they called me and a handful aside and said, "You are going to go into the Air Corps." Which I was pleased to do. That is what I wanted to begin with. So they shipped me off to Atlantic City, New Jersey, for basic training. While there, took some aptitude tests and they decided I ought to be in communications. So they sent me to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where I went to radio operator's school. Operator mechanics. I graduated from there in March of 1943. And I was sent then to Austin, Texas, to a troop carrier squadron.

Most of my graduating buddies at radio school went on to gunnery school because they were not color blind. I was. So I couldn't go to gunnery school. So I didn't think I would be flying. But anyway, I was assigned to a troop carrier squadron which, since they don't carry guns, so I was legitimate there. I was stationed in Austin, Texas, for the summer of '43. I did a lot of cross-country flights, and training that way.

John: What were you flying in?

Don: C-47s. Yea. So then, I was sent to Florida for final phase training to be an overseas replacement. While there, the squadron that I was assigned to was alerted to go overseas, so suddenly I became a permanent member of that squadron. So we did a lot of quick training and learned to fire a gun here and there, and I was assigned to a new commanding officer's plane, so together we flew up to Baer Field, at Fort Wayne, and got some information preliminary to going overseas. Well, we picked up a brand new aircraft there and flew it back to Morrison Field, in Florida. There were thirteen of us. Thirteen new aircraft. And on the 23rd of December, 1943, we left Florida. And ours was the first aircraft in the air. Some stayed back for another day. I think even some didn't get airborne until Christmas. So from there we went to Puerto Rico. The scrapbook has a map, a pretty good map, showing the route that we flew.

John: Okay. I'll take a look at that. If you want to use that while we're talking, feel free. That's fine.

Don: And from Puerto Rico, was in British Guiana overnight. Spent Christmas Day in British Guiana. A few other places in South America. From there we went to Ascension Island. I went swimming there. We were there overnight. And we spent New Year's Eve in Madugery [?] in the heart of Africa. And I am not going to try to spell Madugery. And from there about the 6th of January, 1944, we arrived in Karachi, India, which was India at that time. Now it is Pakistan. About a week later, we were flying air drop missions already into Burma. Drop missions, dropping food, supplies, and ammunition, mortar shells, what have you, to the troops in Burma. For a while, shortly after I was there, I was assigned to headquarters where I was assigned to General Olds' crew, and I flew with him for several months. Shortly thereafter, my squadron was alerted to go to China.

John: Oh, wow.

Don: And I had the opportunity of either staying with this General Olds or going back with my outfit. So I chose to go back with the outfit. And I think I made the right choice. So then we flew over the Hump [Passage over the Himalaya Mountains] and all of our missions then were right in the Hump. We would just fly into China

and fly back across the Hump, dropping air supplies to the troops, Chinese troops and their American advisers. I flew two hundred and twenty-three combat missions.

John: Oh, my God.

Don: As I remember, and I got some five hundred combat hours. Anyway, somebody decided I had had enough and they grounded me sometime in November of '44. And then I was assigned to a communications air-to-ground radio station at Cane [?], China, until I was told I could go home. I left China in February, I believe, of 1945. And I was home sometime in early March. And I had enough points at that time to get out. But my classification, my MOS - I forget what that stood for -

John: Military Occupational Specialty.

Don: Yea. Anyway, it was frozen, so you couldn't get out, although I never went back overseas. I got out, finally, on October 24th, 1945. That pretty much tells my story.

John: When you were flying out to China, over the Hump and that, what were your living condition like?

Don: The quarters were okay. We didn't have tents. Well, most of the time we didn't have tents. And we were relatively secure. There were a few air raids on some of our airfields. And we weren't worried about any enemy troops invading us. Most of our missions were dropping to groups of Chinese on the edge of Burma. But every flight we'd make, most of the flights lasted from, a round trip would be maybe two and a half hours, but sometimes we could fly three of them in a day. So we dropped. That is how I managed to get so many missions to my credit. But while in India, we towed gliders into Burma, in the Burma invasion.

John: Oh, that must have been scary.

Don: We took off with two gliders, fully loaded, towing them taking off, and that was quite an experience. There was a Colonel Corcoran over there that organized the invasion, and I couldn't tell home what I was doing. All I had to tell them was to read the funnies, Terry and the Pirates.

John: Flip Corkin.

Don: And that would tell you exactly what we were doing. But that was, for me, only a couple weeks in the invasion, and thereafter we moved to China, to support the troops on the China and Burma border.

John: How was the aircraft to fly?

Don: Well, it was one of the safest ones. We only had two, while I was there, and I was one of the original thirteen aircraft that went over. More joined us, and more personnel came over later. I was one of the thirteen originals. We had, while I was there, only one that was actually shot down by an enemy aircraft. Most of our, we were shot at, and chased. We managed to dive down into the valley to get out. But our biggest enemy was the mountains and the weather. We lost any number of aircraft and personnel because of that. And then after I went home, of course, the replacements were still over and they lost aircraft and men, too. But most of the time it was weather and the mountains.

John: How high are the mountains?

Don: Well, where we were at, it was fourteen thousand feet.

John: Oh, wow.

Don: We'd fly, if the weather was clear, why we could fly low and in between them. But if it was overcast, to see we'd have to climb up to...

John: What's the ceiling?

Don: I was up to twenty-one thousand feet. But Mount Everest was a little further north of us. We weren't in the highest part of the Himalayas. But all of our missions were directly in the mountains. There is no place to land. Absolutely no place to land. If you had engine trouble, why, you could bail out or get back. Fortunately, I never bailed out. I had my chute on a few times but I never bailed out.

John: And, when you came back, what did you do?

Don: Well, I went to school. I got married and I went to school for two years. Indiana University Extension. But then, the longer I was married, the more married I was. We had a family started and I had to provide for them, so I wanted to go to the University of Wisconsin, and study forestry. My wife was from Wisconsin. So I had an opportunity to move up here in 1948. Soon found out they didn't even offer forestry at that time. The University of Wisconsin. And, beside that, it was obvious to me I wasn't in any position to go back to school. So I continued with night classes, correspondence, and many other seminars. Throughout my entire working life, I think I was in one seminar or another. I worked for the John Deere Corporation, and retired from there in Horicon. I was a designer and a supervisor in drafting. I retired from there after thirty-five years and I been retired twenty-

three years already.

John: Great. Retirement's great, isn't it?

Don: Retirement is great.

John: That's what they say. There's a lot of vitamins in it; it's good for you. Any reunions, or that? Do you get together with any of the fellows?

Don: After forty-four years, we had our first reunion, and we've had one every year since.

John: Oh, that's great. Where?

Don: Practically every place in the country. This year, next year, we are going to have one in New Orleans. Last year, it was in Washington, DC. And then in Seattle, Portland, Maine, East, a lot of places. We've had eighteen of them and I am the only one now that has been to every single one. In fact, I hosted one in Oshkosh in 1993. So, our members attending, we had around fifty show, the troopers. And, of course, with their wives and some families, we had well over a hundred. We're down to about twenty vets now, though we still have as many as sixty people. More of our families are starting to come along.

John: I see. That's great.

Don: We've had a reunion. After forty-four years, the very first one was very unique.

John: I can imagine. A question I ask, you were a young man, and your whole life was ahead of you. And, suddenly, this thing happened, and you got pulled out of it and sent off to the far ends of the world in harm's way, and that. How did you feel about that?

Don: I think, for me and most everyone at that time, wanted to go in the service. We felt sorry for the person who couldn't go because of whatever reason they had, that they weren't going to get into the service. We didn't consider them draft-dodgers, or anything like that. Everybody wanted to get in. As I can remember about that time.

John: Do you remember what you were doing on Pearl Harbor Day?

Don: I was working at the steel mills when I got word. That was on a Sunday, I believe. So, first thing, right away, I wanted to enlist like everybody else, and I wanted to get in the Air Corps. But, like I said, I couldn't, because I was color blind. I ended



up in, anyway, and even ended up flying.

John: I remember I was four or five on Pearl Harbor Day, and the big question was “Where the hell is Pearl Harbor?”

Don: I didn’t know anything about it then, either.

John: My dad didn’t know where it was.

Don: And I often wondered, since, about the Air Corps. If you were color blind, or if your eyesight wasn’t just right, well, you couldn’t get in. I guess we all assumed if you went into the Air Corps, you were going to fly. And, actually, for every man flying, there had to be ten or twenty support people on the ground. I thought, I could have fit in somewhere, in that area. There were more people on the ground than there were in the air.

John: You had the G.I. Bill. Did you use it?

Don: Oh, yeah. Used the G.I. Bill to go to school, and I even used the 4% interest you could get on your mortgage. I took advantage of all of that.

John: How about vets organizations?

Don: I am ready. American Legion and the VFW. But, lately, about six years ago, I joined. I was too busy with other stuff, and I got involved with my own squadron reunions, and what have you. Now, I am a member of both.

John: What squadron?

Don: The 27th Troop Carrier Squadron. This is written, you can have that.

John: Okay. I’ll give this to Gayle. Oh, that is great.

Don: I don’t know who wants-- I wouldn’t part with this. If somebody wants to look this one over, and take information from it. Or what?

John: These are great.

Don: That is one of our aircraft there. Awards. Got the Asiatic-Pacific Combat Ribbon, with two battle stars, and I got the Air Medal, with two oak leaf clusters, and the Distinguished Flying Cross, with one oak leaf cluster.

John: That is a tremendous number of missions to fly.

- Don: Yea. They weren't that long.
- John: I talked to fellows in Europe flying bombers, and their missions were eight to ten hours.
- Don: And, twenty-five missions, if they were lucky to survive it, well, they could go home.
- John: This is tremendous. This is a great story. These stories are all so precious. I have, a friend of mine just passed away, Stephen Ambrose, the writer, who had written quite a bit about World War II, and he was at a meeting of some vets here, a couple of years ago. And he said, he was saying, you know, you guys were great. And a lot of the guys were saying, "I didn't really do anything." He said, "Would you stand up?" And all these guys stood up. And he said, "You were giants! You went out and saved the world!" And you did. You did.
- Don: We didn't think so, at the time. And when we came back, all we wanted to do was get back to starting our family. When I graduated from high school, the Depression was just starting to get over. My dad worked in the steel mills and so I was able to get started there, maybe a little faster than somebody else. If they didn't have someone who worked there. And all I wanted to do when I got out of school was to get a job. But that didn't last long. I ended up going in the service.
- John: When did you get out of high school?
- Don: 1940. So I was out two years before I entered the service.
- John: I was raised in Sharon, PA, which is also a steel town. Sharon Steel. And I came out of the service in 1958-59, and, man, nothing. The steel companies really took it. Well, we bombed out the European and Japanese mills and put new ones in there. Okay. Anything else that you want to touch on? This is a remarkable story. Wow.
- Don: I can't think of anything. You might have some questions that I could answer, or try to answer, anyway. What I came here for, to begin with, was to donate all these publications I have been receiving on the CBI [China-Burma-India Theater]. I have them dating back, almost all the copies, from 1987 to now. Because I was wondering where to get rid of them. I didn't want to destroy them. I asked the Horicon Public Library if they would be interested and there was some new girl there, she said she didn't think so. Well, she probably never heard of World War II, to begin with. She didn't see the publication. I think, maybe, had I walked in there and showed her, because they are nice publications, they may have said yes. But anyway, I found out about the Museum here that might want them, so, as far

as I am concerned, when I am done with them, why, they can all come here. They are all here now, except for the last ones I received.

John: They do a great job here. And I been working, off and on, here for twenty-some years. And they do a great job here.

Don: And I have a lot of material at home that I'd like to keep in the family, but I am sure when they get it, it will be stored someplace in the attic.

John: Tell them to send it here.

Don: And, actually, until I retired, which was in 1982, I had no particular contact with my squadron, or anybody in it. I hadn't paid much attention, and my scrapbook here was in a corner, somewhere. My family paid no attention. Now, they practically wore it out, looking at it. All of a sudden, then, they became interested, and wanted to know where I was.

John: The museum will send you a copy of this transcript. They won't let anyone else have one. If you want to show it to you family and that, that's fine. But they will send you a copy of it, when it is typed up. I'll type it up. It may be a couple of weeks before I get to it. I just got a book published, and I am kind of pressed for time. But I'll type it up and send it to them, and they'll send you a copy, and you can show the family, if you want do. Don, is it Don, or Donald?

Don: Donald. I usually sign my middle initial, which is R.

John: And can I get your-- let's see.

**[End of Interview]**