

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
VERNON MOLBREAK
Pilot, Navy, World War II
1999

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Molbreak, Vernon., (1920-). Oral History Interview, 1999.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 50 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Vern Molbreak, a Vermont township, Wisconsin native, discusses his service as a Naval aviator in the Pacific theater of World War II. Molbreak talks about his pre-war flight training, enlisting in the Navy as an aviation cadet, being in the “4th Flying Badger Squadron” from the University of Wisconsin, training at the University of Iowa, and flight training in Stearmans at the Glenview Naval Air Station (Illinois). He comments on further training in Texas, joining the Marines, and then resigning from the Marines to avoid becoming an instructor. He talks about working in the Navy as a dive bombing and instruments instructor in Texas, flying supplies in a double-engine plane with no experience in double-engines, and flights to New Guinea and the Admiralty Islands with Squadron VR13. Stationed in the Philippines, Molbreak comments on flying SBDs, SNJs, and F6F fighters. He tells of an emergency landing in a field and getting stuck in mud, and he describes some incidents of “horsing around.” He describes navigating over water and rescue protocol for downed pilots. He speaks of using the G.I. Bill for law school, work crop dusting with other veterans, service in the inactive Naval Reserves, and owning personal airplanes.

Biographical Sketch:

Molbreak (1920-) served as a Naval aviator from 1942-1945. After discharge he attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison and established the Vernon Molbreak Law Office in Madison.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999.

Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2009.

Transcript edited by Channing Welch and Katy Marty, 2009.

Abstract edited by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Transcribed Interview:

James: So, you were born where?

Vern: Vermont Township.

James: On a farm?

Vern: On the farm, uh huh.

James: And the year?

Vern: 1920.

James: And you entered military service, what year?

Vern: 1942, early.

James: '42.

Vern: Mm hmm.

James: And you volunteered?

Vern: Yeah. We were recruited from the University of Wisconsin.

James: Well, how good -- tell me how that began.

Vern: Ah, well, let's see.

James: You were a student.

Vern: I was a student, and I had taken a civilian pilot training course offered by the University of Wisconsin. Primary was a dollar an hour. Primary was a little Aeronca, and we got forty hours for forty bucks. And I thought that was pretty neat.

James: Out at Morey Airport?

Vern: Yeah (laughs). At Truax Field when it was--well, at Morey -- Morey was heading that up at that time. Just brand new. And then I took secondary, which was aerobatics in Waco.

James: You were still a civilian then?

Vern: Still a civilian, taking ground school through the Engineering School in the engineering building on University Avenue. And I think it was all designed to get you into the service. And about that time, right after Pearl Harbor, there was a running back—I can't recall his name—from the Bears, Chicago Bears that came up and gave us this big spiel. And a bunch of us signed up, and we --

James: That wasn't Don Kindt, was it?

Vern: No, it wasn't. No, it wasn't Kendt, no.

James: (unintelligible) came later.

Vern: Yeah. And it was sometime around May or so that a group of us went out as the 4th Flying Badger Squadron from the University of Wisconsin.

James: Navy?

Vern: Navy, yeah, Navy. And there were people like Bob Sachtschale. I don't know if you remember him? Bob was a good friend of mine.

James: I knew him from the boxing squad.

Vern: That's right. And Charlie Epperson was a roommate of mine, and-- (laughs)

James: Oh, a kappa Sig -- you were.

Vern: Oh, yeah (laughs).

James: You got drunk and (??) --

Vern: No, no. No, no wait a second. This was in the service.

James: Oh. I was gonna say—

Vern: Later. Yeah. No, I didn't know him before that.

James: Oh, wild.

Vern: Oh, yeah (laughs). He didn't change, either.

James: Well, he (unintelligible) himself together.

Vern: Yeah, well he was a great guy, though.

James: Oh, I'm sure.

Vern: He really was. Stuart Crawford was also – you know Stuart. And Leonard Schmock, of course, “Smokey.”

James: I didn't remember that they were in the same group.

Vern: Well, we all were that vintage, and we left and went to Iowa preflight. Stayed in the quadrangle at the University of Iowa for three months.

James: Yeah, you were a trainee.

Vern: Cadet.

James: You were a cadet, right.

Vern: Cadet, but we –

James: Had no rank at all.

Vern: No, none. As a matter of fact, it was a three-month course, and it sort of backed us up because the primary flight-instructing schools were filled up. So, we went through that course, and they covered academics from, let's say, arithmetic to calculus in three months, you know, and that kinda thing and lots and lots of physical exercise. Freddy Gage was our ninety-day wonder—ensign down there, (laughs) and --

James: Great role model.

Vern: Yeah. He selected me on this basketball team, and we had a couple of problems. (laughs) He sent me on the second team. Anyway, it was a good time, and it was good training. And then I went to Glenview Naval Air Station.

James: How much flying did you do in Iowa?

Vern: None. Zero.

James: That's what I thought.

Vern: And we took our primary down in Glenview, Glenview Naval Air Station.

James: Stearmans?

Vern: Stearmans.

James: (unintelligible).

Vern: No, Stearmans. And that – let's see I got down there in September, and we left in December. Cold! Man, it was really cold down there flying those open cockpits.(laughs)

James: How'd you enjoy that airplane?

Vern: Well, it was okay. But I had flown the Waco, so I was familiar with the kind--

James: (unintelligible) didn't have the power.

Vern: Yeah, and open, you know, goggles (James laughs) and helmet sticking out there. The scarf.

James: The scarf, right.

Vern: Ha, ha, ha! Then we all went to Corpus Christi by train, and got down there just before Christmas of 1942. We took basic training and then advanced training, and then we were sent— I joined the Marines, Jack Eagan and I. We were buddies growing up, and we went in together. Three of us; there was a guy by the name of Bob Webster. Here's Jack, and that's at Iowa Preflight. I'm in the upper bunk, and he could never wake up. We had five minutes to get out on the parade grounds in our gym suits, and he couldn't do it. So I'd have to hop out and dress and get all of his clothes and put them right as he'd sit on the edge of the bed, you know (both laugh). You remember this guy? Maybe you remember Jack. He owned Wisconsin Trailer Mart.

James: Oh, yeah.

Vern: And he ultimately bought twenty-seven acres of land on which the East Towne [Mall?] is now resting. (laughs) That's Jack Eagan. Yeah, he died about two years ago. Then there was a Bob Webster that I went in with, and this is a picture of Bob and myself at Iowa Preflight. He was ultimately sent over to New Hebrides, and Espiritu Santo. He and four others, friends of mine, were going over to the hospital to visit friends of ours, and they were coming back in a Jeep. This was in 1945, I believe. Coming back in a Jeep in the jungle, you know, there's just one trail, and it was at night. And there was a truck that had stalled and left the tailgate down, the endgate.

James: Jesus.

Vern: They hit it and decapitated every one of them.

- James: All four of them.
- Vern: All four of 'em yeah.
- James: Imagine, go like that.
- Vern: Bob, Bob Webster, nice guy. He and I ushered at the Orpheum Theatre together. Yeah, long time ago.
- James: When you went down to Texas, did they separate you into type of aircraft that you were designated to fly?
- Vern: No, no. We didn't have a chance. When after -- I was gonna tell you about this Marine, Colonel Mangram. Both Jack and I signed up for the Marines, and then I found out that they were going to make all of the Marines instructors. So I resigned; so did Jack Eagan. And I got a call from Colonel Mangram; I'll never forget him. He says, "What's the deal here?" So I told him, I said, "Look, I could have been an instructor in Madison, Wisconsin. Civilian! I didn't want it then, and I don't want it now." He said, "Well, you can get out. But remember, the Navy needs instructors too." Well, that's what happened. So, after advanced training, we went to Atlanta. And this is a picture of Smokey and I strutting down Atlanta (laughs).
- James: Oh, yeah, great picture.
- Vern: Yeah, isn't that a good picture? (laughs) Anyway, then we went through an instrument squadron there, and then we instructed in instruments at Beeville, Texas.
- James: Flying what aircraft?
- Vern: Flying SNJs. Navy designation: AT6s.
- James: AT6s.
- Vern: Yeah, yeah, and then I was on a list to go down to fighter squadron down in Kingsville, Texas. So I went down there. I won't go into the detail of how I got there (laughs). But anyway, I got down there and I spent a year, a year and a half, instructing in fighters along with Charlie Epperson and Freddie Damra. I don't know if you met him, but he was with us. And this is a picture of a friend of mine and myself down at Kingsville, Texas. And I got him a job after the war. We were pretty close with the airline here, North Central. And he matriculated to be the Vice President in Charge of Operations of Republic Airlines. And then we were angry, because we

weren't getting out to the fleet. So we sort of had a—it wasn't a strike or anything—but we were giving a lot of downs of people that weren't as good as we were, we thought. And this was in late '44, and so they put us, they did release us from instructing. And we were in a, I was in a dive bombing squadron, operational. And it came upon us around Christmas time that the personnel officer was supposed to get fifty twin-engine pilots to go overseas. And he didn't do it, and when he got back from Christmas he had three days to get fifty pilots over to Atlanta for more instruments. And he took us all, every one of us who were flying SBDs, which were dive bombers, Douglas Dauntless.

James: Perforated dive flaps.

Vern: That's right, yeah. And that's another story. When I got back to the squadron, there was nobody there. And I said, "Where is everybody?" (Both laugh) And I got called, yeah. I was in another town, and I called back to Kingsville, and they had gotten the orders and I hadn't. So, I then went to Atlanta again, and then we left for overseas. I had one flight in what we called our "5Ds." But they were DC4s, really. I flew one trip with it from Pearl Harbor to Johnston Island to Kwajalein to Guam to Eniwetok to Pearl Harbor. And then I didn't like that, either. I really dislike multi-engine. I never had—none of us had—one hour, not one hour in multi-engine.

James: (unintelligible) in the seat?

Vern: Yeah.

James: Without any experience?

Vern: No experience at all. None. Zero.

James: What a risk.

Vern: Yeah. Well so then we moved further out and flew DC3s in the Admiralty Islands. This was Squadron VR13. It originated in Brisbane, Australia, and then came up to the Admiralties. The Admiralty Islands consisted of Los Negros, on which island I was, on a little hook called Momote. Another island was Manus, and that was a tremendous harbor. They repaired carriers and battleships and so forth because it was a natural harbor. This is what it looked like. Those are the Quonset huts that we stayed in.

James: Deluxe quarters!

Vern: Deluxe quarters.

James: Yes.

Vern: And I flew around, from there we flew around to New Guinea: Hollandia Finchhaven . We went down the slot. You know, they did island-hopping when they went up. So there were clusters of Japanese in Rubal and New Ireland, Green Island that we flew down through. And they'd bomb us periodically, only because we were on the airfield. They were really bombing the shipyards. (laughs) But they threw--

James: [unintelligible]

Vern: Yeah, well, no, no. We were further away than that, but they'd do it because of the airfield.

James: Right.

Vern: And so forth.

James: What was your mission, primarily?

Vern: Just, just –

James: Carrying supplies?

Vern: Carrying supplies and some troops and personnel. And then from Momote we'd go north through Peleliu and across that was Babelthuap. If I could find one of those – this is Peleliu. Well, this is the Admiralties, by the way.

James: I was gonna say (unintelligible) left behind (??) (unintelligible) church on Peleliu.

Vern: Yeah, yeah. This is Biak. Here's Babelthuap that was across from it. The Japanese were over there, and they'd build boats. And about the time they got them built, why, we'd go over and bomb them, and away they'd go, so And here's a cemetery at Peleliu. They had a horrible battle in Peleliu. That was really something.

James: That was a strategic blunder.

Vern: Yes, it was.

James: They had no reason at all to go there. And it was just terrible.

Vern: Could've skipped it, yeah.

James: 15,000, they lost.

Vern: Yeah. Oh, it was awful. I think that, according to this book anyway, I think MacArthur wanted to get around it.

James: Right.

Vern: Just hop over it. And Nimitz wanted—I don't know why--

James: Well, Chesty Puller and those guys (??) --

Vern: Is that right?

James: Yeah, Marine --philosophy. Rather than go around anything.

Vern: Uh huh?

James: They didn't like that.

Vern: Yeah. Well, anyway, this was Admiralty Islands. And here are several pictures of the natives, the aborigines, down there. This was our officers' club.

James: This was the officers' club?

Vern: Yeah, that's the officers' club. That was built after we got there. When I first got there (laughs), you know-- Well, yeah. But I went to the officers' mess, and they had some bread out there. And there were wings sticking up, you know, and feet. I said, "What?" They said, "Spread some peanut butter over it. You'll get used to it." Sure enough, you know, a week later, I was spreading the peanut butter over--

James: It all tastes good.

Vern: (Both laugh) Yeah. This is a B24 that we had in our squadron. Well, anyway, we went from the Admiralty Islands up to Peleliu to the Philippines, Samar in the Philippines.

James: You mean your base did?

Vern: No. Well, later, but that's our route. And we went through Morotai too, which was more towards Malaysia, and then on up to the Philippines and flew around there, at least I did-- Cebu, Palawan, Mindanao, Luzon. We had a squadron house up in Manila.

James: These are, all on R5Ds.

Vern: No. This is all in R4Ds—DC3.

James: Oh!

Vern: There's a picture of me.

James: Oh, even earlier.

Vern: Yeah.

James: Yeah, that's a good picture.

Vern: This was a tent area in our squadron. Some of the guys who were with me.

James: How big was your squadron, now? What are we talking about?

Vern: Oh, the squadron was comprised of maybe fifty officers or so.

James: And how many planes?

Vern: Oh, we had, uh—

James: They're all DC3s.

Vern: They're all DC3s. Well no, we had one—

James: One B24.

Vern: One B24.

James: Did you fly that?

Vern: No, I didn't fly it. I rode in it; I didn't fly it. But what I did do is, I wanted some single-engine flight time. And so— this is one artifact that we got when we were -- and I got permission from our squadron commander to fly a single-engine. What I did, is I tested F6Fs that came from the fleet to be repaired. I flew them an hour, because they had to be flown an hour before they were sent back to the fleet. So, I had to get permission, and I still have that permission. I was looking at this morning, just to see what I should bring along, and this was it.

James: This is the base commander?

Vern: Yeah. Other than that, this one is pretty rickety. But it's still—

James: You should photocopy that.

Vern: Yeah. I should do something with it.

James: Put it in the copier before the thing is—

Vern: Before it goes. But anyway, that's the permission that I got, and as I was looking though that, I found this in there. You might read it. I really don't recall where I got it, but I got it. Kind of a "short snorter" [laughs].

James: [Laughs] Before we leave, I think we'll make a copy of both these.

Vern: Okay. Anyway, I had a "short snorter". Somebody got it on me, it looks like. It's a dollar bill, as you know. This was just a—

James: Somebody must have made off with it.

Vern: Well, I think it has to be. Good Lord, somebody's got it. No! Here it is, yeah. Charlie Epperson and all of the guys on that. (laughs) And that was back that long ago. Got the commission on May 8, 1943.

James: Everybody kept these things, didn't they? (??). Everybody --

Vern: Everybody had one. Everybody had one.

James: You just got everybody in your squadron to sign it, right?

Vern: Oh, yeah, yeah. Overseas, our squadron -- now, I gotta show you something I'm very proud of.

James: Okay.

Vern: That's this wristwatch. This is the original issue that I got,--

James: Oh!

Vern: And it works.

James: Still yet today.

Vern: Still yet today.

James: I can't see the name. What kind is it?

Vern: It's a --

James: A Bolivia or Gruen, or one of those old Hamilton's? Hamilton. Oh, is that neat.

Vern: Now, now –

James: Was it issued in Iowa Preflight or --

Vern: No, no, at Corpus Christi. So it's aged, but it didn't have this bracelet.

James: Oh, I'm sure you added that.

Vern: But we got that, our whole squadron. Each one of us got one for two bottles of liquor, which was worth quite a bit of money.

James: I was gonna say—

Vern: It's mother-of-pearl shell in there.

James: That's very nice.

Vern: And I'm pretty proud of it, because there aren't too many out that are working like that. And it's been--you can see it's pretty green –

James: Right.

Vern: From weather. But it still works, and I'm pleased with it. So I thought I ought to bring that along and show you.

James: Yeah, that's nice.

Vern: And then, let's see, we moved from the Admiralty Islands. The whole squadron moved up to Samar in the Philippines. And then we flew around the Philippines. An interesting time: one time I was flying an F6F and went over the Task Force 58, which was in Leyte Gulf. And I've never seen such an armada of ships in my life. It was just – endless! I was up 2,000 feet.

James: (laughs) And you still couldn't see the end of it?

Vern: Couldn't see the end of it. And I'll tell you, the problem is that I was trying to inspect it more closely, and all of a sudden the Aldis lamp came up. That's one that flashes the Morse Code. (laughs) but I couldn't read the Morse Code anymore. But I felt it says, "Get outa here!" So –

James: You're in our way.

- Vern: Yeah, or “We’ll shoot your down.” So (laughs) I skittered.
- James: Yeah.
- Vern: But it was an amazing, amazing fleet. I think it was Bull Halsey. I think Spruance or Bull Halsey, one of the two. One had 30 Task Flight-- it was the same task force. It was either 34 for one and 58 for the other. But I recall it as 58. And so we flew around the Philippines for—a year? And then came home. And I got home sometime just-- I got back in the States Christmas Eve of 1945, and jumped back into school. I got discharged, at least in active duty in February or something like that, let me see.
- James: ’46?
- Vern: Yeah. I started June 11, I was brought in. And February 17, 1946, is it. So then I jumped back in school, and there you are.
- James: There you are. Okay, now tell me what it was like going suddenly into a hot aircraft which you’d not flown (??). Did you do the At-6 – or not the AT – from the AT-6 to, you know, F6.
- Vern: Oh, well, nothing. I went through the -- were you gonna? No, you don’t want this one.
- James: Yeah, I want to copy that.
- Vern: Okay. All right.
- James: This, by the way, this is the kind of stuff when you turn up your toes, if your family doesn’t want-- these are the kind of things that are prized—
- Vern: I know, I know.
- James: That watch—this thing—
- Vern: I know. I know.
- James: These things are priceless for a museum person, that’s all.
- Vern: I know it. Yeah, I know that.
- James: Whatever you -- I just want you to appreciate that. We’d be willing to accept them,--
- Vern: Sure I understand, yeah.

- James: Because those are hard things to find.
- Vern: Yeah. Mm hmm. They certainly are. And I don't know that my children would want this kind of thing.
- James: It's just that I always tell people this way more than one person can appreciate them. Because historians, as I say, look at all this (??) and conserve them.
- Vern: Yeah, sure. I understand. But those decisions will have to be made a little later. 'Cause I still am around and expect to be around a while. [Laughs]
- James: I understand. I understand. [Laughs]
- Vern: Well, I went through, you know I'd had, gee, at least when I did this, I had 1,500 hours of Navy time.
- James: Sure.
- Vern: In the single-engine. In the single-engine. So --
- James: It wasn't that it was just a faster airplane.
- Vern: Yeah, but the SBD was slow. It was like a Maytag washing machine, really. You set it up. Interesting, if you want to hear some of these war stories?
- James: Yes. That's what I like (??).
- Vern: We were in this operational squadron after instructing in fighters, and I was flying SBD. I had been in a dive. You know, you think that you're going straight down, but you're really not. You're going maybe eighty degrees or so, and you've got the dive flaps on. And I looked out the right wing, and there was smoke coming from it. I figured out that it either had to be smoke or the gas cap had just been not put on properly, and it was streaming and leaking. But I remember that I thought, "Well, I'll jump out." But then I thought, "No, I'm not gonna do that," after, you know, thinking about it. And I thought, "Well, I'll go to one of the auxiliary fields," and land it. After I located the one I wanted to, there were wires around it, telephone wires. I thought, "Well, I won't put the gear down. I'll just get out and run." Then I thought as I was coming over the wires, "Well, I'll put the gear down. If they come down, fine. If they don't, I don't care." Well, they did come down, and it did. (laughs) But it was muddy. It had been raining, and it was an awfully muddy field. So, I jumped out of that thing, and I ran backwards with a parachute on, and, sure enough, it was the gas cap. Well, the field is small, and it was late in

the afternoon, and I gotta get back to the field. So I get all strapped in. I can't budge that airplane because of the mud.

James: It's sinking.

Vern: We had a crank. I'd shut everything off. We had a crank that you had to go like that and then jump in and pull a couple of buttons to start this thing. So I did that. I took the crank and I cranked it up and I got in and got all squared away--the parachute and the safety belts and everything. Push the throttle to it. Doesn't move. So now, I gotta get out. I gotta dig holes in front of the wheels. So I took the crank and I dug. It's hot, muggy. And I dug a couple of holes, and I get all strapped in. The propeller's going. [Laughs] Yeah, I didn't care about that time, either. So I got all strapped in again, and I'd forgotten to put it in full low-pitch, er, high-pitch, I mean. So I got the throttle up, and it sidled up to where I had quit digging (laughs) and stopped. So I gotta get out. I gotta dig a couple more holes. And I got in again, and I thought, "Well, I don't know. I can't taxi back to the beginning. I got to start right from here. I'll never get out." And then I thought, "I'm gonna bang into the wires." I really didn't care about that time. I just --so, anyway, I got back to the squadron without any mishap, and everybody was gone. That's what I was telling you. Everybody was gone; there was not a soul there. They had all been ordered by this to the twin-engine to Atlanta, Georgia. (laughs) And here I sit.

James: So, you were AWOL.

Vern: Yeah. Anyway, no, I guess I really didn't care. I was so angry about the whole thing anyway. But at any rate, I was not really pleased with the kind of service. It was undistinguished, as I told you, the kind of overseas work that I did, and I really thought, you know, we were trained for something else. But you do what you have to do, and that was it.

James: After you got put in a certain situation, you just do it.

Vern: That's it. Yeah.

James: Right.

Vern: At least I got back.

James: That's the important thing.

Vern: Yup.

James: Tell me about that airplane, before we leave that, that lunker (??). What was its main characteristic, other than—

Vern: The SBD?

James: So slow, yeah.

Vern: The SBD. Well, it was a stable, real stable, aircraft, but it was very simple to fly. It wasn't difficult at all.

James: This was the hero at Midway.

Vern: Yes, it was only because they didn't have anything better, is all. But it was slow, and, you know --

James: But that 2C -- [End of Tape 1, Side A, ca. 30 min.]

Vern: SB2C?

James: SB2C was disliked by a lot of pilots --

Vern: Well, only --

James: And it was a faster airplane.

Vern: That's right. Bob Sachtschale flew that.

James: So what was the matter with that airplane?

Vern: The SB2C was the successor to the SBD.

James: Right. But people weren't happy with it, though.

Vern: Well, I think it was pretty big and bulky, really. I mean, it wasn't a sleek performer, and I think that was the biggest problem with it.

James: It outweighed that Douglas by a lot.

Vern: Oh, yeah. And they had three pilots--uh, not pilots--but the pilot and a crew of three. So it was a big airplane, and I know that so many people complained about it. The Stukas, for instance, you know quite a difference. I didn't fly that at all. I flew the SBD, and then I flew the F6F. And going -- there wasn't really much that you had to learn. I mean after -
-

James: Must've been more fun flying the F6F, then with all the zip they had.

- Vern: Uh, no. It's all relative, you know. You get up there. I can remember this guy, Red Wallace, that I showed you, was leading a couple of us in SNJs. And my friend Willy Banks and I were on the wings, and we just moved in and we lifted him. You can do that. You know it may sound--
- James: Did you have one on each side?
- Vern: Yeah, one on each side, and we got under his wings and we lifted him. Now, you're all going zero so it really isn't any task if nobody screws up, but you never know about that. (both laugh) But we did that, one time. And so the fact is that the speed is so relative. When you're up in the air, 2,000-3,000 feet doesn't seem like anything. The only reason that you feel good about speed is when you're right down on the deck. I did that and I was put in "hack" for two weeks. [Laughs]
- James: Oh, you were horsing around?
- Vern: Yeah [laughs]. That's how I went from the instrument squadron to the fighter squadron. They said, "You don't like it here." And I said, "No, no I can't say that I do." [laughs] But we were in a three-plane section, and we had some enlisted men in the back seat to give them—they were entitled to extra pay if they got time on the airplane, you know. So we'd have to take them in bad weather. It was bad weather, and so we had a three-plane section. And I can remember that [Aprox. 3 sec gap in tape] the lead guy, we were flat-hatted. We were down on the ground, and I saw this wire, electric wire, telephone, I don't know which. I waited until the very last second before I pulled up, and (laughs) he just barreled right straight through it, you know.
- James: Wow!
- Vern: The guys on the left wing pulled out that way, and I pulled out that way. And I thought, well, he probably cut it with the prop. Not true. He comes back, there was a--
- James: Wrapped around his wheel?
- Vern: Not the wheel. There was a radiator-type thing, airflow vent on the bottom. It was about like that, and it had caught in that, and there was a piece of wire about ten feet long [both laugh]. So then I went over, and I did some other things that were sorta stupid and got caught for both of them.
- James: Oh, my.
- Vern: And we were put in "hack" for two weeks.

- James: They didn't take your pay away for that.
- Vern: No, no, but they put a Marine guard out in front. There were – we were (both laugh) --
- James: Brought you your meals?
- Vern: No, but he marched me over to the officers' club. Well, anyway, we had -- the rooms that we were in at that time: there was a room here, and room here, and a common bath for this guy and this guy. And I was one of them. So all our guys went over to this room, and I went through, and the guards' out there and so we (laughs)
- James: They didn't really bother--
- Vern: They really didn't bother that much, but they know we were doing it as well. So, but they had to do it. I remember there was a guy by the name of—we called him “Daddy Nash” --he was our squadron commander. He handed me this flat-hatting book, and he said, “Take a nice rest for a couple of weeks.” (laughs) That's what it was all about.
- James: Did it bother you flying over the water in your transport plane?
- Vern: Ah, no. Well, that -- nothing ever happened.
- James: 'Cause there's no place to land.
- Vern: But there's – no, you have to -- the way at night, you had to fly-- you know, the Admiralty Islands was right south of the Equator. And you had huge buildups from the south and huge buildups from the north. We didn't have any sophisticated navigation equipment, so we called it a bird dog. It would point to the station, and there was a way of scissoring so that you could take a heading and get there. But most generally we'd go the round circle, you know, with the wind, because you didn't know the winds aloft.
- James: Didn't know how much they were going to push you.
- Vern: Well, you knew the surface winds were 500 feet, but that's all you knew. And then up above that, why, we didn't know. So, we sorta did a round circle thing. But when the lightning hit, you had to bird dog and swing over there. Anyway, we --I lost my train of thought there but --
- James: Flying over water.

- Vern: Yeah, over the water, yeah. I was going to tell you about at night, and if you had engine failure. Going down, the way they trained us is that you dropped the antenna. It had a lead ball on it that had fifty feet of wire. And then you had somebody in the back that said, "We just hit water at fifty feet." And then they'd draw it up to twenty-five feet (laughs). Would never have worked, but it didn't happen to me.
- James: Oh, I see. You didn't have a small –
- Vern: No, I had--
- James: They had to run out a dinghy, an inflatable dinghy, or anything?
- Vern: Nothing, nothing. Life vests, that's all.
- James: That wouldn't keep you going very long.
- Vern: No.
- James: You were in constant radio contact, though.
- Vern: Yeah.
- James: Did you have a (unintelligible)?
- Vern: Well, you'd have to send out the Mayday, you know.
- James: Yeah.
- Vern: We had -- radar was just coming in at the time, and it'd have a blip. There was a pedestal, and you'd catch this blip, and you'd try to keep it on that pedestal. Never worked, because the strength of the station wasn't enough. So you'd have to be right over it before you could stop it and use the radar. So we'd sort of -- it was, you know, fifty -some years ago, And there wasn't too much--
- James: What was the plan, though, for rescuing you, as far as you know?
- Vern: You just hoped.
- James: If there was a ship nearby or –
- Vern: Yeah, I doubt --
- James: They wouldn't send out a PBY after you.

Vern: Well, you'd never-- it'd be just plain luck if you ever--

James: 'Cause your radar, your radio wouldn't work. You didn't have any radio to --.

Vern: Unh unh. Oh, we had— I don't recall. I expect that there would be dinghies there, and I expect that there would be in the dinghies there'd be radio equipment that you could umbrella up and send out an SOS. But, that's a lot of water, you know. It would be just dumb luck if you got picked up. So --

James: You think that happened to many of the guys?

Vern: Didn't happen to anyone. We lost a couple of pilots, but other than that, no. Most of those islands had a cloud circling around a mountain.

James: Oh. So you could spot the island before you saw—

Vern: Oh, yeah.

James: All before the island.

Vern: Oh, yeah. But, really, you couldn't go through it. You'd have to circle down the hole. I remember landing at Hollandia many times. There'd just be an opening, so you could corkscrew down. (laughs). The alternative was to go out over water and then come in underneath it. But, by and large, we just didn't--we lucked out. I don't know why. When you look at the kind of mechanical equipment in those engines, it's, uh—

James: Right, pretty crude, yeah.

Vern: Yeah, so –

James: Right. When I flew across when I went to Korea in a DC6 – that's a little bigger.

Vern: Yeah, right, uh huh.

James: Matson's running a bigger version of the DC4.

Vern: Yeah.

James: And we went the same route, you know, Hawaii, Johnston, Kwajalein.

Vern: Did ya?

James: Yeah. Guam – I spent a night in Guam. Eight hour trips each day.

Vern: Sure.

James: Guam and then Okinawa and then Japan.

Vern: Japan, yeah.

James: But one time in Kwajalein, I was out, you know, have to stay there while they're refueling. And I went and looked at an engine, and they had a screwdriver propped at an angle. It was tagged in position to hold something open.

Vern: (laughs) Yeah.

James: I said to the guys, "Is this where--?" "Yeah, I guess it is." I guess that's the way it is, you know.

Vern: Yeah.

James: Jesus that was a (unintelligible) laughs.

Vern: Yeah. Oh, I tell you, some of the things for repairs were ludicrous, but it worked, you know (laughs).

James: That's interesting. Now, after the war you used your G.I. Bill to get back in school?

Vern: Right, I did.

James: Did it pay for your law school, too?

Vern: Yeah. Oh, you bet. I'll tell you, it was really something because I jumped back into school in February of 1946, and I completed my junior year. Then they allowed me to go down to law school.

James: Starting the following fall of?

Vern: Ah, yeah.

James: Of '46.

Vern: And used the law school credits for my undergraduate degree.

James: Yeah. We did the same in medical school.

Vern: Yeah and so I went then “three semesters U.” With one-half a semester out, I crop-dusted with all of our boys—Charlie Epperson and the whole bunch up at West Bend.

James: While you’re going to school?

Vern: Yeah.

James: This was a weekend activity?

Vern: No, this was a full— I just took off one half a semester in law school.

James: What the hell you were flying then?

Vern: We were flying Stearmans. There was a little hill in the runway, and you didn’t know which way they were coming (both laugh). So, but we had fun. I’ll tell you, if that wasn’t a ball.

James: You flew that what, about a hundred feet?

Vern: Oh, crop dusting?

James: Mm hmm.

Vern: Oh, no. We were right on the ground when we dusted.

James: Twenty feet or something like that?

Vern: Oh, ten, yeah.

James: Those tiny hills mean something, then.

Vern: Oh, yeah. Well the hill I’m talking about was on the runway.

James: Oh.

Vern: So, on takeoff and landings (laughs) you didn’t know – you couldn’t see. But Bill Marth – did you ever know Willy Marth? He was a lawyer in West Bend.

James: Who hired you?

Vern: For crop dusting?

James: Mm hmm.

Vern: Well, Bill Marth is the guy that put it together.

James: Oh, I see.

Vern: Yeah.

James: Oh, you're freelancing. Sort of a freelance group?

Vern: No. It was a guy that hit a guy wire. He was dusting a lake, and he had the company. He was putting lampblack on the lake so that it would open up quicker and get oxygen to the fish, I think. Anyway, he hit the guy wire on one of these telephone poles, and he was in the hospital. And somebody had to take over, and he was a friend of my friend Bill Marth, and so he resurrected us, and up we went. Had a ball. Smokey was along. And Smokey was climbing up here. You see, you'd come down over the trees and get down on the ground, and then you'd come up and you'd go this way and then come around, and make your next pass. And Smokey was pulling up, and he hit one tree because he was, you know, these planes weren't very strong; and he tipped over the next tree. And he got out, went back, and got another plane. (laughs) Finished dusting that was a fact. Leonard Schmock.

James: Wow. Was there any problem with the dusting material, or he just had a lever he pulled and --

Vern: That's all, yeah. It was dust.

James: It's either open or closed. There was no adjustment.

Vern: Open or closed. No. Just pull her out and go. And close her up and get up around, make your turn, and come back down again.

James: So it really wasn't too difficult to do then.

Vern: No, no.

James: Did they pay you well?

Vern: Yeah. We got paid--I've forgotten--but I think it was by the pounds that we dropped, that kinda thing. Yeah, it was-- we spent it all (laughs).

James: (Laughs) You were still single then?

Vern: Yeah.

James: Well, of course then, what would you need- -

- Vern: No, I wasn't single. Excuse me. I, no, no, I got married in the chapel in Corpus Christi, after -- let's see, in 1944 at the main base, Corpus Christi. But, I still had to do that because it was our obligation, of course. It was a lot of fun anyway (laughs).
- James: Right, exactly.
- Vern: Yeah.
- James: Well, that was a great experience. That's unusual.
- Vern: Uh huh.
- James: Yeah. Did you join any veterans groups when you got out of the service?
- Vern: I was a weekend warrior down in Glenview.
- James: In the reserve?
- Vern: In the reserve. I did that until they made some changes that didn't coincide with my—
- James: Lifestyle?
- Vern: My, yeah – no – with – yeah, with my legal practice, and so I quit. And Fritz Wolf —you remember Fritz—organized a squadron, a fighter squadron, here that was going to be out at Truax. And they were going to fly the aircraft from Glenview Naval Air Station to Truax. Then we were - - You remember the Quonset that was down on East Washington Avenue? Well, we were having our meetings there, and we had the pilots. We had the ground crew. We had everything all set up. About that time, they had a--after we had set ourselves up and were there for a couple/three months-- they changed personnel officer down in Glenview. And he queered the deal. So, that's the last that I—
- James: That's your last time in the air on your own?
- Vern: Yeah. Of course, I've had airplanes all my life.
- James: But you've flown – your own purpose –
- Vern: Civilian.
- James: You purchased one, you mean?

Vern: That was a Cessna 172, my first one, and then I got a --

James: Must be the most popular airplane --

Vern: Yeah. And I got another one of those. And then I got a Mooney.

James: Oh, now you're into the big stuff here.

Vern: Yeah. And I sold that about six years ago.

James: Oh, yeah? You still flying something?

Vern: No, no.

James: Gave it up?

Vern: Well, yeah. It doesn't bother me unless I get around an airport. (both laugh) And then I'd like to buy one, and my wife says, "*Rent one!*" So, that's about it.

James: You like that Mooney?

Vern: Mooney's a fine airplane.

James: Yeah. Bill Meisekothen had one.

Vern: Yes, I know that. Yep.

James: Yeah, I've interviewed Bill. Yeah.

Vern: Uh huh. Yeah.

James: Bill, I know, was very fond of his Mooney (??).

Vern: Oh, I should say. Didn't he quit?

James: Yeah.

Vern: Yeah, he quit.

James: I think so. He doesn't fly anymore. So they said I've run out of my options.

Vern: Yeah, right. Well, Jim Brandenburg had one too, you know.

James: Oh, I didn't know that.

- Vern: He had a dandy. He had one for a long time. He just sold his last year. I flew [Approx. 10 sec. gap in tape] you know, a couple hundred miles an hour, a little over.
- James: And the 172?
- Vern: The 172, probably 130-140. Yeah.
- James: That would feel like you're in a Douglas dive bomber.
- Vern: Yeah, well, you know, it really, when you've got the altitude it doesn't make any -- I mean, you look down and everything's the same. Sometimes if a big wind, maybe a truck down below is passing you, but --(both laugh) -- with --
- James: [Laughs.] Oh, that's good. Right. Very good. So, what else did I want to ask you about? Oh, did you keep in contact with the guys you flew with?
- Vern: Oh, yeah. Charlie Epperson.
- James: Of course he's dead.
- Vern: Yeah, he died. Fred Danler, from Columbus, Wisconsin, and I went over to visit him when he had his leg amputated at the Veterans Hospital over at about Hollywood, over on the east coast of Florida. He looked--he'd aged, no question about it.
- James: That drinking he did --
- Vern: Yeah.
- James: Was disastrous.
- Vern: Yeah, and then Stuart Crawford is here in the city of Madison. And, of course, Smokey, and, you know, I've --
- James: Smokey's havin' tough times now.
- Vern: He's having tough times, yeah. He's almost wheel chaired, I guess, from the last --
- James: That's what Janet told me the last time I was --

Vern: Yeah, yeah, And, let's see, who else is here. Bob Sachtschale is up in Stevens Point. Jack Eagan just died; he was with us. Ed Johnson, I don't know if you knew Ed Johnson.

James: I eat lunch with him every Tuesday.

Vern: Well, it's the wrong Ed Johnson.

James: Oh, because I was going to say, Ed Johnson didn't go to the Pacific, though. He stayed down in Corpus (??).

Vern: Yeah, no, that –

James: That's the one that belongs at Blackhawk.

Vern: Yeah, no – that – that – right.

James: That's the one I have lunch with.

Vern: Yeah, okay, yeah.

James: Your Ed Johnson I don't know.

Vern: Yeah. Well, there's Ed Johnson, and who else is here? Can't – talked about –oh, Joe O'Brien (??).

James: Oh, yeah.

Vern: Remember him?

James: Yeah.

Vern: Yeah, he's –

James: Where's he live?

Vern: He's in an apartment over by Vitense on Schroeder Road.

James: Oh, yeah?

Vern: (laughs) He's one you could interview. Joe --

James: He did something different than you?

Vern: Yeah, he was sent over -- I think he was in a B25, or something like that. In my mind, it seems to me that either-- they went into the Pacific, I

know, and he had his flak suit on, and somebody grabbed him. (Laughs)
He was going down. Typical Joe, you know.

James: Uh huh.

Vern: Yeah, Joe's a --

James: Joe O'Brien(??). You don't know where he lives?

Vern: Well, I can get it for you.

James: Because there might be several Joseph O'Briens (??).

Vern: Sure, yeah, yeah.

James: That's on the west side?

Vern: Yeah, over by Vitense.

James: If I can't find out by looking in the phone book, I'll call you.

Vern: Yeah, he just moved into an apartment. So, give me a call if you can't find it.

James: All right, other than that I can't think of anything else, unless you have any other war stories?

Vern: No, (laughs) – I had well, I had pretty good luck, really. Oh, you want copies of those. I had pretty good luck. I got back. (laughs)

James: That's the best part.

[End of Interview]