

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
KEN HELFRECHT
Pilot, Army Air Force, World War II.

1999

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Helfrecht, Ken, (1925-). Oral History Interview, 1999.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 65 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 65 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 65 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Ken Helfrecht, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his service as a pilot in the 4th Fighter Group, 2nd Division, 8th Air Force during World War II. Helfrecht speaks of enlisting in the Army Air Force Reserve at age seventeen and entering pilot training in 1943, just after his eighteenth birthday. He states that during his pre-flight training at Maxwell Field “they still had hazing.” Helfrecht describes getting treatment for viral pneumonia and being sent home on a three week medical furlough. He speaks of flying a Stearman PT-17 at a civilian-lead primary flying school, a Vultee Vibrator at basic in Macon (Georgia), and AT-6s during advanced training at Jackson (Mississippi). He recalls his group being the first Americans to train at Jackson, which had previously been training Dutch pilots. At replacement training unit in Sarasota (Florida), he talks about aerial gunnery practice and skip bombing, and he touches on having two weeks of bivouac at Tallahassee (Florida). Helfrecht recalls landing at a Royal Air Force base in Cockshale (England), where he first flew a P-51. He recalls all his clothing being sheepskin lined. In England he joined the 4th Fighter Group, 8th Air Force as a replacement. Helfrecht details the differences between gyro gunsight and fixed gunsight. Assigned mostly to escort duty, he details the only dogfight he was in and confesses he almost shot down one of his own flight leaders. Helfrecht describes a typical mission flying cover for B-24 and B-17 bombers and explains the use of drop tanks. During a strafing run, he tells of his plane being hit and losing hydraulic fluid, but being able to fly it back to base. He speaks of practice skeet shooting and confusion caused by British and American pilots using the trigger for different things. He reveals his unit competed with the 56th Fighter Group for “most aircraft destroyed.” On days off he recalls going to the Rainbow Club, a USO club, in London. After the war ended, Helfrecht states he languished in Debden (England) for a few months and he sketches the demobilization of the air fields. He describes his flight record and reflects on the quality of his training. Helfrecht mentions flying a half hour slow time in a P-47, stating they had nice landing characteristics, and he expresses his admiration for the German Me 262. He talks about keeping in touch with people through correspondence, attending 4th Fighter Group reunions, joining and dropping out of the VFW, and having a career as a transmission engineer with GTE Corporation. After two years in the Reserves in Milwaukee (Wisconsin), he explains why he stopped flying.

Biographical Sketch:

Helfrecht (b.1925) served with the 8th Air Force during World War II. Stationed in England, he flew missions into Germany and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. After two years in the Reserve, he received a bachelor's degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, moved to Wausau (Wisconsin) to pursue a career with GTE Corporation, and eventually settled in Madison (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999.
Transcribed by Alex Rosinski, 2009.
Transcript corrected by Channing Welch, 2010.
Corrections typed by Katy Marty, 2010.
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

Jim: Okay. You were born in Madison in 1925, and you entered the military in 1943. Where did you go [unintelligible]?

Helfrecht: Well, I don't know how it started, but I became aware of an opportunity to enlist in the Army Air Corps Reserve, I guess it was called, at seventeen years of age. It was a program where when you were called after your eighteenth birthday, you'd go right into cadet training. It was attractive to me, and so actually took my physical out at Truax in the winter of '42 to '43, that's as specific as I can be, just before my eighteenth birthday. Then I was called to active duty shortly after my eighteenth birthday April 2nd, 1943. I don't know how I got there but I imagine the Army paid for it, I took a train or something to Nashville, which was called classification. The classification people were there, and I was there for a month. We took physicals and all kinds of psychological and motor skill tests to determine whether we would be put in the bombardier, navigator, or pilot training program, and by the grace of God I got my wish to go into pilot training. In fact I think it was at that time, although it might have been later, when there was a decision to be made whether to go into single engine or twin engine training. Then we went down to Maxwell Field for what they called pre-flight, that was kind of like basic training. But I'll have to say that if I hadn't been in ROTC here at the University, I probably never would have learned close order drill, because we did march, but we didn't practice marching like we did in ROTC. So I was at pre-flight for, it was supposed to be for two months, but sometime during the first month, toward the end of the first month, which was underclass training, they still had hazing. I came down with the virus pneumonia. I had night sweats and just felt miserable, and I finally went to sick call, and they said I had bronchitis, and they put me in the hospital for a few days. Well, after I was in the hospital, they decided I had viral pneumonia and I was there for seven weeks on sulpha, I guess penicillin was saved for -- Okay, that's good that you're a doctor, you'll know where I'm lying in some of these areas. [laughs]

James: You're not lying, that was what they did then.

Helfrecht: And then when I got, I was with Class 44A at that time, which was all prior servicemen and when I went in service my voice hadn't even changed yet. So they were filling me full of -- everything. When I got out of the hospital I was given a three week medical furlough, and in that period of time my voice had changed, so when I came home, I came down the driveway in the dark, my mother had just come home from workin' at Truax, and she didn't know who it was. [James laughs] So after that three weeks I went back to Maxwell Field for my second month as an upperclassmen, and I was now with 44C and these were all kids, I'll call

'em, essentially my age, my background, my educational experience. Most of them had languished in some, I want to say B12, but I don't know if that's right, some program where they came from different colleges.

James: ASTP. [Army Specialized Training Program]

Helfrecht: Okay.

James: Yeah, that's the Army. V-12 was the Navy.

Helfrecht: Navy. They'd been in the service actually longer than me, but they were like-minded kids, so I went through the rest of my training with them, and that really helped. So that's how I got into the service. That's probably a long answer to a short question.

James: So when did they decide what kind of airplane you were gonna fly?

Helfrecht: I really don't, after pre-flight, we went to primary flying school, which is also for two months, and you log about eighty, eighty five hours. I flew a Stearman PT-17. It was at, oh shoot, some days I remember it, some days I don't, it was in Georgia, a little town, in the southern part maybe that will come to me later. It was a civilian flying school, nice campus, small, but nice. I was the bugler. That meant I had to put the record on for [James laughs] meals and stuff like that. So then, I think it was when we finished primary that they decided which way we would go. But then I went to Macon, Georgia for basic, flew a Vultee Vibrator there, and I got my first night flying. Then went to Jackson, Mississippi for my advanced. I was with the first class of Americans at Jackson. They had been training Dutch pilots, mainly from Indonesia, prior to that. They were training in, I think B25s, and the stories I got were they were a wild bunch, and when I say wild I mean they were good pilots, because they didn't have a care in the world, it seemed. That's where I got my wings, was at Jackson. My mother came down on the Illinois Central for the graduation. Then I went on from there.

James: So what kind of plane were you flying now?

Helfrecht: I flew AT-6s in advanced, and then had a brief stint, and when I say that, it was two weeks or a month, I don't remember which, of gunnery in an AT6 down at Eglin Air Force Base. Again, we always had to wait until some time between 10:00 A.M. and noon for the fog to lift, because it was early spring or some time after March. Then I went to Tallahassee, which was the replacement depot, languished there for about a month, and then went to Sarasota for replacement, what we call RTU, replacement training unit, flew P-40s there, and had a lot of aerial gunnery practice on a sleeve

target, and skip bombing with false bombs that I want to comment later on. Anyhow all that aerial gunnery was with the fixed guns.

James: From your point of view (??) the P-40, what's your impression of it?

Helfrecht: I loved it. Had a nice landing characteristic[?]. Just --

James: How fast did it go?

Helfrecht: Well, the problem is that the air speed indicator acts as a function of altitude, so what it says has got absolutely no relationship to either air speed or ground speed. So you could ask me that on any aircraft I flew and I would be hesitant. I'd be more likely to quote what I read in the newspapers.

James: That's an answer I've never heard. I've asked several people that.

Helfrecht: A lot of my flying later was how long it took, rather than how fast we were going. [both laugh] So I was at Sarasota for a good two months. I don't remember if it was before Sarasota or after Sarasota, but some place in there, sandwiched in two weeks of bivouac we were in Tallahassee at the time. They didn't have such a need for pilots at that time, you might say that life was starting to back up a little bit. So they sent us to bivouac at a Boy Scout camp some place in the Florida swamps, and that's actually where I learned to swim. I enjoyed those two weeks, I really did, and in that period of time, my best friend Walt Hughes from Memphis still lives in Memphis, and I drove one weekend so he could see his new bride. We drove from Tallahassee to Memphis and then we went back. Then when we got done with replacement training, went back to Tallahassee, and I don't remember again, one of these places, there was some time lag, idle time. I left Florida September 5th; I remember these dates because they impressed all of us, left Florida September 5th, arrived at Cockshale, England, up near the Humber on September 12th. We had sheepskin lines—

James: '43?

Helfrecht: This would have been '44. Sheep skin lined boot, sheep skin lined clothes, helmet, everything sheep skin line. We were put in a Nissen hut with these little space heaters, I guess they were probably British manufactured, and one of the guys even went to bed at night with the boots on, because the contrast was unbelievable, we just froze. That's where I first flew a P-51. I had twelve hours again transitional training in P-51As and Bs, they're probably Bs. These were the ones with the Allison engines, and they were designed as low flying aircraft, mainly for ground support. The Bs were the first ones with Rolls- Royce Merlin engines, and

more for altitude, they had two speeds, two stage super charger, it had a Packard engine. in the back, and I'll maybe comment about that a little bit more later. They must have been all Bs—

James: That late in the war I would think. That's when they started flying, a year before --

Helfrecht: Anyhow, they have the old cage and all that, you couldn't see out of it because of all that, kind of like a modern Buick where there's a post every place you want to look. But they had, I don't remember getting any gunnery, but I think they were equipped with the gyro gun sight. So anyhow, after that twelve hours, then I went to, I think we had some choice, there was a group of ten of us that were kind of together, came through training together. Anyhow, we chose to go with the 4th Fighter Group, which was the first fighter group in the 8th Air Force. It was made up of, originally, of all the old Eagle Squadron, 71st, 73rd, and 121st, I think the numbers were. All those fellas that were Americans that either went to Canada or right to Britain and were flying with me. RAFs streamin' battle Britain were what started the fighter wing in the 8th Air Force.

James: Jim Edsall. He was in [unintelligible].

Helfrecht: Oh.

James: RAF [unintelligible]

Helfrecht: Okay, well then, if he flew the B-24 he was in the same division as I was, that was 2nd Air Division, 8th Air Force. I don't envy him.

James: Jim Edsall, you say, I ought to write his name down.

Helfrecht: So, do you want me to just continue?

James: Yes, where you were.

Helfrecht: Okay, well like I said we were sent to the 4th Fighter Group in mid October I think, 1944, as replacement pilots. The 4th had quite a reputation already, which we heard about, but assumed was pretty much embellished. The CO when I first got there was Colonel Blakeslee, who was quite well known, established quite a reputation for himself, not that he was self-centered, but he was a good leader, and the man for the hour. But he actually was taken off line status a couple months after I got there, because they had lost Gabby Gabreski 56th Fighter Group, and the Air Force didn't want to lose both of them.

James: He flew a P-47 (??)?

Helfrecht: Yeah. And I just, his book is one of them I've read in the last two years. I really liked it, probably one of them I liked the best was his book. Anyhow, I was introduced to the gyro gunsight, and I didn't do enough shooting, by the grace of God, to ever really get used to it. And there were a lot of the older pilots that didn't bother with it, they just continued to use the fixed gunsight, there were some of them like Captain Carlow, really good at deflections, and they just stayed with that.

James: Tell me how that worked, the gyro.

Helfrecht: Well, it worked by precession, first of all. It would compensate for all of the forces that were being impinged, I can't think of the right word, on the aircraft at the moment that the bullet was going out the barrel. If you were even skidding, it would process in such a way that it would say, "Hey, the bullet's gonna go over there because you're skidding." The main thing was that if you were in a tight turn, that gun sight would go right down into your own nose, and say you've gotta lead that aircraft so much that you can't even see it if you want to hit it. That must have created problems sometimes, but I didn't ever get into that kind of a circumstance. Because we were the 2nd Air Division, 8th Air Force, most of our activity was escorting. The most dangerous thing we did was we would strafe, but by the time I was on Ops, the lines were moving so fast, our lines were moving so fast, they would not let us strafe closer than fifty miles up the front line, on the Germans. But some of the flight leaders were a little more gung ho than others, and you could count on once we let the bombers that they'd want to go down and do something. My second mission was the only time that I fired my guns that I can recall air to air. We were bouncing some Germans, and when I say we, there's about seventy of us in the group maybe in the air at one time. Well, forty eight then, maybe at that time, but one of the fellas I went over with, fellow by the name of Childs from Garden City, whichever one that is, he just froze. Like I said, it was his second mission too, our first. There was a German on his tail and he froze and he was shot down. My flight leader went after that German, and of course my job is to stay with my flight leader and protect him, and so I'm tootling along after him, and Bob, who I just saw this summer, he just about emptied his guns. When you get close to the end of what you've got, you get some tracers that let you know you're almost out of ammo, well he came down across the air field after that German and pretty well unloaded his guns, and he started screaming in the radio, and I couldn't figure out for a long time what he wanted. But I finally figured it out, that he wanted me to put my throttle to the firewall if it wasn't already and go after that guy. So I did, but by then, just about the time I figured it out the German goes into the clouds. So I went after him, and came out the other side and there's an aircraft. I started shooting, by the grace of God, because I didn't know how to use the gun sight, I

missed. It was one of our own flight leaders. I don't say this with any braggadocio or whatever you say. I've confessed it once or twice before, because I've never been able to forget it. But I did miss him.

James: The whole thing?

Helfrecht: Yeah, and it gives you good demonstration about how wild you can get when the pressure's on.

James: I understand.

Helfrecht: Anyhow, never did see the German again, and came back. Another time, I got hit by ground fire when we were strafing. Cockpit filled up with smoke, lost my hydraulics fluid, but other than that, no problem. I was able to get back and about the only other time I fired my guns and had some effect – it's a cite of a flight record here, I got credit for five aircraft destroyed on the ground. They probably were all aircraft the Germans wouldn't want anyhow because it was near the end of the war. Like I said, most of the time I spent escorting.

James: Give me a -- typical mission would be the bombers would be up before you took off or—

Helfrecht: They'd be up before I got *up* --

James: -- They had to form, before you get up there while they're takin' on, [unintelligible], right?

Helfrecht: That's right, I usually would wake up and hear them forming up, and like it was a permanent RAF station, and where we were stationed, we even had batmen that like take care of our rooms, and we had waitresses, an officer's mess on a beach—

James: English?

Helfrecht: Yeah. So we would, some enlisted men would, I don't know if they banged on the door first or just burst in the room and woke us up, get dressed, and go eat breakfast, and go to briefing, and then they take us out to flight line weapons carriers, I think that's what they were called. Bigger than a jeep, smaller than a tank. [laughs] Then we would take off—

James: What time would you usually leave? Ten?

Helfrecht: You know, I really can't remember, but most of our missions when I was over there were five to six and a half hours long, and we'd always get back before dark. We would take off in pairs, and we would form up circling

the field, and I don't know how this ever was accomplished, but this last summer, or this summer, I saw one of the guys had a map that shows all the airfields in England at that time. I don't know how you could walk between the air fields, there were so many of them. We formed up, then we would climb out, and we'd usually meet the bombers just about landfall, or further in maybe later in the war, that part I'm unclear on. We would fly high cover, middle cover, and lower cover, and if you were high cover, you were usually about three thousand feet higher than the bombers. Never liked to fly high cover when we were flying B-17s, which we did sometimes because depending upon the needs, we did cross over between divisions. If you flew high cover for the B-17s, you'd be up around 32,000 feet, and boy, that aircraft would just mush all over.

James: That's too bad about that.

Helfrecht: Yeah, and we were flying with very low mercury. We'd fly with about thirty inches of mercury, which is about an atmosphere. So we didn't have to estimate, we still would have to guess off, to see a whole group of aircraft trying to stay with the bombers, sweeping back and forth.

James: Because you were going so much faster.

Helfrecht: Yeah, even at that low speed too.

James: Tell me about the drop tanks. When did you use those?

Helfrecht: Well, we would take off and fly out on the fuselage tanks until you get down to about half full because P-51s are terribly tail-heavy with full fuselage tank and really dangerous if you're in a tight turn. So we would draw that down to something like forty or forty five gallons from I think they had a maximum of eighty five gallons in there, and then we'd switch to the drop tank, and try to use these as much as we could. We would drop them if there was any likelihood of aerial combat. There were two kinds. There were the metal ones and the fiberglass ones, and the fiberglass ones had the tendency to stop drawing. Three squadrons in the group, and one squadron tried to keep their metal tanks I would think out of jealousy, so they would as much as possible come back with those. Our squadron always used fiberglass, and we would drop it. Just fly on them, if you didn't have to drop them, you'd fly on them until they were empty, then get rid of them. If you had fired your guns, usually emptied them over the North Sea, I'm a little unclear on that, I remember doing it, but I don't remember if that was the rule. I had the opportunity to see a lot of bombers go down just because, I don't know how those guys have that kind of guts, because once they hit the IP, the initial point, that's where they turn to the target and fly in and drop their bombs. Many of these

targets we went to, there would be just a solid black wall of black smoke—

James: They had to fly through that?

Helfrecht: They had to fly through it. I was never so happy for choosing single engine flying school as when I was observing that. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** We had our losses, but not like the bombers. So then, towards the end of the war, there was a great deal of competition, particularly between the 56th Fighter Group and the 4th Fighter Group for ending up with the most aircraft destroyed. In fact, the first book on our group that was written was written by our public relations officer, whose name escapes me right now. He's dead; he died I would say probably dead by around 1950. He called it "*One Thousand Destroyed*." In fact, he wrote a history while he was still in England, called "*Tettley's Tenants*." "*One Thousand Destroyed*" was just kind of an add on to "*Tettley's Tenants*." There's been a lot written about our crew, because it was good public relations, I guess, to keep everybody's eyes on. But the 56th and we were in deep competition for total aircraft destroyed. Theoretically, we ended up beating them, but that was because the last few weeks of the war, they would, wing headquarters would authorize one group or the other one to do some strafing, and we'd go in to some of these airfields that the Germans didn't have very well defended, if at all, and chewed up all their old Junkers and ME-110s, and that's how I got halves of the aircrafts destroyed on my record. [laughs]

James: [unintelligible]

Helfrecht: When I was on operations—

James: [speaks softly, unintelligible]

Helfrecht: 9th Air Force was formed I think, I don't know if they ever were formed before they left England or not, but the 9th Air Force grew out of the 8th, and they were the ones that went to Europe, they were ground support with P-47s, which could handle a lot more, yeah, they could handle a lot more punishment. I stayed at Debden and languished in England until November, after the war was over, because I had enough hours, I didn't want to retrain; I guess they'd send me to the Pacific. I don't know that I know all the rules, but I do know I stayed there until November, and I actually in retrospect think those months after the war ended with nothing to do were harder on me than combat.

James: [speaks softly] [unintelligible]

Helfrecht: That's right.

- James: [speaks softly, unintelligible]
- Helfrecht: There was no sales talk, but—
- James: There were suggestions?
- Helfrecht: But there were fellas that came after me, that had fewer missions, that did get sent home and back, and I think some of them even got out to the Pacific.
- James: [speaks softly, unintelligible]
- Helfrecht: That's all out, that was at the point I remember that [papers shuffling], but this incidentally is a letter from a guy I sent this to, Gary Fry, he's now deceased. He died in an aircraft accident about two years ago. I think he was flying a P-51 or P-52, but anyhow, this is what you look at, you can probably read it better than me, but I think this had something like fifty four. This was kept by our operations office in the squadron.
- James: This is another original?
- Helfrecht: Yeah. Now in back, it has something about sorties, apparently they gave me credit for more sorties than missions, so I don't know how they counted a sortie.
- James: Yeah, I don't know. I know what a sortie is, but [speaks softly, unintelligible]
- Helfrecht: Yeah, that was, I got an air medal for every ten sorties, and on that basis I'm short several oak leaf clusters, but I'm not gonna worry about that. It also lists on the back here, they did write down here, those are the aircraft I destroyed. Here they've got a little symbol for an air medal every time I was awarded an air medal. I don't know if the DFC is showing on there or not, but I got a DFC for leadership. Those orders I think are in there, the DFC was actually awarded sometime after the war ended.
- James: Sounds right.
- Helfrecht: But I started pawing through those papers, and I got another book of stuff from when I was in Milwaukee from 1952-54 in the Reserves down there. I gave up trying to find documentation for some of these.
- James: So, the war was winding down, fewer and fewer targets, fewer and fewer missions. Then what [unintelligible]. When you all went home, did you go home separately?

- Helfrecht: Well, I'll give you a long answer that'll make him proud of me, but my crew chief, and most of the enlisted men were actually at Debdin longer than my entire military career, my crew chief, and I saw him this summer. He was at Debdin for three and a half years.
- James: You mean after the war?
- Helfrecht: No, no, I'm sorry, total time at Debdin, but what I'm trying to say is there was a point system. You got points, you maybe know it better than me, you got points for when you were in service, I think. We got points for awards—
- James: Yeah, I know that everybody got points, what else?
- Helfrecht: So, the first guys that went home were all over forty years of age. The two enlisted men that were, the main ones in our operations office were both over forty years of age, but one of them I remember his name, John. They went home right away, like if the war ended on the fifteenth, they went home on the sixteenth, that's what it seemed like. Then they started going home by points. A couple months after the war was over, they took the aircraft away from us, every air frame was over a hundred dollars worth trashed. We took them up someplace near Liverpool, I don't remember where it was, trashed it. We didn't even have anything to fly with after that. Then they moved us to one of these temporary airfields that some other fighter squadron, I think, maybe it was a bomber group, some other group had been, and I don't even remember the name of it, but it was nissen huts, and latrines separate from the nissen huts. In order to get running water a little closer to our place of abode, we were able to get a hold of some drop tanks and convert them to water tanks. We'd drill them with the garden hose, and then we'd have our water in our [laughs] barracks (??). That was, and I don't remember exactly how many months we were there, that's where we languished until we came home.
- James: When you went home, you went right out of the service, you didn't stay once you got back to the United States?
- Helfrecht: No. I wouldn't even be able to tell you how many days it was. I at least traveled in pretty good style on the ocean, went over on the *Mauritania*, and we had pretty nice quarters there, there was a state room, and even were able to use the bathtub, although it had salt water. [laughs] Boy, did that itch. On the way home, we came home on the *Mary*, and that was more like a troop ship. We were packed in like sardines, the only place to put the luggage was – like our P4 bags was in the bathtub. We came home and I think went to Fort Sheridan, I think, to get out.

James: Did you escort any B-24s?

Helfrecht: That was almost all my escort was—

James: B-24s?

Helfrecht: Yes, rather than the B-17s. Our wing, the 65th Fighter Wing was in the 2nd Air Division. The 2nd Air Division was all B-24s. The 1st and 3rd were all B-17s, so we would only escort B 17s if the men upstairs decided there was gonna be this change. We were flying maximum effort a lot the last few months. Normally a group would put up forty-eight aircraft. There would be four flights of sixteen aircraft for each squadron, but when we flew maximum effort, they put just about every serviceable aircraft and pilot on the field in the air, and we would be putting up something like seventy aircraft. On some of these missions toward the end of the war. How we were divvied up, I don't recall, but I just think we didn't all stay as one unit under those circumstances; maybe some would fly with one of the other air divisions.

James: Did you ever fly a 47?

Helfrecht: I have a half hour slow time in a 47. We had one on the field for a period of time, the commanding officers and those higher up would sweet talk one guy into something [James laughs] and another guy, and so we had a P-47. It had a new engine in it and we had to be slow time with it for I don't know how many hours, and I took it out for about a half hour. I don't remember why, but I did get it into a spin one time. I probably turned too tight for the throttle setting, at slow time you're supposed to keep manifold pressure down. Anyhow, I loved the landing characteristics of that. I landed that aircraft once, and I probably made a better landing with it than I ever made in a P-51. A P-51 had a laminared flow air foil that flowed air, which had a real sharp stall characteristic. You had to be near the ground when it stalled—

James: It was stalling. Do you know Cliff Bowers, he flew a P-47, and he shot down two (??) [Me] 262's.

Helfrecht: Cliff Bowers.

James: He lives next to Gordon [unintelligible] on Lafayette Drive.

Helfrecht: The name doesn't (??) ring a bell, but there weren't many people that shot 262s [pronounced two-six-twos].

James: [speaks softly, unintelligible]

- Helfrecht: You mean in the landing pattern or something?
- James: Well, I don't know, I'd have to ask them specifically.
- Helfrecht: When those 262s first were flown, they could mess up a whole mission, because everybody wanted to get at it, you know. Finally had to get some organization on how to handle that, which was first order approximation was ignore them, second was maybe assign one flight of four to see whether they would do something about it. The Germans did a good job of using that to distract us.
- James: [speaks softly, unintelligible]
- Helfrecht: I saw airfields that were wingtip to wingtip with hundreds of 262s. If they would have been able to get the fuel for them --
- James: You think that's the reason you beat them in the war?
- Helfrecht: That's my belief. I've never read or heard anything to that effect, but that's my belief, and you couldn't get near those aircraft. They had so many anti-aircraft guns in those airfields, we didn't fool with those.
- James: Did you ever shoot any [unintelligible] ?
- Helfrecht: The pilots. Yeah.
- James: [unintelligible] they had to know that the fuel capacity --
- Helfrecht: Oh, I see. Wouldn't allow them more than 20 minutes. I see. I didn't know that. They also had a rocket aircraft, and I don't remember the number.
- James: Komet.
- Helfrecht: Komet.
- James: It was launched, and they lost fuel. Came down on its skids.
- Helfrecht: That was the one that, they used a lot of psychological warfare on me. [James laughs] One time I had to fly RT relay. When the longer missions would take us into Berlin, and into Prague and places like that, and in order to be able to communicate with Nuthouse, which was our codename for the radar at Liege, we would have flight aircraft that would just go part way in, and then whatever the Commanding Officer wanted to communicate with VH, we would relay. We were flying around during it all by ourselves, with a plume of contrails going straight up, and they

made me nervous as the dickens. I thought those were all those rocket aircraft, and they were probably V-2s being launched to go to England, but I didn't particularly care for that activity.

James: And you didn't see any buzz bombs?

Helfrecht: Heard them. The squadron histories talk about buzz bombs landing near the air field, even the one when I was there, I'll be darned. I probably slept right through it [laughs] because I could sleep through just about anything. I butchered that almost as an anecdote. We got a lot of skeet shooting in the training for deflection shooting. I can't remember the air field anymore, but I remember the skeet range and it had this gravel where you go to different stations, and there was a shed where they probably kept the ammo and that, but—

James: Sheds would blow alright.

Helfrecht: Anyhow, I fell asleep laying on that gravel waiting for my turn to shoot. [laughs]

James: When they would instruct you, using thirties, the thirties—

Helfrecht: We had fifty—

James: Fifties?

Helfrecht: Yeah, fifty caliber.

James: Two or four on each side?

Helfrecht: We had three on each side, but they had about fifty rounds more than the other two, and that was when we started getting those tracers that we used, in the end (??)

James: Then when they instructed you, did they instruct you in a particular way using the short bursts, or did they let you make the call?

Helfrecht: They were pretty emphatic that you fire short bursts, but I never heard of a pilot shooting at an aircraft that did this. Just like I was telling you about Bob Dickmeyer, he just put the trigger down, and I won't elaborate on it, and he just kept firing. I think he had, maybe he thought he had a fire hose. [James laughs] But that's another thing, because it was former Eagle Squadrons, those fellas, the Brits used the tip on top for guns, and the trigger on the stick for tanks, or drop them. All my training, and all the other Army Air Corps units, they used the trigger for the trigger. Just fire the guns and the tip on top the bombs, and that like I said was the way

I was trained too. So that was another problem with the, in fact I might have, I don't remember now, but that might have given me problems with shooting at that German on that second mission, because that's the first time I fired guns from a P-51. I probably was wondering why, and I haven't had this thought since 1945. It was probably during one of the delays in switchin' (??) --

James: After a mission, what was the usual ?

Helfrecht: After a mission the first thing would be a shot of brandy and an interview with an intelligence officer. Ben Ezell was our intelligence officer, and he was another father image for me, and really well liked by all the guys. He's dead now. Then after debriefing, we were pretty much on our own for the rest of the day.

James: Were missions generally run daily or were they were interspersed with some time off?

Helfrecht: There were missions, when I was over there, missions essentially daily. There were enough pilots that even though the squadron might be flying every day, the pilots didn't fly every day. Now, you might have two or three days that you did fly, but there was not an extended time that you didn't have a day free of flying.

James: You mentioned everybody didn't go up in the air on the same day, except for the inception?

Helfrecht: Yeah.

James: So, you had a day off. Now what did you do with the day off?

Helfrecht: Not a heck of a lot that I can recall.

James: You go into town and visit?

Helfrecht: Well, that was a, to some extent a personal preference. The enlisted men especially developed a lot of personal relationships with the Brits. In fact, we have several former British wives that come to our reunions. But I didn't become familiar with the surrounding towns. The train station was at a community called Audley End near Saffron Walden, and I would go to the train station and go on in to Rainbow Club in London, USO club. But I've never been an observant person, which is not a very good attribute for a pilot that's looking for targets of opportunities. Maybe that's where I learned to be an observer. [laughs, unintelligible]. But, where were we going with this?

- James: The Rainbow Club.
- Helfrecht: Oh, yeah. I didn't do the sightseeing I could have done in London. I did go to Big Ben, but I never got to St. Paul's. I did look through the fence at Buckingham Palace, I did go to Madame Tussauds wherever she is. If she's in Paris, that happened then when we landed one time. I don't honestly remember what her—
- James: Did the (??) Germans bomb London while you were there?
- Helfrecht: Not with aircraft, no.
- James: Buzz bombs were buzzing.
- Helfrecht: Yeah. I'm sure that I must have heard at least one buzz bomb when I was, because I could still hear the motor.
- James: So, after you got home, you kept in contact with your organizations, what's going on?
- Helfrecht: Not really. I corresponded with Childs' mother for years. She wrote me a letter and wanted to know if I knew anything about her son. Then unfortunately, she probably either died or suffered from, the correspondence stopped. I've maintained some correspondence with my friend Walt Hughes from Memphis. Others I can't even find, but the credit for our having reunions belongs entirely to a former armament enlisted man by the name of Leroy Nitzchke. He's dead. But he spent his life after the war as a test board operator AT&T long lines in St. Louis, and he decided by golly, we ought to get together—
- James: The fighter group?
- Helfrecht: Yeah, and he just busted his tail getting information. We met the first time, I'll say around 1970, that's a little shaky, down at a resort near Elgin, Illinois, I think it's burned down now. Then we met the second time I think in three years, but we've been meeting every odd numbered year since then, so we've had thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Of course there's a lot more deceased than alive as far as the roster is concerned. My crew chief is about ten years older than me, I should know that accurately, but I can't, being who I am. He was at the reunion in Knoxville this summer too, so we had a good time.
- James: Did you partake in the GI Bill when you got out?
- Helfrecht: Oh yeah. I never had any, my mindset from beginning to end was to go back to school. But my mindset changed as far as how serious I would

take school, which I regretted ever since. I was a good student, in the first semester I got before I went into service. In fact, I just missed honor roll or whatever you call it by a couple hundredths of a point. Was a little bit too much interested in having fun when I came back to accomplish in school what I should have.

James: Then you went on – which career did you follow?

Helfrecht: My entire career was as a transmission engineer with GTE. It was called Commonwealth Telephone Company when I first started with them. They were down at the old power line building.

James: Join any veteran's groups?

Helfrecht: I joined the VFW when I first came home because a buddy of mine, childhood buddy, he was infantry radioman during the war, but his dad was a World War I veteran, and he signed us both up for the VFW, and I think I enjoyed it the brief time I was there. His dad got upset with the VFW, with the locals, and he dropped out, so I blame him for my dropping out. I of course was not there long enough to realize that there's politics and everything, and I guess I just quit, and I've never belonged to a veterans group.

James: So your training and everything was, looking back, you got good training, for what they asked you to do, were you pleased or was there too much on the job [unintelligible].

Helfrecht: I think everything was excellent, only thing maybe, I've already expressed it, to have any hands-on training with the gyro gun sight. I think they would have been better to have left it off [laughs], not encourage us to try and use it. But I felt that the flight training was excellent, I really did.

James: Good instructors.

Helfrecht: Oh yeah, good instructors. I can't think of an instructor that I didn't like. My primary flying instructor hung a moniker Junior on me, and that stuck with me all through service. They don't call me Junior at the reunions anymore because the guy who had always insisted on continuing to call me Junior died.

James: That's the only way you got rid of it. Have you flown up any more since you got out of the service?

Helfrecht: Well I flew **[End of Tape 1, Side B]** with the Reserves down in Milwaukee for two years, 19—

James: P-51s?

Helfrecht: Yeah, here again we started with A-6s and then we got 51s. In that brief period of time I got officially transferred to Wausau by my employer, GTE. I was single, and they also were, towards the end of my time there, they were transitioning to T-33 jets, and I was, this is a part that I'm a little bit reticent to talk about. I landed one time in Milwaukee, and I was rolling down the runway, and out of habit I reached down and made sure the landing gear handle was locked, and it wasn't. I didn't push it down in to the locked position, and I just felt that I was supposed to be in Wausau, evidence I was getting to be a nervous pilot, and I just thought it was a good time for me to stop flying, and that's what I did.

James: That was with the T-33?

Helfrecht: No, that was still a P-51. I didn't pilot a T-33. They gave me one flight and one in a two seater, whatever you call it, training before I left. It was a nice flight but I just felt better on the ground.

James: Have you ever been [unintelligible] Reserves [unintelligible]?

Helfrecht: No, not that I'm aware of. Not that I have had any contact with them. But the fella that they had, I'm pretty sure that, you know they actually transitioned sometime along the line to tankers, and that's what they fly down there now (??). The fella Timmy Cronin, he lives in Oconomowoc, and he's one of them that we can't get to come to our reunion, but he had my aircraft before I had it over in Debden. He finished his tour and came home, but he joined the National Guard. I don't know if he flew out of Madison or out of Milwaukee with the Guard, being in Oconomowoc it could have been one or the other, but he was activated, and he flew in Korea.

James: [unintelligible] Alright, I've run out of questions.

Helfrecht: I've run out of answers, too. [laughs]

James: Anything else you'd like to offer of interest?

Helfrecht: Not really, no. Well, thank you. Wanna go home, huh? [laughs] I have a sister in-law that has blood testing at noon today that I'd kind of like to go with her and my wife.

James: Are you going to do anything with that? You're not gonna throw that away, are you?

Helfrecht: Not after fifty years. In fact, when I took it out the other night and started thumbing through it, I could smell the dried paper. [laughs]

James: You know, those are the kinds of records that you can give to your kids.

Helfrecht: Well, I'll keep that in mind.

James: Because lots of people call[??], historically they learn a lot about what you did and see how you operated

Helfrecht: Well, I'll sure give it --

[End of Interview]