

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Francis R. Johnston
Turret Gunner, Army Air Corps, World War II.

1997

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Johnston, Francis R. (1922-2000). Oral History Interview, 1997.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 62 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 62 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Francis Johnston, a Kenosha, Wisconsin resident, discusses his experiences in the Army Air Corps during World War II as a tail turret gunner with the 531st Bomb Squadron, 380th Bomb Group in the Pacific front. Johnston states he was born in Burnt Creek (North Dakota) and moved to Wisconsin at a young age as his father tried to find work during the Depression. His family lived in Chippewa Falls (Wisconsin) before his father found work at Nash Motors in Kenosha (Wisconsin). Johnston recalls working at Hollywood Theater in Kenosha in 1941 when he learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Johnston enlisted in the Army Air Corps in October 1942. He describes his medical exam and enlistment process in Milwaukee and the trip to Fort Sheridan (Illinois) for his induction. Johnston touches upon his basic training at Kelly Field in San Antonio; he mentions it was an eye-opening experience to meet Hispanic soldiers and young men from different regions, and he recalls Spanish guitar music was played nightly at camp. Next, he outlines the different "schools" he attended: mechanics school at Kelly Field, radio school at Truax Field in Madison (Wisconsin), armament school in Denver, and gunnery school in Las Vegas. Johnston mentions he was finally assigned to a flight crew and remained with the same group for the duration of the war. He notes that during his flight training in Boise (Idaho), the actor Jimmy Stewart was the commanding officer. In November 1943, after finishing advanced flight training in Wendover (Utah) and jungle survival training in Herrington (Kansas), Johnston's crew was assigned an airplane that they flew from Kansas to Brisbane (Australia); making stops along the way to deliver Army mail. Johnston remarks that the day his crew joined the 380th Bomb Group in Australia was also the day of his first air attack; however, he was so exhausted he slept through the attack in his tent. Next, Johnston names and describes the duties of all ten crew-members, including: John Baptist (pilot); Cliff Austin (co-pilot); John Brown (navigator); Martin Hock (bombardier); Fred Jackson (flight engineer); Russ Anderson (radio operator); Bill Lynch (top turret gunner); Curtis Beech (nose gunner); and J.W. Star (waist gunner). Johnston was the tail gunner. He comments upon relations between officers and enlisted men, stating they were friendly but didn't become close. He also states military regulations were relaxed on base in Australia and airmen wore cut-off pants and caps due to the heat. During lulls between missions, Johnston explains his crew was assigned repair work, garbage details, or would make improvements to their tents. He mentions taking leave to Adelaide and remarks that the Australians got along well with

Americans. Johnston recalls an early, difficult mission in December 1943 and describes bombing Ambon (Indonesia) in January 1944. He flew thirty-eight missions total, which he notes was more than the twenty-five required to be sent home. Johnston outlines a typical mission, explaining that missions over the Pacific were long and the amount of gas needed for the trip caused fumes to back up into the airplane. Once in the air, Johnston spent most of the flight in the turret gun, alone, with limited communication to his crew. He states it was cold and boring and that he was too large to fit comfortably in the turret. Johnston explains he often did not know how the mission had gone until the briefing back on base because he could not see the targets they hit or hear news from his crew during a flight. Johnston recalls that most missions were over New Guinea and Indonesia and targets were often airstrips on small islands that the Japanese used as refueling stations. According to Johnston, the most frightening aspect of combat was the anti-aircraft flak coming from the ground. Johnston describes the physical and mental fatigue that set in as his mission-count grew higher, illustrating how the job became routine and airmen became less attentive. He criticizes General Douglas MacArthur for keeping troops in the Pacific instead of flying in replacements from the States. In late 1944, Johnston returned to the United States via New Guinea and San Francisco. He addresses the difficulties of readjusting to civilian life and his struggles with combat fatigue. Johnston was sent to a military hospital in Miami (Florida) to recover and readjust and was finally discharged from the Air Corps in August 1945. After the war, Johnston reveals he had difficulty finding work because employers would see “psychoneurosis” on his discharge papers and discriminate against him. Johnston also comments that despite his thirty-eight combat missions, he felt “insecure” to be among the first veterans to return to the U.S. He provides examples of civilians undermining his service and admits that for years he did not discuss his combat experiences and his combat fatigue. After the war, Johnston worked briefly for a mattress factory before he went to art school. He explains he paid for art school and supported his wife and three children with money from the G.I. Bill and Public Law 16, which provided for disabled veterans. He mentions the government was often slow to send the checks each month and that it took a while for him to get back on his feet after the war. Johnston states he belongs to the DAV, and he praises the Milwaukee VA Hospital. He mentions that thanks to a VA psychiatrist in the 1980s, he finally opened up about his combat fatigue and a recurring memory of a Japanese pilot attacking his aircraft from behind. Johnston also shares a story of his flight engineer’s struggles with mental illness; his buddy committed suicide in the 1960s which Johnston suggests might have been prevented if his friend “would have went into the hospital like I did” when he returned from the front. Finally, Johnston tells how he requested this flight engineer’s combat medals for his daughters, and how, decades later, Johnston received a belated box from the Service Office containing his own Presidential Unit Citation air medal.

Biographical Sketch:

Johnston (1922-2000) was born in Burnt Creek (North Dakota) but grew up in Chippewa Falls and Kenosha (Wisconsin). In 1941, he was working as a theater manager in Kenosha when he learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Johnston enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1942 and served as a tail gunner with the 531st Bomb Squadron, 380th Bomb Group in Australia, New Guinea, and Indonesia. Johnston's crew flew thirty-eight missions and received the Presidential Unit Citation award. In 1945, Johnston returned to the U.S. and spent time at a Veterans Hospital in Miami where he battled combat fatigue. After his discharge, Johnston worked in a mattress factory before going to art school. He settled in Kenosha with his wife and children where he designed and built his own house. Johnston attended reunions of the 380th Bomb Group and was a member of the Disabled American Veterans.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997

Transcribed by Alis Fox, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2005

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

Interview Transcript:

- Mark: Today's date is June the 24th, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview over the telephone this morning with Mr. Francis R. Johnston of Kenosha, Wisconsin, a tail gunner in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Good morning and thanks for taking some time out of your day.
- Johnston: Thank you, Mark.
- Mark: Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.
- Johnston: I was born just outside of Bismarck, North Dakota, in a place called Burnt Creek on a farm, and soon after we moved back to Wisconsin--my mother was from Wisconsin, and we moved back to Wisconsin--and then we moved from Chippewa Falls down to Kenosha where my dad started working for Nash Motors, and that's how I got into Kenosha. All of my education came from this area.
- Mark: Now, these were the Depression years. Did your father have trouble finding work at all?
- Johnston: Oh, yes.
- Mark: Is that one of the reasons you were moving around or is it just--
- Johnston: Well, the reason why we were moving is because there was no work up there in that area, just farming. So, you know, a lot of people moved down to the industrial area to try to get jobs.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: And, as you say, we lived through the Depression. My dad left us at an early age, and my mother raised us, my brother and I. I had another brother that died in '25. It was a rough life, but I think everybody had that sort of life and you didn't really know that you were really poor because everybody was.
- Mark: Yeah. So when Pearl Harbor was attacked you must have been 18, 19 years old.

- Johnston: Right. I was working at the-- I was the manager of-- Or at that time, I was an usher at the Hollywood Theater, and the news came across that Sunday that we were working there, and it was hard to believe, but from then on in, everybody that was in high school knew that eventually they were going to go in the service, and so consequently not very many people thought about going to college as they can today. It was very expensive, and most people couldn't even really think about going to college.
- Mark: Yeah. It wasn't long until you actually entered the service then?
- Johnston: Yes. I went in on October 5th, 1942. I went up to Milwaukee and enlisted and ended up at Fort Sheridan, and from there we went down to Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas, for my basic.
- Mark: Now, you selected the Air Force. Was there a particular reason why--
- Johnston: Always wanted--
- Mark: --or was this first base for you somewhere down the line?
- Johnston: I've always wanted to fly, always liked airplanes since a child. I've always wanted to fly, and the only way I could get in at that time--the enlistments were all full--I went in as a bicycle repairman. That's the only way I could get in, but--
- Mark: Yeah, because it was pretty competitive to try to get into the Air Force at the time.
- Johnston: At that time it was real hard because so many people were enlisting or getting drafted or so forth. They had their quotas, and that was all there was to it. I never thought of signing up for the cadets. I have no idea why I didn't. I probably didn't even know anything about them because nothing was said about the military at that time. It was just you went into the service and that was it. You choose your branch and-- Like today these recruits [military recruiters] come around these high schools and try to get these kids in the Navy or whatever, and it was completely different in those days.
- Mark: Yeah. So why don't you just walk me through your induction process. Like you said, you went from Milwaukee to Fort Sheridan and then down to Texas. Why don't you just take me through the various steps and tell me what happened to you along the line—

- Johnston: From Milwaukee?
- Mark: --up to basic training. Yeah.
- Johnston: Well, it was a true experience from Milwaukee because we went up there and you disrobe down to your--nothing. They mark a red number on you, one red for-- I think it was red for enlistment and kind of a purple for a draftee, and you spent the day walking around that building with nothing on, going through all the examinations and so forth. And at the end of the day they took you to a meal, put you on a train, and we went to Fort Sheridan. That was the end of that.
- Mark: Yeah. And what happened at Fort Sheridan? Was this just a transit point, or was this where you got your uniform and--
- Johnston: You got your first haircut down to your scalp and got your clothing, and they give you your--wherever you were going to go, and so a group of us were put on a train and we went down to San Antonio.
- Mark: Was it Kelly Field at the time you said?
- Johnston: Kelly Field, right.
- Mark: And this was where your actual basic training took place?
- Johnston: Right.
- Mark: As an enlisted person in the Air Force, what did your training consist of?
- Johnston: I went to a number of schools. I went to a school in Kelly Field on mechanics, and then we went up to Truax Field. I signed up to be a radio operator, a number of us did; and again that was a way of trying to get into flying; but when we got to Madison we were put in this group for ground people, repairing, and there was great confusion, and we didn't want to be there. Eventually they washed us out and we went to Denver, Colorado, to an armament school. And I graduated from armament school, and from there I went down to Las Vegas to a gunnery school. I completed gunnery school there, went through an air-to-air firing school, completed that, and we were sent to Boise, Idaho, to be put on a flight crew; and from there we were assigned to flight crews and flew a few missions there, training missions. And, by the way, at that time Jimmy Stewart was CO [commanding officer]

of that field--

Mark: Oh, is that right?

Johnston: --in Boise, Idaho. But he soon left and so did we.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: And from there we went to Wendover, Utah, and completed our flight training.

Mark: So it was in Boise that you actually got the crew that you flew with in combat?

Johnston: Pardon?

Mark: It was in Boise that you got the crew--

Johnston: Right.

Mark: --that you flew with in combat?

Johnston: Yes.

Mark: The same plane and everything?

Johnston: Not the same-- Well, we all flew B-24s, but they were training planes.

Mark: Oh, I see.

Johnston: And when you go to these bases they have a series of their own planes that you train with.

Mark: Yeah, I see. I want to backtrack a little bit about your training. As I recall basic training forty years later, it sort of brought people together from all different parts of the country.

Johnston: Oh, yes.

Mark: Was that your experience as well?

Johnston: Oh, yes.

- Mark: And if so why don't you just describe some of the—
- Johnston: Of course, being in San Antonio, we had a lot of Spanish kids there, and every night we had a serenade of guitar and Spanish singing. But coming out of where we did, Kenosha, we were lucky to ever get to Chicago, let alone San Antonio, and never met people from all different parts of the country.
- Mark: Sort of an eye-opening experience?
- Johnston: It was hard to believe some of the language they used, foul language that I was never brought up with, and it was truly an experience.
- Mark: Well, that leads into the second area of questions that I had, and that involved some sort of adjustments to military life. The language, for example, seemed to shock you?
- Johnston: It was shocking because, as I say, we weren't raised with that kind of language, and to this day it still bothers me to listen to that kind of language. I think it's because it was thrown upon you so fast that you weren't really ready for it.
- Mark: So who was using it? Was it the—
- Johnston: GIs.
- Mark: It wasn't the drill instructors?
- Johnston: No, no, no, just the GIs that you live with.
- Mark: I see.
- Johnston: Yeah.
- Mark: So just in everyday conversation—
- Johnston: Oh, yes.
- Mark: --some unpleasurable words somebody uttered?
- Johnston: Right, right.

- Mark: I see. Anything else about military life that you found puzzling or troubling? The discipline, for example, always being told what to do and all this kind of thing, some guys don't adjust well to that. How did you do?
- Johnston: I liked military life. In 1939 I signed up in high school to go down to Fort Sheridan for military training. It was a month of training down there, and then every summer you could go, and eventually you could sign up for OCS [Officer Candidate School] and so forth. And I liked military life, and I liked the marching training and so forth. I still do. A good parade with good music brings tears to my eyes because it's still in me and I'll never forget it.
- Mark: So that wasn't a problem for you?
- Johnston: Pardon?
- Mark: That wasn't a problem for you at all?
- Johnston: No, uhn-uhn. No.
- Mark: Okay. So you went to these various bases, got your training, met your crew in Idaho, trained a little while. Then it was time for you to go overseas. When did you-- why don't you just describe your going overseas to me?
- Johnston: Well, we picked up-- we left Wendover and we were sent home on leave, called back early and report back at Wendover, and we knew what was happening. We were going to be shipped out for overseas. We went to Herrington, Kansas, and we got some--a short course in jungle living, if you were shot down, survival.
- Mark: Now, was this the first time you knew that you were going to the Pacific as opposed to Europe?
- Johnston: Well, getting jungle training, I think we figured we were going to the Pacific.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: But--
- Mark: Well, I'm saying that was the first knowledge you had of where you were going?

Johnston: Yeah. We had no idea where we were going.

Mark: I see.

Johnston: No. No. And no crew knows where they are going to go until they start getting this sort of training. They took our ODs [olive drabs] away when we went overseas, and we just had suntans. So there is another thing. We figured we were going to to the Pacific. But then we headed for California; and we picked up our airplane in Herrington, Kansas; and we flew overseas with our own plane. And headed for Herrington, Kansas; and we were there for a few days until they would get enough to create a flight to make this trip. On this trip we carried all our own baggage, plus we carried pounds of mail to be delivered overseas. It was a way of transporting mail, and we hit a number of islands on the way over. We hiphopped to these different islands until we got to Australia, and we landed in Brisbane, and then we went up to Townsville. Townsville is where we brought our plane, and we left our plane there because they had to do some change work to make it for the kind of planes that we used in the Pacific. We carried a Speary (ph) ball turret, for instance, and they didn't use that there. They removed those turrets, and so we lost our plane that we flew over in. And we went up to Charters Towers and did a little training up there waiting for them to have a plane ready for us to take, and in a couple weeks we had to go back to Townsville, and we picked up an airplane and we went over to our bomb group. We arrived at our bomb group on November 11th, 1943, and that night we had our first air attack. It was the bomb group's last one and was our first one, and we were put in a tent that night and we slept right through the bomb raid, never heard it. It was kind of a funny thing.

Mark: Yeah. The first time someone enters a combat situation that's not normally their reaction, in my experience anyway.

Johnston: Well, we were tired, and it was very hot in that part of northern Australia, so consequently you get tired real easy.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: So when we hit the sack that night-- there was nothing else to do, there was no place to go in the bush country, so you went to bed, and we just slept.

Mark: So you flew with pretty much the same crew all through the war?

Johnston: Oh, yes.

Mark: Why don't you just-- if you'd just give me a brief rundown of all their different personalities and what their positions were on the airplane, just to sort of get a sense of the guys you were serving with.

Johnston: I flew with a pilot named John Baptist, and we figured we can do no wrong with John the Baptist. So we thought we were pretty well set. But our co-pilot was Cliff Austin. Our navigator was John Brown. Our bombardier was Martin Hock. Those were officers.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: The enlisted men were-- Fred Jackson was our flight engineer. Russ Anderson was our radio operator. Bill Lynch was our assistant flight engineer and top turret. Curtis Beech was our nose gun. J. W. Star was our waist gunner, and I was tail gunner. Ten people in all.

Mark: Yeah. What were the officer/enlisted relations like in a crew like that? I mean, you had to work pretty well--you had to work pretty closely together, yet there is the military and the military discipline. How did all that sort of go?

Johnston: It's no different than it is today. The officers were by themselves in a separate area, and enlisted men were in their own area. It was a given fact that officers did not fraternize with the enlisted men. You became friends, but it was never close like the enlisted men living together for that amount of time.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: So you became friends but that's it.

Mark: Yeah. And what were your accommodations like? I mean, where you were living daily? In a tent, I would imagine.

Johnston: Yes, we lived in a tent, six people, six enlisted men. We ate out of a mess kit. It being so hot, normally we cut off the bottom of our trousers and we walked around in shorts, a cap, and a pair of shoes. That's about all we ever wore until we went on a mission. You got pretty nice and tan.

Mark: I bet you did. Now, that must have been a far cry from-- now, geez, and you are on a training base somewhere where I would imagine things were pretty-- "GI" was the term they used when I was in the service, probably the same

way there too?

Johnston: You are right. It was very informal most of the time. We had a CO come in and decided he was going to have head checks and stuff like that, and that went over like a lead balloon.

Mark: That didn't work very well, huh?

Johnston: No. But later on I had to fly with him. We flew with him as--he was our pilot. So it was stressed when we got him as a pilot.

Mark: I see. Now, that's the sort of thing that the GIs would refer to as "chicken" I guess.

Johnston: Right.

Mark: Was there much of that when you were actually--

Johnston: Not overseas.

Mark: --overseas?

Johnston: No, uhn-uhn. No. See, everything depended on your missions.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: If you flew your missions and you were getting your time in-- The thing you would look for was getting your mission so you could go home, and you had to fly so many missions and you could go home. But we lost our first pilot after about, oh, five, six missions, and so being without a pilot you don't get any missions.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: So it was very stressful because you flew with almost anybody that you could get, and some of our missions were good and some were bad, they just didn't work out so good.

Mark: Yeah. Well, now, I'm looking at your flight log here, and you flew your first mission on the 25th of November, '43.

Johnston: Oh, well, if you are looking at my flight record, that's probably what it was.

- Mark: Yeah. I was saying, you were there about a month before you flew your first mission.
- Johnston: Well, we flew into one area and the whole outfit moved. The 529th and--no. 530th and 31st squadrons moved to a different area and a different airstrip. So there was time that you didn't fly. There was time where you had to fly to get your flying time in.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: In non-combat they gave you a time to set up your tent and do whatever you are going to do with it so you could live in it. So there was a period of time that was a lull period.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: And seeing that we weren't flying, we ended up in a lot of crews to do repair work and things like that. They needed some guys, there were six guys that weren't doing anything. We got little jobs, like garbage detail and things like that.
- Mark: I was wondering if you remembered your first mission, your first combat mission, if that sort of sticks out in your head at all?
- Johnston: No, I don't think so. Those first missions, when you are young, you are eager and all you are thinking about is going on the mission and getting your time in, and it was a true experience, something new. You knew you were there for that reason, and I don't think it bothered you. There was somewhere along the line, about, oh, I think it was December 19th, we had a rough mission, and that was quite early for a new crew to have a rough mission like that, but we went through it all right.
- Mark: Yeah. Now, my next question was were there some missions that stuck out in your head?
- Johnston: Oh, yes.
- Mark: Because again looking at your flight record here, January 19th of '44, you got a red dot next to that one, Ambon.
- Johnston: Yeah, that was a rough one.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: Our crew shot three planes down that day. We were attacked by quite a few enemy aircraft, and Ambon and that area was a tough target. A lot of enemy aircraft came out of that area, both Navy and Army. So it was a target that you were a little leery about going to see, but it was our first real enemy experience. The flak and the enemy aircraft were pretty rough. But--

Mark: And so what's going through your mind at this time? Are you focused on your job, or are you frightened or--

Johnston: You don't really know. You-- When this comes about, when things are happening when you are over a target, you really don't have time to think. Everything is happening so fast that it's just doing your job. I know I shot a plane down that day, and it was there, and you did the job. If you hit it, you hit it, fine, you know; but the reason for the gunners to be on that plane is to protect that airplane, and that's what you were doing.

Mark: Right. So you eventually flew thirty-eight missions?

Johnston: Thirty-eight missions, yes.

Mark: Yeah. Why don't you just walk me through a typical mission, you know, from the time you get up in the morning, the briefing, getting on the plane, flying out there, coming back? Why don't you just sort of describe that experience to me? It sounds like it can be incredibly boring and yet incredibly exciting all at the same time.

Johnston: Well, usually you brief the night before, and they give you a weather report of what it was supposed to be and when the mission was going to take off and so forth, and our missions mostly were-- I can't remember truly, but we used to get woke up by a person that would come and wake us up, sometimes 4:00 in the morning, something like that, and you got your gear together and went up and ate breakfast and jumped on a truck and went out to the airstrip and got everything aboard. It was just a matter of one, two, three, doing the things that you had to do. The pilot checked the airplane, everybody checked their equipment, and you took off. Our missions were very long, most of them.

Mark: I would imagine they would have to be because it is pretty remote out there.

Johnston: Right. Carried an awful lot of gas, had to carry a lot of gasoline, and that was the most dangerous part of the beginning of your missions because you took off with so much gas. The gas would be coming out of the wings, out of the top of the wings, flowing down, and your plane would be full of fumes. And you stood still. You didn't monkey around too much because you can create a spark. A spark can blow you up. So, consequently, until you are leveled off and straightened up for about 15 minutes, got the air flowing through the airplane and got all the gas fumes out of there, to really start moving around.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: A mission, after you moved around for a while and settled down, you checked your guns, see if they fired, and I'd crawl in my turret and I'd stay there until the mission--we got back to Australia on the way back.

Mark: Hang on a sec. I got a visitor here.

[Interruption on the Audiotape]

Johnston: Get exciting I suppose, I don't know, but truly it's not that way. It's mostly quiet other than the noise of the planes.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: And you didn't talk over the intercom much, only when you had to. And being back where I was, I heard absolutely nothing from anybody. Nobody come back to visit with me because who the heck would want to go back there?

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: Most of it was on the flight deck, and that's why most of the people that got on the flight deck knew what was going on. I never knew what went on until I got back to base and we had to go to operations to talk about the mission.

Mark: Yeah. Must have been pretty boring back there.

Johnston: Very--very boring and cold. I was too big to belong in that turret to start with, and I couldn't move around. So I used to-- my legs would get so cold under the knees I would have to pull myself out of that turret, and then the flight would come down lower as you got closer to Australia and it would warm up

a little bit. But, you know, it is terrifically cold up in the air.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: And being so big I couldn't wear heavy clothes. Consequently I used to really get cold.

Mark: So you are on a mission and you are going to--largely Indonesia is what it looks like here?

Johnston: Southwest Pacific covered the area from New Guinea all the way up to Borneo, Java. That Borneo trip was around seventeen and a half, eighteen hours.

Mark: Yikes.

Johnston: Java was fourteen. Celebes, in that whole area, most of that was Japanese occupied islands.

Mark: Right.

Johnston: And an awful lot of water.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: So consequently if you were shot down or went down for any reason you either were going to get captured or you were going in the drink. So consequently you never knew what really was going to happen.

Mark: Yeah. On these missions what were your targets as you recall specifically. I mean, was it ammo dumps or troop concentrations, or what was it you were going after?

Johnston: Mostly airstrips, and like you say these little islands were just saturated with Japanese troops.

Mark: Yeah. Well, that's where the oil was. That's why they wanted these islands.

Johnston: Yeah. Well, they could hiphop-- They could have attacked us by air with a fighter and didn't have to carry a lot of fuel because you run out of fuel, they could go down to an island and refuel. So consequently they had these little islands all filled with people, and they had a large concentration of airplanes

on strips. We'd try to bomb the strips, and we'd bomb as many airplanes as we could. Shipping, we went after shipping. A lot of harbors had shipping in it, and that was sometimes a target. But you never knew what you were going to see when you went on a mission. You might see a bunch of ships, you might not see anything. So it's just a matter of trying to harass these people and keep them on the ground so that the ground troops could keep moving up. And, for instance, in New Guinea, they kept moving up through New Guinea, and by keeping these Japanese troops tied down and no airplanes could get out of their places, that gave the American troops and the Australian troops a chance to keep moving up in Australia and New Guinea.

Mark: Yeah. I'm just sort of curious. Being where you were in the airplane on a bombing run, I'm wondering if you could have perhaps more of a sense than others of how accurate your bombing was, you know, because you're flying away from the target and you're on the rear of the airplane, I am wondering if you were able to look down and see--

Johnston: No. No.

Mark: You weren't?

Johnston: No, no. I couldn't see what happened until we were many, many miles away. Even if I would get up and try to look down, I couldn't see. The only thing you can see is in your immediate--where you could turn your head and look, up and down, where airplanes would be, that's about all. But as far as knowing what the targets were like or anything else, I didn't know anything about it until I was many, many miles away.

Mark: Now, the men and you were debriefed at some point, so you had an idea of how well you were doing or something like that?

Johnston: Well, I'd have to listen to the rest of the crew and what they seen, and then I knew what was happening. But other than that, in my things that I sent you there, the little story of the bombardier. I never knew this until just a few years ago. I got this from him, and did I know what we were doing on our mission because it was just hearsay. Then of course when we got back we had to go to briefing and they would debrief us and find out what happened on the missions and so forth and how good we did and if you killed any fish. "Killed fish" means you didn't hit the target, you hit the water.

Mark: I see.

- Johnston: And that happened because in the Pacific the weather is very intense and you never knew the type of weather you were going to get. So you could go through some terrific storms, and the targets would be socked in and you'd have to use an alternate target. Maybe that would be socked in because-- Maybe an hour from then the target would be open, and that's the nature of the Pacific.
- Mark: Yeah. So on a bombing run, what was the most dangerous part for you or what did you fear the most? Was it the fighters? Was it the flak? Did it really matter? Just what scared you the most?
- Johnston: Well, the only thing I could see would be the flaks, and the fighters would never know until we start talking that, you know, fighters seen here, fighters seen here, fighters-- Then you are on your lookout and you start watching, but until there you are just sitting up there just waiting for something to happen. But the flak is--that's a scary thing.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: I know my flight engineer, first time we ever went over a target we got flak, he says, "Hey, they are shooting at us," and that poor guy never did live that down.
- Mark: So I'm looking at this record again. Looks like you were flying fairly often there [**End of Tape 1, Side A**] for a while, but it seems to have gone in like streaks where you'd fly every day and then not fly for a while, that sort of thing.
- Johnston: Well, that period where we flew so many missions, we got a distinguished--no, we got a Presidential Unit Citation for those missions at that period of time because it was a time of intense flying, intense bombing throughout that area.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: And with that came the--the troops were able to move up because of all this flying. There was a reason for it. We kept them harassed, kept the enemy harassed all the time so that they never knew where we were going to bomb.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: And it kept them on the ground and it was a help to the ground troops.

Mark: Yeah. But there were some times where you weren't flying; you got a break once in a while?

Johnston: Yeah.

Mark: I am interested in what you did to keep yourself occupied in the times when you weren't flying, and you were in a pretty remote area. I don't imagine there was too much to do.

Johnston: No, there was nothing much to do. They kept us busy. Our crew seemed like always got details. I don't know why, but we used to pick up details real easy, and you'd go on a garbage detail or something, you know, or you'd try to fix up your tent, make it a little bit better. We got a hold of some cement once when we were in one of the places and put a cement floor in from what we knew how to make cement, and which made it a little bit nicer. It took quite a while because you had to take some of your beer ration and go trade it for something, you know, and we got a cement floor in there.

Mark: I see.

Johnston: But at that point we-- we put our tent up farthest away we could find from the orderly room so that we wouldn't go on detail, and we--not knowing where we were, we put it below a hill; and the weather there, at night it gets real damp and cold, and that dampness would come down that hill and go right into our tent. We almost froze to death, in the Pacific when it was 120 degrees. But at night we used to cover up with everything we had because we were too stupid to know you don't put your tent below a hill.

Mark: I am wondering if you ever got a USO [United Service Organizations] show or anything like that out there?

Johnston: Well, I seen in a book that we've got here John Wayne was there, but he probably was over at headquarters in another strip because we never seen him. There was a couple of starlets that came there once; and a fellow by the name of Red Barry, a cowboy star, he came there; but I was on a mission, so we didn't see anything.

Mark: You got a leave to go to Adelaide apparently?

Johnston: Yeah.

- Mark: That was pretty rare I take it.
- Johnston: Yeah. Well it was-- we went there-- the first time we went there it was the rainy season back at the base, and Adelaide was a very nice place to be. The Australian people were very nice to the Yanks, and there was a lot to see. We liked it, and we ran out of money because we couldn't get back to the outfit. It was so socked in we couldn't get in, so we were running out of money. We were wondering how we were going to pay for our room and board, but it was a good experience.
- Mark: Yeah. So, let's see here, thirty-eight missions. We've covered your spare time. We have covered the combat time. So you said there was a set date of missions that you were supposed to fly, and towards the end of the European Theater it ended up being twenty-fiv. You flew a lot more than that.
- Johnston: Yeah. Well it started with 25, and I ended up with 38, but I myself personally I didn't have much use for Dugout Doug [General Douglass MacArthur] for that reason. There were troops in the States that he could have had brought over there, but he didn't. We flew more missions than we should have. Thirty was plenty to fly because your body starts wearing out, and when I finished my missions I didn't even--I had that chart, I showed you I had that chart there--I didn't even finish the chart. I wrote it on the little slip of paper because it didn't mean much anymore. You were kind of in a, oh, stupor; you were tired.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: Your mind don't think good. Your body don't think good, and you shouldn't be there because if something happens you're not thinking as a young man should.
- Mark: Yeah. And that was pretty common throughout the crew apparently.
- Johnston: The crew?
- Mark: Yeah.
- Johnston: Yes, oh, sure. In fact, I found--I never knew this either--because I wrote to them for these bombing records, and he didn't complete 38. He only completed 34 missions, and he wasn't even flying with us the rest of those missions, and I didn't know it. I had no idea that he wasn't on the crew, and we had a lot of respect for our navigator. He was a very good navigator, and I

didn't know he wasn't there. I don't even know who flew in his place. Someday I'll call him on the phone and ask him.

Mark: So when did you find out you were going to be through flying combat missions?

Johnston: One day they come in and said, "You're grounded." That was it.

Mark: So there was no lead-up time to saying you got two more missions, one more mission?

Johnston: No, because when you start getting into the thirties, missions, you are just flying missions, you don't--your name comes up and your crew goes. That's all there is to it.

Mark: Yeah. So what happened after that?

Johnston: Radio operator Russ Anderson and I found out together, and they grounded us. That's how it was. They grounded us, and about two days after we got grounded we were on KP [kitchen police]. So here is a tech sergeant, a staff sergeant doing night KP, but we didn't care. And first thing you know they come in and told us we were heading home and get your stuff together and turn in all your stuff, your gun and everything, to the supply office and get ready.

And I think the next day the truck come and picked us up and we went off the airstrip and got on the C-47 and flew up to New Guinea, ended up in Nadzad, New Guinea, and by that time-- Nadzad used to be a tough target, and the Yanks flew over it, of course; and there was an airstrip there, and we flew there, and the food was terrible. We had powdered eggs and moldy bread. That's about all we had to eat there. So they shipped us out of there. We went down to Finschhafen, New Guinea, and stayed there for a few days and maybe a couple weeks I guess waiting for a boat and we got on a big boat and headed for home.

Mark: Which must have been a long journey.

Johnston: Eighteen days it took.

Mark: Yeah. And where did you land, San Francisco?

Johnston: Exactly right.

Mark: Golden Gate?

Johnston: Golden-- Well, we went to that--what is it--Ellis Island [means Alcatraz?] and we landed there, everybody got off, and we didn't have any winter clothes. We got home in December. So they had to issue us all new clothes, otherwise we would have froze to death. And coming from a climate where it's 110-120 degrees, in December, I don't care if it is San Francisco or where it is, it's cold. It was no picnic.

Mark: Yeah. Now, you weren't being discharged from the service yet, were you?

Johnston: No. No.

Mark: So you still had some duties to do?

Johnston: No. You were more or less put in an area and told to stay there so they knew where you were so in case they needed you they could call you, and you couldn't leave that area. You had to stay there.

Mark: So you came back at the end of '44 and sat there basically how long?

Johnston: We were there about a week I think, you know, until everybody got their clothes and the records were made out, the shipping orders were made. I went from there to Fort Sheridan, and all those records had to be made and with your records to be sent to Fort Sheridan so that they knew you were coming, and picked up all our baggage and we took a train and we went to Fort Sheridan. It's three-four days on a train to get across the hump and, you know, to the midwest; and we weren't at Fort Sheridan very long because we were supposed to go--we went on leave. We had a 30-day leave and then report down to Miami Beach with the leave in between.

Mark: Yeah. And Miami Beach was just rest time I guess.

Johnston: Right. That was a rest time, and it gave you time to, oh, straighten yourself out, get used to—

[Interruption on the Audiotape]

Johnston: And that was all right until the gun club closed.

[Interruption on the Audiotape]

- Johnston: --and to go and look for a job because they wanted to see your discharge paper and wanted to know why you were discharged, and that was the reason why they had to change that psychoneurosis because people wouldn't hire you.
- Mark: So in your experience there were some who didn't want to hire you because of what your discharge said?
- Johnston: Well, like I knew that from people that wrote back to the outfit that went through this when they got back. At that time they were calling it "psycho-neurosis" and, you know, they: "Oh, John got back to the States, and he's a psycho case," you know. Well, you don't know the circumstances until you go through it yourself. And he wasn't a psycho case; he was combat fatigued. So I never even went to look for jobs other than factory jobs because there they didn't ask any of that; they are just looking for bodies to work.
- Mark: Other sort of adjustments to civilian life. As you mentioned, you couldn't make change at the movie theater, that sort of thing. Just perhaps sort of generally why don't you tell me about some of your adjustments getting back into civilian life. Were there things that seemed strange, things you had trouble with?
- Johnston: Well, for one thing, when I left to go into the service I was making 25 cents an hour. When I got back they were making two dollars an hour; and these guys working all during the war, they must be rich now, with all that kind of money. Two dollars sounded like an awful lot of money, and my wife and I had saved \$2,000 in the time we were married. I went overseas, I was married a month before I went overseas. So we saved our money, and before the war you could buy a house for \$2,000. Two thousand was nothing after the war, buying a house or doing anything. So it was a matter of adjusting to the way of life of civilians.
- Mark: Yeah. Was it difficult?
- Johnston: Yes. Living in the woods like we did and coming back to people that were crabbing about not having this and that, it was kind of hard to take.
- Mark: Yeah. So you had a little sort of resentment about civilians it sounds like.
- Johnston: To a certain extent, but we as soldiers realize that without those people at home we wouldn't have airplanes or we wouldn't have boats because they

were doing a tremendous job, and you never forget what the civilians did during the war because they did a tremendous job. They got paid for it, but they still did a tremendous job, and I to this day have a lot of respect for all these people. Without them we wouldn't have won a war.

Mark: Yeah. Other sorts of medical problems. Now, you were in a tropical area. Very often people come down with malaria and other sorts of strange tropical diseases. Did you have any of that at all?

Johnston: No, I didn't-- Australia doesn't allow anybody with malaria in the country. If you got malaria, they shipped you out because they don't want it there. In New Guinea they had malaria, and we took what they called Atabrine. They put it in the water, and it kept you from getting those diseases. The only trouble is you turned yellow and your eyeballs turned yellow. When I come home from overseas my eyeballs were yellow. I was yellow, tan but still yellow, from all this Atabrine. Took a long time to get it out of your system.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: But everybody that came home from that part of the country had to take Atabrine.

Mark: So your medical readjustment problems usually had to do--were confined to the combat fatigue problem that you had?

Johnston: Right.

Mark: How long did you suffer from that intensely? You mention that you still have some issues today, but I'm wondering how long did it really impact upon your readjustment?

Johnston: Within a year--one year after I got out I had to go up to Milwaukee to the VA, and they checked me over and they cut my pension from 50 percent to ten percent. Well, I should have objected to it and got somebody to speak for me, and I probably could have kept it because I still wasn't correct. I wasn't feeling right. I wasn't right. I couldn't do things. I was like, oh, a hermit, didn't want to meet with people, which I am not-- my personality is a person that meets people and likes to be with people, and I couldn't do this, and I lived with it. I just-- they cut it to ten percent, okay, that's it, forget about it, and I just forgot it. I put it out of my mind and I lived the way I could live, and my wife put up with a lot of my antics, but that's neither here nor there.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: That's the way we had to live, and that's the way I lived.

Mark: Yeah. So how long was it until you really felt yourself integrated back into society?

Johnston: Well, I finally went to art school. My brother-in-law, my wife's sister's husband, decided he was going to art school, so I thought, well, I'll go with him. I had two kids and one on the way, and I should have never went, but I did. Me and my wife talked, we said, yeah, go ahead, you know. And it was nice, and I learned a trade, a profession. You hear an awful lot out of a school how much you are going to make and everything else, but it's never true, no different than college kids today. You tell them what they are going to do, but it's not always there.

So I pounded the pavement looking for a job until I got down to about my last ten bucks and I had to go get a job in the factory making mattresses. So I worked there for about three years. I finally got a job up in Milwaukee doing technical illustrations and for \$40 a week. I was making \$80 a week making mattresses plus I had to pay for the train trip. So it was a long start. It was a long, long way of getting back up to where I was. While I was in art school, I didn't get paid by the government for almost eight months. So we had grocery bills, milk bills, and everything else. It got to the point where nobody was going to sell us anything anymore. Finally I got a check from the government for about \$1200, paid all the bills off, I was broke again. But it has been that way of life for us.

Mark: Now, in your going to art school, let's talk about that for a little bit. There was a GI Bill after the war; and then there was another bill, Public Law 16, which was for disabled veterans.

Johnston: That's what I had.

Mark: That's what you had? I was going to ask with the combats [fatigue], did it qualify you for that?

Johnston: Yes, Public Law 16.

Mark: Did it meet all your expenses eventually?

Johnston: No. No. It paid to go to art school. It's just that you were a disabled veteran

and going to art school rather than a regular veteran.

Mark: I see.

Johnston: GI Bill was just the whole thing as a whole. Public Law 16 was for the disabled veterans.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: But I still had--got the same amount of money. It paid my wife, so much for my wife and so much for the two kids. But I had to pay my own transportation and so forth, and when you ain't getting paid-- I don't know, I guess my mother give me money for transportation every so often, had to buy a ticket for a month each time. And after-- Finally I start getting my checks, I had some money to buy my own ticket. But it was no different than the other GI Bill.

Sometimes I think maybe I should have went to the university, but I didn't want to become a teacher. It was something I didn't want to be. So consequently I didn't go to college, but there was nobody here to go see to explain to you the different things that you could do when you are going to school to prepare yourself for a future. You decide to go to art school. I didn't even know what I was going to learn in art school; it was art school. And until you get there and understand all the different branches of art there is, you don't know what's going on.

Mark: Yeah. You know, I would like to go back for a little bit. As you mentioned, you came back a lot earlier than a lot of guys did.

Johnston: Not a lot early but earlier because I got out of--was discharged from the hospital in August of '45, and while I was in Miami the war ended down there. So a lot of these people were shipped to different parts--branches of the service all through the States and they didn't get out for another six or eight months. So consequently I was home months ahead of time.

Mark: I am still interested in the people's reaction to the returning veteran that early. It is unusual compared to a lot of veterans I've spoken with, and after the Gulf War there was talk of parades and this kind of thing. I'm just interested in the public reception that you received.

Johnston: Well, we didn't have anything like that in Kenosha. One thing, I felt insecure because I was so early. Again, they had to know "why were you out so

early?" I was discharged from the hospital. And so you didn't want to meet people because they would ask you these questions.

Mark: Now, out of curiosity, sort of a pain in the neck I guess.

Johnston: Yeah. Well, the thing is I didn't want anybody to know that I was discharged for combat fatigue, and consequently I would stay away from people and I wouldn't answer questions. I got out on nerves or something like that I'd tell them. I used to hang around at a restaurant, my wife and I. We both worked in a theater before, and after the theater closed we'd go get a bowl of chili. So we went over for a bowl of chili, and the guy says, "Oh, you're home from service," talking about--and he says, "But you never seen any combat, did you?" So I just didn't answer the guy. Why even mention it, you know?

Mark: Yeah. So if someone did manage to pry it out of you that you were--that you were discharged with combat fatigue, what would their reaction be?

Johnston: I never--never let it out.

Mark: Oh, you never did?

Johnston: Never, never let it out. My wife didn't really know what was wrong with me. None of my kids ever knew-- to this day I don't think know that I was discharged that way. I never told anybody.

Mark: Interesting. Well, let's talk about some other sorts of benefits that you may or may not have used. We talked about the GI Bill and Public Law 16, which you did utilize. As you got on in life when it came time to establish a family and buy a home and that sort of thing, did you use the GI home loan at all?

Johnston: No, I didn't. I built my own house. I designed and built my own home. I started with a three-room house that I added onto years later when the kids come along, but I never used the GI loan for that. One time we were going to move up to Racine and we applied for it, but the job fell through so we never used it, but I have it in my file. I have the form that I am--you know, I can have a loan.

Mark: Yeah.

Johnston: But I never used it. We just-- we built as we went along, and we lived in two by fours for walls a lot of years, but we built as we went along.

Mark: Were there any other benefit programs that you perhaps used over the years?

Johnston: No. Other-- you know, in the last-- I think in 1970 or something like that my diabetes was so bad I went up to the VA Hospital in Milwaukee, and I've been going there ever since, and I would say that the VA Hospital in Milwaukee is probably the best hospital in the country.

Mark: Why is that?

Johnston: They treat me very well. I have had a lot of things done there, and they treat me very well. But they brought this combat fatigue thing out of me. I'm able to tell people what I was going through.

Mark: And when did you finally become comfortable doing that? I get the impression it was long after the war was over?

Johnston: About ten years ago.

Mark: Really.

Johnston: I started going to reunions, my bomb group, and one of the persons at the VA--I had an impression that I went through a mission, and I still don't know whether it was a mission or it was something in my mind or what. But a Japanese airplane came up in back of me. I could see the man in the airplane. I tried to shoot him and my guns wouldn't work, and he peeled off to the right, shot a couple shots at the plane next to us and disappeared, and I never heard anything about it anymore. And I have a psychiatrist up there now. I've been trying to find out-- That's why I got all this information, because I can't find out whether this mission ever happened or if it was just in my mind.

So I left--I lived with a guilt feeling all these years thinking that I could have killed our crew and everything else because I didn't say anything. Well, when something like this happens when you are flying, it is not like you see in a movie. It's seconds. These things happen in seconds. It may seem like an hour, but it's seconds; and it's there, it's gone. So consequently I can't in my mind say I was right or wrong. Did I--it happen to me or was it just my imagination or dream or whatever?

So, as I say, about ten years ago this one person up at the VA got me to talk about it, and I'm able to talk about it now like I'm telling you. I never could do that before. But you could probably tell in my voice, it's changed right now

because this is what's happening. I take pills to calm me down. It's hard to get the air out.

Mark: Yeah. I've just got one last area that I want to cover--I'm not sure it applies to you or not--and that involves veterans' organizations.

Johnston: I belong to the DAV.

Mark: So when did you join that?

Johnston: Quite late in life. I didn't belong to service organizations because most of these places did a lot of drinking, and I never drank when I was overseas. I don't believe in it, and I just didn't want to get involved with people that were half stewed all the time. So consequently I never belonged to it, and I was always too busy. When I came home from work I spent another three, four hours working on the house. So I never had any chance to do those things, to belong to these organizations. Maybe I would have or not, I don't know. But I do belong to the DAV now, and I have been active for, I don't know, ten - 15 years.

Mark: Yeah. Do you attend meetings?

Johnston: Yes.

Mark: Or perhaps even hold offices and that type of thing?

Johnston: No, I can't hold offices. I can't get up in front of people and talk. So I go to the meetings and mostly people--World War II people now. There aren't too many left in the thing. It's mostly younger people. So consequently I don't have much to talk to about to other people. So--but I was at a meeting last Wednesday. They have it every second Wednesday of every month, and I try to make it if I can make it, but it's nice to belong to the organization. They stay and drink, but I just go home.

Mark: And why that group in particular? I mean, there are a lot of groups to choose from.

Johnston: Because I'm a disabled veteran. When my kids were growing up they joined a drum corps here in Kenosha and it was through the American Legion, and I could see through the American Legion what was happening with, you know, these people after their party-- after their meetings and stuff, and I didn't want to get involved. So I just never joined any of them, but as I got older I figured

I should belong to the DAV because somewhere along the line I might need some help from them for being a disabled veteran, and that's one of the reasons why I joined them. I could have joined the Veteran of Foreign Wars too, but I don't know, again, I knew people that were in there and it was a drinking party. I just wanted nothing to do with it.

Mark: Those are pretty much all the questions I have.

Johnston: Well, good.

Mark: Anything you would like to add or anything you think we skipped over or anything?

Johnston: Did I send you a thing that I had in the newspaper about getting my medals?

Mark: I got this whole big pile of paper. That doesn't ring a bell offhand.

Johnston: Well, just recently-- Oh, Memorial Day I did.

Mark: I don't think I have that.

Johnston: I went down to the Veterans office, service office, to see about medals for my flight engineer because his daughters inquired about it, and I thought I would get it for him. And a number of years ago, in the late '60s I think it was, he took his own life, and of course they were little kids at that time and they had no idea of what their dad was all about. And, again, if he would have went into the hospital like I did at the same time maybe he would still be living because he started getting whacky like I was, and the VA wouldn't take him in, and he went all over the country trying to get into a VA hospital and they wouldn't take him in. He finally took his own life. He tried once and didn't make it. He tried again; this time he made it. It was a stressful time for me because I couldn't believe a friend of mine like that died, couldn't believe it.

Mark: And when did that happen?

Johnston: I think in the late '60s. And, you know, he had two girls; and I got a letter from them once about something about his medals. So I went down to the Veterans office here, and I got them to send for his--all of his awards. And then while I was there I was entitled to a Presidential Unit Citation and I said, well, send for that for me too; and I never heard anything from it. I got the medals for him and sent it to the kids; and, oh, about a month or two ago I get a big package in the mail, all these medals. So I went down to the service

office, says, "Hey, how about taking a picture of me holding my air medal? You guys got it for me." Said, "Okay. Bring your wife down, we'll take a picture." But she went in the hospital. **[End of Tape 1, Side B]** So I call the news, I said, "How about taking a picture of this?" And I explained what it was. They said, no, we'll just write a little thing up about it. Being Memorial Day coming up, they wanted it for that, and the service office was closed. Anyway, so they interviewed me over the phone like this and they sent a guy out here to take a picture of it, put it in the paper on Memorial Day. So I felt pretty good about it.

Mark: That sounds interesting actually.

Johnston: I thought I sent one.

Mark: No. I don't have that.

Johnston: I will send it to you.

Mark: I will put it in your file. That will be interesting actually.

Johnston: Okay. Then I'll send the tape at the same time.

Mark: Oh, yeah, that would be great. Well, I thank you for taking some time out of your day.

Johnston: Oh, thank you.

Mark: I really, really appreciate it.

Johnston: Well, I'll have to sit down a while now and calm down.

Mark: Okay. Sorry to make you—

Johnston: That's all right. That's part of my life. I've lived with that.

Mark: I guess so.

Johnston: Yeah.

[End of Interview]