

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
EUGENE KLAWITTER
Mechanic, Air Force, Korean War
2000

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Klawitter, Eugene W., (1932-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 55 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Eugene Klawitter, a Montello, Wisconsin native, discusses his Korean War service as an auto repairman with the 6161th Motor Vehicle Unit with the Air Force. He talks about training at Lackland Air Force Base (Texas) and mechanic training at Le Tourneau (Texas). Klawitter mentions his trip overseas aboard the U.S.S. General Polk, assignment to the 6161th Maintenance Squadron, and duty at the Yakota Air Force Base (Japan). He talks about repairing a variety of jeeps, cars, trucks, towing equipment and he describes supervising Japanese mechanics. He describes being on a gun crew and towing a quad mount for machine guns to a small Army base. Klawitter describes in detail a B-29 accident on the runway, the explosions from its bombs going off, and the response of Japanese firemen. He recalls another B-29 accident when a plane crash landed on a bowling alley and clothing shop. He comments on sightseeing and recreational activities, and he recalls seeing shows with bandleader Xavier Cugat and boxing champion Joe Louis. Klawitter talks about shipping home to the States and spending a year at Whiteman Air Force Base (Missouri) working with B47 bombers, first in the 340th Bomb Wing and then the 486th Bomb Squadron. Klawitter touches upon getting a job as a mechanic in Madison (Wisconsin) right after discharge and membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He details getting a three-day pass and climbing Mount Fuji while in Japan.

Biographical Sketch:

Klawitter (b. January 4, 1932) served with the 6161st Motor Vehicle Unit in Japan during the Korean War. He resides in Poynette, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.

Transcribed by Alex Combs, 2009.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

- James: Well I could buy two 14s for him. Talking to Eugene Klawitter it's the 25th of July year 2000.
- Eugene: I need some extra—
- James: When were you born, Gene?
- Eugene: January 4, 1942 [1932].
- James: Where?
- Eugene: Montello, Wisconsin.
- James: Oh, just up there the other day.
- Eugene: Oh were ya?
- James: Mm, hmm [affirmative]. And when did you enter military service?
- Eugene: Um, March 21st, 1951.
- James: '51. And headed to?? the Army?
- Eugene: No, Air Force.
- James: Air Force. You were a volunteer then?
- Eugene: Yes. Well at that particular time the Army was drafting personnel and, uh, things were getting such that after I got out of high school in 1950 that in the fall of 1950 things were getting more, uh, close to getting drafted because the war in Korea broke out I think the 25th of June—
- James: 1950.
- Eugene: —1950. And, uh, having worked at the canning factory and then of course in the winter?? had to be laid off a little bit, uh, those things came to my mind during the way to go into the Army, so I was going to try for four years in something else such as the Air Force, and, Sergeant Fandahay??, that was the recruiter up there at the time, had a list I think he had 30 or 40 people waiting to get into the Air Force, but all the sudden he got an opening for four people and he couldn't seem to contact any one of those 40 or 30, whatever it might have been, and there were four of us that just had signed up probably within the two weeks of that notice and he contacted us, and we were more or less all people who went to school

together or in the vicinity and we knew one another and we got taken in right at that time.

James: Good. Where did you go first?

Eugene: Went down to processing center down at Milwaukee. And, I don't know if I had a newspaper?? with me or not, I really didn't bring that with me—

James: Oh that's nice.

Eugene: —I was a processing center there for the Army as well as the Air Force.

James: I see.

Eugene: You're integrated together as one unit for your medical—

James: Exams.

Eugene: —Exams, and from there that took probably no more that 3 days, I think it was about 2 days to do that, and then we got on a train that went directly, I believe to San Antonio, it may have changed tracks or you know here or there, but certainly going to San Antonio. The Army, I don't know, I think we were just about all Air Force on there but I couldn't guarantee that, there may have been some Army places that were on the way that some Army got off, that I don't know. But, it probably took a day and a half to get down there anyway the way we were going along. So went along to San Antonio and they picked us up by truck there and took us in to uh, Lackland Air Force Base there was, there's the, uh, what do you call it, it's the center for training, well boot camp would be the word for the Army, but it being Air Force, it—

James: Basic training.

Eugene: —Basic training is what I'm trying to say here.

James: Ok, and that lasted how long?

Eugene: That was, I believe that was 8 weeks there at that time. It did vary, but we happened to be 8 weeks.

James: Now you still didn't know what you were going to do in the Air Force, how was that decided?

Eugene: I didn't really know exactly, but my line of occupation was at that time just odd jobs and I loved cars and trucks and stuff like that and I was born in a small town up in Montello and some of my life was spent on a farm

and of course you got familiar with horses and tractors and pickup trucks and cars and such like that and of course I was already driving a vehicle on the farm, of course off-road most of the time, but in those days they weren't too particular where you drove and I was already driving in the 6th grade, not that I was gonna be going to town by myself—

James: Right, but around the farm and such—

Eugene: Right and going to school, to the country school I would drive, my dad would let me drive, whatever vehicle it was and then drive it home—

James: So you had a lot of experience before you even grew up.

Eugene: Oh I had a lot of experience. And of course I tried to install accessories on cars such as radios, which I did and uh, oh I'd be fixing tires now and then all such minor things pertain to vehicles, and of course you learned a lot in your experiences with machinery when you're on a farm. And about half the time I spent operating a machine almost. So when I got down to basic training, I told 'em my experience about auto accessories, and the more or less they had considered me to be a mechanic then. And then that's where I got the training initial, the training for a mechanic. And so when I came out of there, out of basic training I went to Long View, Texas, and that's an old established company, there is Eternal Heavy Equipment, it's earth moving equipment and the government had set up a situation with them where they trained mechanics and they trained riggers, people that would be out there rigging telephone poles and probably engineers for making building bridges and such for the Army. So we had riggers and we also had a large very large building there for teaching us the different stages of repair, such as, uh, stationary mounted engines, like that GMC [General Motor Company] 6-cylinder engine for the World War 2 equipment, and we also had diesel training for heavy equipment, and of course that was also on display as well as some of the vehicles that we'd torn apart. And then we had classrooms on either side of the building which would zero in on such things as carburetion, ignition, diesel injectors, driving, drive train of vehicles, such as Hodgkiss differentials, transmissions. It was pretty well covered and then at that time too they had a little course there where you drove the equipment too that you would be working on. They had more or less 2 and a half ton trucks that were troop carriers, they were a utility vehicle, and I believe we also had some weapons carriers there and we had a course that we went on. And this previous area where we stayed was an add-on situation where the German prisoners from World War 2 had been kept prior to 1951. And they had a medics' building there, the regular living quarters, and they also had an entertainment, it was called an auditorium, so we utilized that and it was very neat to live there, because all the buildings were connected by enclosed corridors, and you could walk down to the mess hall or to the entertainment or you could visit

someone and never go outside so to speak. And Latternal?? did an excellent job by setting this up, Mr. Latternal?? I don't remember his name, but I've got a lot of the literature that he would sent to my mother, or the company would sent to my mother, every month telling he was a very Christian person. And he would send my mother, and a lot of other kids or course, literature on what the goings on were at Latternal as well as, uh, at the school, sort of the highlights.

James: So what did they train you to do?

Eugene: Well I—

James: Take care of everything or—

Eugene: It was a mechanical side of taking care of those vehicles, whether it be replacing an engine, trouble shooting—

James: But then airplane engine?

Eugene: No airplane engines. After I got into the service and found out a little bit more about airplane engines I wish I could have gotten into A&E at that time it was called and I could've experienced some aircraft motor work, I was very interested in motors. Oh, until this day, but I did not get that training.

James: So after you finished the course, what did they do to you, for you, where did they send you?

Eugene: Well then I believe I came home for just a few days, it could have been as much as a week. Came home, and then I had to find transportation from Portage, Wisconsin to San Francisco to Camp Stoneman. There was Army processing facility located up the Pittsburgh River north, northeast of San Francisco. I guess to this day it's still in business processing troops for overseas, whether it be Army or Air Force.

James: What's the camp called?

Eugene: Camp Stoneman.

James: Camp Stoneman. S-T-O-N-E-M-A-N?

Eugene: Yeah, it's located at Pittsburgh, California. It's a smaller town, it's not as big as Pittsburgh.

James: And what did they do to you there?

Eugene: Just for processing, which took about, possibly, 3 days. It was to get the flu shots, Japanese beetle was one of them we had to have at that time, and whatever other up to date shots we needed to, probably typhus and stuff like that, you know. And then after being there, barracks there for 2 or 3 days and then we got on board a troop carrier ferry, that I guess was currently assigned to such duties on the, uh, I can't remember the river it came up there, but it was a backwater of the Pacific Ocean. And, uh, I guess the miles that we went down there possibly about 20 miles down that river past San Quentin, also we had a lot of Victory ships from World War 2 [Victory ships: cargo ships built by the United States during World War 2 to replace losses due to German submarine attacks] that were stationed in some part of that particular back area, there were a lot of Victory ships anchored there I know of course ____ (??) you went up to the processing pier in San Francisco right near the Bay Bridge. I mean the Bay Bridge was just half a mile or a quarter mile away. And I don't recall too much processing there other than just waiting to get on the troop ship, in this case it was the General Pope (name of a ship). And to bring everyone up to speed on the General Pope, I guess that ship—

James: It took you to Korea?

Eugene: It took me to Tokyo, Japan.

James: To Tokyo.

Eugene: Yeah.

James: Yokohama and Tokyo are somewhat combined so you could say “either or.”

Eugene: Yeah.

James: Ok, and then what did they assign to you?

Eugene: Well then at that time I was assigned to the 61, 61st Motor Vehicle Squadron.

James: 61.

Eugene: 61. 6-1.

James: Motor Vehicle Squadron?

Eugene: Yup.

James: Felt like you were in the Air Force (chuckles)?

- Eugene: Ok, this was located at Yokota Air Base [US air base near Tokyo], and that was the largest, that was the largest bomber base in the Far East. And, uh, of course, the aircraft there were about 90 percent, maybe 95 percent B-29s [heavy bomber flown by US during World War 2 and Korea] from World War 2, we had a few B-50s [an updated version of the B-29 with larger engines & tail stabilizer, served until 1965 as reconnaissance and refueling planes] there, which were the later version of the B-29 with the high-aired tail and a bigger motor, that we called the “corn cob engine,” and, uh—
- James: So what was your work there, just engines—?
- Eugene: Oh, I was in, uh, I was in 3rd and 4th echelon, and that was the, when I first got there, and I was a motor, then I guess it was, uh PFC at the time and I had about 3 to 5 Japanese mechanics that worked for me, we more or less took care of light maintenance which would be tail lights, head lights—
- James: On airplanes?
- Eugene: No, on motor vehicles.
- James: Oh, ok.
- Eugene: On your Jeeps, your weapons carriers, your 2 and a half ton, your 3 and a quarter ton, and your big fire trucks, quite heavy equipment, and your trailers, and even some armored cars, and staff cars, all that. And bomb service trucks, a lot of bomb service trucks, and also towing equipment such as the Cletrac that was popular in World War 2 for towing heavy aircraft. And then we had some Coleman tractors that were even bigger than that 4-wheel drive all steering wheels for towing B-29s, more of modern towing equipment because the Coleman could tow aircraft without scuffing up the runway, where the Cletracs had a rubber pad tracking like a tank and they weren't really made to run on hard surfaces, they were made to run on the old portable landing strips that were put together by personnel to land aircraft on the islands in the Western Pacific. So I was in that minor maintenance and the oil leaks and all such things as that. And then I went into the 4th echelon after a fashion, oh, 6 months, a year or something like that where the procedure was for training and then I got into that and of course that was more or less, um, changing transmissions in engines and getting deeper into the ignition system pulling the triggers, campaigning?? those and repairing them. There was a battery shop there, and of course most of the *hard* work was done by Japanese hired mechanics. And a lot of those mechanics were mechanics that actually worked in World War 2 on Japanese equipment such as heavy aircraft, A&E-type Japanese guys that worked on heavy Japanese aircraft. And

then actually we put hands-on, it was actually hands on doing my own work on all that equipment that came in, but if something was to tie you up, they didn't want you to get tied up for any length of time, because you had to take care of supervision of your own mechanics there too. And eventually, and it wasn't too long after I was there I got on a gun crew and throughout the airbase, different squadrons would furnish possibly about 6 to 8 people such as myself and you would be assigned to, 4, it was 4 machine guns, it was 50 caliber machine guns on a quad mount, which they called it, and it was portable equipment that you could put wheels on and tow behind a vehicle and tow it to any particular area that was needed. But in this case it was somewhat permanent right on the flight line to the added protection of the base, along with some Army units that were more or less on the outside area of the base, on unknown areas. They were in, to protect from whatever may happen. So I was on there and I was moved up to supervisor on that quite fast for whatever reason, but anyway then once a year we had to take that quad mount, put it on wheels and tow it north of Tokyo on the Atlantic Ocean (probably means the Pacific Ocean) to a little town called Katakai which was an Army base, a small, very small Army base with more or less tents and a few permanent buildings such as a maintenance for the radio-controlled airplanes they had there and also for the mess hall and from that party personnel that would be operational for that particular base, and we stayed there for about a week and then of course we had to uh, fire our quad mount at a tow target, or in this case, more or less a radio-controlled airplane which was about a ten-foot wingspan on it, about 14 feet long. And it was, like I said, radio controlled and then we had a faced our unit at the ocean, straight on the ocean and then we had on each side, right and left a marker stake that was in the ground and you were to shoot only between those two markers as anything would go by, in this case a radio-controlled aircraft called an "R-CAT" (Radio Controlled Aerial Target Detachment, radio controlled planes used for target practice).

James: And what kind of a gun were you shooting?

Eugene: 50 caliber.

James: 50 caliber.

Eugene: 4 barreled quad mount, shoot 2 barrels at a time.

James: So you're on 4 always at a time or _____(?).

Eugene: Well it depended, there were other squadrons that had the same equipment we did and we took turns shooting, we might be there for about a half a day I'd say, probably 4 hours approximately, and we'd pull out and another unit would come in and set up, and the next day we'd be back

again doing the same thing. And that was once a year, actual wet fire to keep us in training for that particular situation, and my basic job at the airbase was making sure that equipment got fixed up.

James: Ok, and now long did you stay in Japan?

Eugene: Oh, I was there I don't know if it says on my 214 or not, but I was there from August or September, either one, and I was there till, that was 1951, and I was there till January 3rd or 4th or 5th before??, and that came out to be about 2 years and 8 months or something like that and I was at, in the 61 61st all that time and of course, when I was over there too we were into an area, being the biggest bomber base we had to carry protection and that was, in this case I had an M-1 carbine that I carried with ammunition taped to the stock.

James: Carried it where?

Eugene: Carried it everywhere you went. Except for the mess hall.

James: Oh on the base.

Eugene: On the base, oh yeah. And after that I was supervisor of the gun crew then I carried a .45 (.45 caliber pistol) and turned in my M-1 and carried a .45 which of course in this case they gave out even to the silver round??. But yeah, everybody carried except for the mess hall. We didn't have facilities, and probably didn't want facilities there to be storing guns. ____ (??).

James: So you did the same thing with the entire term?? there they didn't change your duty at all.

Eugene: No, no, it was strictly maintenance for all equipment that came forth before us.

James: None of you, none of you were sent to Korea locating another woods??

Eugene: Uh, not to my knowledge there's a little bit of shifting of personnel around to different things like that, no, a friend of mine was put in a refueling squadron, but it wasn't any major change off-base and that was our job there. Course we had some entertainment, there were other bases right around there, which I don't read much about this in the VFW or anything but I'd like to see them zero in on Dakota Air Base some time in their features cuz there was lots of activity in not only in Dakota, we had aircraft coming in all the time there, and the bombers the B-29s there left usually by the evening, starting as probably as early as about 4 o'clock and they would continue on taking off until maybe about 9 or 10 in the evening, then they'd come back early in the morning approximately 6 to 8

hours later, maybe even 10 hours later. And some of them were pretty shot up, and motors feathered because they quit or got shot as far as how many didn't come back, that wasn't privy to us to know that but we, put 2 and 2 together once in a while, and of course with the accidents we had on the base itself not only was it that peoples aircraft that I wrote about that blew up, it was close enough for most of us, there once one that was even closer than that but it was—

James: Tell me about that aircraft blowing up.

Eugene: Well it was in the fall of the year and I was in the first barracks, I had actually moved around to 1, 2, 3, 4 locations in that time I was over there and I ended up in a tent, but that was the first barracks I moved into and it was a permanent building and it was a 2 wing building and I was in the south end of it one night talking to another guy standing up in we'll call it the south wing I guess is what we'll call it, and I was, we were standing directly underneath one of those lights that has a globe on it, and it was suspended from the ceiling on a just a cord that came down. And we were looking at one another talking and all of a sudden the barracks kinda light up with a light and we looked to the right of us, cuz there was the parking lot right in front of us and across the street was a power plant with a steam power plant that heated a lot the buildings on the base and in some cases I expect--I never got in the facility--but I expect that maybe it provided some electricity too. And the only thing came to my mind was that the boiler blew up or a storm or something like this, light happened first, saw the light, and then the building shook, just like an earthquake and that globe that was around the light bulb just came right down and hit right between us, and glass flew all over well then we thought, well yes, could be the power plant, or it could be something else. In Japan I had experienced a small earthquake either before or after that I can't recall, but they do have earthquakes over there—

James: Very common.

Eugene: Very common, so couldn't put it all together at the moment, and then as a few seconds went by and minute, well we heard a concussion too, then we didn't, we still didn't know exactly what was going on. And then the other fella, I don't know where he went, but I went around the room into a new partitioned area where they had a pool table and I jumped underneath the pool table, knowing it was heavily supported, and then some more concussions came and more of the storm windows just fell right out of the place and then some of the other, inner windows just broke, glass hitting the floor and then I thought, I better get out of the building 'cuz the building was shaking kinda bad. And I thought, I'll just run right out 'cuz there are trenches all over this base, trenches all over for personnel to jump into when it was necessary. So I got in the first one right outside the

door, then as I looked across the street at where the boiler heating plant was. I noticed that it wasn't coming from there it was coming behind it, and behind it was been looking off toward the northeast, to the end of the runway, the east runway, and then I could see fire in the air and a lit up sky and then of course you could easily put 2 and 2 together because these aircraft were taking off with a full tonnage of bombs, and we thought to ourselves, it's got to be a B-29, and it certainly it was, loaded. And what had happened I guess to the best of my knowledge, was that he couldn't get off the ground either because of power failure on one of the four engines whatever, or something with the control of the airplane and they went off the end of the runway and I would imagine they had cut the power down and they went across a frontage road that was raised up about a foot or two, that's for security vehicles to drive on, and the landing gear of the B-29 just plowed a furrow right through that, of course it was so heavy and stopped just prior to going right through the fence off the base and the personnel got out, were able to get out and ran away back toward the base of course, and got far enough away, that when it went off, for whatever reason the engine caught fire or it nosed over, I don't never know, anyway it blew up. And when it blew up more than once, the bombs I suppose after the first explosion scattered around and eventually I guess most or all of them went off, blew an awfully big hole in the ground, I guess big enough to put the barracks in and then some. And then of course the fire trucks went up to put it out. By the way I was going to bring the picture of the fire trucks, cuz I found them yesterday or Sunday I found them, the picture of the three fire trucks and they were pretty much demolished and burned up and then I think the—

James: Tell me, those who put out the fire, were they (??)—

Eugene: Those were Jap, mostly Japanese firemen, but there probably was, I know the supervisor of most of the Japanese would have been Air Force personnel and to the best of my knowledge none of the Air Force personnel got hurt in any way, but I'm not in any way positive of it, but the Japanese they had a couple Japanese killed in that situation too.

James: How did the fire truck get caught?? because I thought they went to put it out?

Eugene: Well I think, it was some possibly bad instructions given here or whatever, because when a bomber's blowing up and on fire I don't think, and it's got bombs on it, you don't go near that.

James: And that's what they did.

Eugene: And that's what they did. Whether some of the bombs went further away and were getting close to buildings I'll never know, but I don't think that

was the case 'cuz with the end of the east runway buildings were quite far away and I think they was just premature for them to be out there trying to put fires out, 'cuz they went off probably the full load went off in a 3, 4 minute area, or time frame, the bang was the first hole in the ground, or whatever, and other bombs went off and I think the fire department decided to go out there between some of those explosions and try to bring it down to size more or less, and that's the mistake they made, there were other bombs that went off, and it was out, well it was off the runway so that was as far as a construction of, or destruction of buildings and so on, there wasn't any. And, that's my closest to getting the business, well I'll take that back, there was there was another one, it was a little later on, I think it was about a year later—[**End of Tape One, Side One**]

--another situation, there was no explosions, but I got, got closer to getting involved in an airplane crash, but that's basically what happened with the story that I had written up. And I can tell you about that too if you want to hear about it.

James: Yeah, sure, tell me, that's why we're here.

Eugene: Ok. After this particular incident, like I said, had took place at the first barracks that was, situated in, I was transferred to an area that was closer to my work, it was about a block away, and it was a Quonset area [Quonset hut: prefabricated, corrugated steel buildings with a semicircular cross-section mass-produced during World War 2 to be set up without skilled labor] set up for dependent families that might have been over there and it was nice set up and we got to stay in a Quonset hut, not only with living room, kitchen and all the amenities?? like that but it was just the next block that my work was at, and one morning I got up, and it was no different morning than anything else, it was a not, it wasn't anything that went on during the night that I was aware of, and that was very funny because after I got up and walked over to the street that went east to west I was walking west to go to the next block where I was going to the motor pool area, I looked to my left about a half a block down there and here was a B-29 that had landed in the parking lot between the bowling alley and a clothing sales store, just as though it had flown itself into the parking lot with the nose into the clothing sales store and the tail just clearing the bowling alley it wasn't touching it, it was actually in the parking area. And this was like a half a block away from me! I mean it was getting awfully close to where I was sleeping. I never heard it. And apparently nobody else did because it was not brought to our attention during the evening with a siren or anything or nobody said, "Well did you hear this?" or "Hear that?" Was nothing about that, I, within 3 stone throws, a good 3 stone throws I coulda hit that B-29. And what had happened was he was coming back in the fog and if I'm correct the call it a GCA guidance system [Ground Controlled Approach: air traffic controllers guide pilots to

safe landing in adverse weather conditions using radar images] and in those days a GCA was probably not as perfect as what would have happened today for guidance, but anyway it was landing, the aircraft was landing parallel to the runway but over about a quarter of a mile, approximately from the runway itself or a third of a mile or something like that, and it was going just parallel with that and for whatever reason it came down, maybe thought they were on the runway, or maybe it was ran out of gas, I don't know, but anyway the fog certainly didn't help, it had actually landed on the top of the bowling alley on one end of it, and took out, of course it smashed the roof and everything on it by the, I've got pictures of that at home, which I wish I would have brought along uh, and it actually hit that bowling alley, landed into the parking lot, and the nose went down into the clothing sales store, and the tail went up into the air, but to the best of my knowledge everyone got killed in it. The airplane looked pretty much intact, when I walked by it, I didn't go off onto the blocked-off area of course, I didn't go over there, but my understanding is that most of the personnel were killed in that and of course then I just continue walking a half a block and get to work. And for some reason or another, that airplane disappeared in a hurry, because I don't recall seeing it day after day there, it got dismantled and taken care of in a very big hurry. But that was about as close as I wanted to get—

James: Sure.

Eugene: —Yeah, near. It was sorta, where I was, Porter, who was neither one of those buildings I stayed in was between both of those aircraft that landed like that I was closer to one than I was the other.

James: Did you get into Tokyo often?

Eugene: Yeah, we went into Tokyo fairly often for more or less sightseeing and so on like that I—

James: So did you go to Eck?? like everybody else did?

Eugene: No I don't think I got to that peak.

James: Really? You're the only one I ever talked to that didn't.

Eugene: Yeah, I never got to that one.

James: It was a huge PS?? there right in downtown Tokyo.

Eugene: Well I never got to it, but I got down to—

James: Beautiful place, wow—

- Eugene: —Yakuska [called this by Americans, in Japanese it is Yokosuka, home to one of America's largest Navy seaports] uh, Naval—
- James: That's the Navy base, that's where I was.
- Eugene: Were you at Yakuska? I went down to that PX [Post Exchange: retail stores operated by and for US military personnel that sell North American goods to servicemen] somehow on a bus, that was one of the things they entertained us with, going there on a bus. And I also got down to, I believe the name of the place was Sagami, and that was where they had brought back a lot of the vehicles from World War 2 from the islands in the Pacific and they would have parts scattered all around the place in the back yard, so to speak, the Japanese there with identification books for different vehicles or aircraft or whatever, and they'd pick up a part, try to find a part number, and try to match it what it came off of, and then they'd process that, put that in a bin and stuff and use that, in fact I went down there with an officer one particular day, it was a 6-by (presumably a truck with a bed 6' by another measurement), and proceeded to load the 6-by up with tail lights and head lights, and oh, and other equipment, cables, and you name it, to keep our World War 2 vehicles going, 'cuz when I was there 99% of the vehicles there were from World War 2 from the islands and so on.
- James: So, and, uh, did they didn't have a lot of entertainment for the boys there when—?
- Eugene: Yes, when I was there we had, uh, Xavier Cugat [American orchestral bandleader, helped with the spread of Latin music in US popular music] came to the gymnasium, I forget the singer that he at that—
- James: Abbe Lane.
- Eugene: Abbe Lane, was a singer, they put on quite a show, and Joe Louis [heavyweight boxing champion from 1937-1949] came over there, put on an exhibition boxing exhibition at the place and uh—
- James: Did you see anything from the Salvation Army or the Red Cross?
- Eugene: No, I, they coulda been there, but I don't recall going to anything that they did, might have put on, I don't know.
- James: So when did you leave Japan to come home?
- Eugene: That was January I believe January 3rd or 4th of 1954.
- James: Was that another big troop ship?

Eugene: Yes, it took General Mitchell, and the Mitchell well it came outta if I had to guess Tokyo Yokohama harbor and, remember the submarine nets they had there?

James: Sure.

Eugene: I remember them opening the nets to let us in and out of the place, but anyway we headed south and we didn't know where we were going, and we ended up in Guam and they wouldn't let us off the ship, but I managed to get off the ship because I was on, I seemed to get TP?? detail one way or another and I had 4 or 5 guys working for me and I was in charge of the detail to get rid of the garbage and all that stuff, so I managed to put my foot on Guam anyway. But anyway we picked up a lot of personnel there the cars, some cars were put aboard, and of course the belongings?? and stuff like that more or less so that the troop ship from Guam and headed and proceeded to head back to San Francisco.

James: And you were discharged shortly thereafter?

Eugene: No, I had another year to go—

James: Ah.

Eugene: —And I was, I had picked an area that was proposed for us to pick from and I picked Sedalia, Missouri. And I got stationed for the next and last year of my service at the formerly Whiteman Air Force base during World War 2 which was a glider base, but it had been converted from gliders to B-47 jet bombers and that was something new to me because we were strictly B-29s and B-50s over there and here all the sudden we were in the jet, 4 or 6 jet aircraft B-47. But may I just tell you just one other thing that just comes to mind from being in Japan, and that was at Tachikawa Air Force Base, the big transport base, was located within sight of airplanes landing to our north of us and to the northwest of us was Johnson Air Force base which was a P-51 [P-51 Mustang: propeller-driven fighter, one of the most effective Allied fighters of World War 2] protection of all Allied bases in the general area, bombers or whatever may come our way, that was P-51 over there. So we and we also had Showa Air Base, which was a reconditioning of motor vehicles, and we had Fuchu and that was a processing center for outgoing airmen like myself, so I had to go through Fuchu before I left there.

James: Oh, I see.

- Eugene: I was there approximately 2 to 3 days at Fuchu and then got transported in some fashion to troop ship coming back. The Mitchell in this case. And then about halfway—
- James: So what was your duty down in Missouri?
- Eugene: Duty in Missouri was, I was transferred into the 340th bomb wing which was heavy maintenance and that maintenance was on Cummings diesels for that were turning generators for supporting the B-47s there. For ground powered equipment and all other things that we'd be concerned with ground powered equipment there were smaller generators rectifiers used for the B-47s in different hangers and more or less to keep the aircraft all maintained and then I was only in that for [coughs] excuse me, several months, and then I was put into, in charge of supervision in the maintenance of such equipment in the 486th bomb squadron, and that was, that was the remnants of the 8th Air Force in World War 2 outta England, and the only thing, we had some P-51s there that were brought up from the Arkansas Air National Guard needed repairing which stored in some of the aircraft hangers there that were left over from World War 2, but basically was the serves the B-47s, they more or less were just keeping up the training for the pilots there, 'cuz they weren't going anywhere to my knowledge.
- James: That was your last duty station?
- Eugene: 486th Air, yeah.
- James: When you got out of the service, did you use your GI Bill [GI Bill: a bill that provided college education, 1 year of unemployment benefits, and various low-interest loans to returning American veterans]?
- Eugene: No, I didn't and often thought of, "why didn't I?" but I didn't because I went right into mechanics I liked mechanics so well that I went to work with Kaiser Ford [car dealership in Madison, Wisconsin] right here in Madison, Wisconsin.
- James: So you got a job right away, that was nice.
- Eugene: Oh I got a job right away, but I just, I don't know, today I certainly would have—
- James: Done it differently.
- Eugene: —Done it differently, yes, I would've took the GI Bill.
- James: Right. And did you join any veterans' groups?

Eugene: I joined the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars, an American veterans' group] back sometime ago here in Madison, the 8483rd VFW that's located at the south, er, north end of the runway [of the Madison airport] here in Madison.

James: And did you, did you see any of your fellow airmen?

Eugene: Yeah, I haven't as of late, but back in the 50s and 60s Bob Sandblum from Lafayette, Indiana, I visited him when, I, I visited him the last year I was in the service in fact, he had an early out, he was a farm lad and I visited him in western, in the Indianapolis races in '54 [likely the Indianapolis 500, a 500 mile race] and he came up to visit me, and I had a call within the last 5 years from Bob Freeman from Coldwater, Michigan, him and I climbed Mount Fuji [highest mountain in Japan at 12,388 feet] on our 3 day, no we took a—

James: A 3 day pass?

Eugene: —3 day pass or was it, I guess we were gone a week, I guess we were gone a week. Whatever.

James: How was that experience?

Eugene: Oh that was, that was thrilling, (laughs) that was thrilling, hard but thrilling.

James: So it was difficult?

Eugene: Very difficult, yeah, yeah, we, we uh, went to Enoshima Island first, just off of, south of Tokyo, we had a lighthouse there and a lot of Japanese have their vacations spent a Enoshima Island and there's a nice beach there, beach, oh so called beach homes and houses, housing there, and of course from there you can see Mount Fuji very easily, as well as the last year I was at Yokota I was in a tent, and my tent window, the little tiny window I looked through to the east and I could look to the southeast and I could see Mount Fuji about 65 miles away, I could tell whether it was a clear day or not by just by if I could not see Mount Fuji it was not good weather, but, uh, yeah I went through there and then we took us 2 days to climb Mount Fuji, we started off at Silver City and got aboard a bus and went up to almost to the tree line, it couldn't make it to the tree line, but it, within probably a quarter mile, half a mile—

James: You had to hoof it from there?

Eugene: Had to hoof it through this forest, going uphill of course, and then you got to the base of the, the lava there, then they had a zigzag trail that zigzagged all the way up the top with different stations, there was 9 and a half stations, I don't know why they called them "half stations," but they did, in some places, and at each station would be a Japanese living in a little manmade lava hut, or he'd have some kind of wooden shack, he'd have a charcoal fire and he'd have some little food there and drink and you could, uh, he always had a charcoal fire going and he had a branding iron in there so you could pay whatever was a quarter, 50 cents something like that and get branded at that particular station.

James: Branded (chuckles)?

Eugene: Yup. It, branded, bought a Fuji stick; they call it a Fuji stick, with an octagon shaped stick, and on that stick they would take and brand that particular station and tell the feet, how high you were, so in case you never make it to the top you could prove how far you did go up. And I was hoping we could make it, we put that in the back of our minds "well, we're gonna try to make it to the top of this thing." So the first day we got up to, uh, I think it was 7 and a half station, 9 and a half being the top. We could see the top within a hundred yards, but the air was so thin up there that after all the zig—

James: How high was that?

Eugene: 12,394 feet.

James: At the top?

Eugene: Yeah, it usually always snow up there, if it wasn't on the outside it was on—(long pause on the tape) Made it to the 7th station, with about a hundred yards to the top there and uh, we were so high that we were above the clouds of course, and at that particular day there were multiple clouds floating around, and this was a pretty good sized station, I think it was spotted out that way, because they figured they knew that most everybody would be resting at that station because very hard to make it to the top in one day, because the air was so thin.

James: It was cold?

Eugene: And it was chilly there, and this particular Japanese person had a nice little charcoal fire *inside* the building not outside, he had it inside and it had a nice floor there with a rice mat and then you could rent another rice mat to put on top of that and a couple blankets and a pillow and we went to sleep about 3, I think it was 3:30 in the afternoon, we were so bushed, and we decided we'd get up early in the morning, and—

James: Get at it.

Eugene: —And get at it and finish our, our trip. And some of the Japanese are so wiry people that they have pack backs on their person, and some of them went right past us but we just couldn't make it any further, so we slept there during the evening and this was something else, there was a door at each end of this particular building and the clouds would come by like a fog and part of it would make it into the building before it vaporizes with the charcoal and you could see the cloud going away from us on the other end.

James: Bizarre.

Eugene: Oh you were high. I mean you were up there. So in the morning we got up, we ate some C-rations [military rations, consisting of canned meat and vegetables, potatoes or beans] which we had gotten at the supply squad and they didn't, they worked, but they, but we were a little bit sick from that too, I wasn't as bad as Bob Freeman, he was really sick, but we got enough energy up to finish it, trip and we had hired a guide, a Japanese guide to take us up to the top.

James: Why did you need a guide? I thought there was a path.

Eugene: There was a path, but he could point out different views from Mount Fuji you know, he could point out Enoshima Island, he could point out Tokyo's over there, and so and so's over there, and if you needed any assist to carry your luggage if you had any luggage, which you try not to do, he'd help you carry that, and he'd point out, of course he could speak Japanese, and if we had a problem particular problem to present to anyone on, at those different stations, he could point that out; assist you in any way he could. Anyway, we got on top, I had very few pictures left, I had 2 pictures left on my camera, Bob Freeman says "don't worry about it, you'll be able to buy film all over the place," well that wasn't the case at all, but we couldn't even buy film at the bottom of Mount Fuji, but you could in the bigger towns. So I had 2 pictures left and I got those taken to prove—

James: That you were there.

Eugene: —That my guide and I were both at the top, and you could see the big horseshoe cavity at the top with snow on the inside.

James: So where's that picture?

- Eugene: It's at home. I got it in my rec (recreation) room. If you ever get up to Poynette, I'd appreciate it if you'd stop—
- James: If you've got many copies we'll take it, easily done.
- Eugene: I could have more copies made, I got a big one, 8 by, 5 by 7, 8 by 10 made (all presumably in inches) of it, if you wanted one—
- James: No, I just wanted to see it, that's all.
- Eugene: Oh, well.
- James: That's all; I've seen a lot of pictures of Fuji from a long ways away.
- Eugene: Well I was still into it yesterday, trying to, or Sunday afternoon trying to get some information for you to—
- James: Sure.
- Eugene: More or less look at to show that I'm the guy that wrote the story or whatever. But anyway, yes I do have some pictures of that and I would even consider making one or two and giving to you and if you want to hang it up or file it away whatever you want to do, I would do that for you.
- James: Well that's nice; you don't need to do that. These are copies of your record.
- Eugene: Yeah.
- James: Can I have this?
- Eugene: Yes, you can have both of those.
- James: Ok, those are, we like to keep it with the story, so we have it all. Alright I've run out of questions to ask you, thank you, it was an interesting story you have.
- Eugene: Very, very welcome.
- James: Well you were a busy guy I think.
- Eugene: Oh yes, we were busy alright. Yeah.
- James: Alright. **[End of Interview]**