

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ART RORTVEDT
58th Bomb Squad, Air Force, World War II
1999

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Rortvedt, Art (1918-2004). Oral History Interview, 1999.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 videorecording (ca. 50 min.); ½ inch, color.

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

Abstract:

Art Rortvedt, a DeForest (Wisconsin) native, discusses his service with the 58th Bomb Squad in Hawaii, Kanton Island, and Makin Island. He describes in detail the three waves of attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7th, 1941. Rortvedt also explains the specific details of repairing and maintenance for A-20 attack bombers, P-38s, and other military aircraft. He discusses the differences between living on Makin Island versus Kanton Island. Rortvedt explains several jobs he held in civilian life, as well as his membership in the VFW and the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association.

Biographical Sketch:

Art Rortvedt (1918-2004) served with the 58th Bomb Squad in Hawaii, Kanton Island (in the Pacific), and Makin Island from 1940 to 1945. After a short time as a civilian, Rortvedt enlisted again in 1947 as a recruiter and later an engine operation and testing instructor until his discharge in 1950.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999.

Transcribed by Janet Stewart and John Maerzke, 2011.

Transcription checked and corrected by Amanda Axel, 2012.

Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: It's the 8th of November, 1999. We're talking to Art Rortvedt. And Art, you were born when?

Rortvedt: The 10th of July in 1918.

McIntosh: In Madison?

Rortvedt: No, in DeForest down on a farm on North 51.

McIntosh: And you entered military service when?

Rortvedt: December 3rd of 1940.

McIntosh: And were you drafted or—

Rortvedt: No, I was not drafted. I graduated from short course in 1940. March. At the university, agriculture short course. I applied for a job, there were 200 of them applying for a job at Baraboo. And I got the job—

McIntosh: Of what?

Rortvedt: Of being a mechanic. I went to school to become a block man for the International House of JI Case or whatever—

McIntosh: A block man?

Rortvedt: That's just like a doctor. Just like a doctor. In other words, when you have trouble; if the implement dealer has trouble, he calls a man from the factory. The factory rep in other words they call him.

McIntosh: I see.

Rortvedt: And he would come out and diagnose the trouble.

McIntosh: But not fix it?

Rortvedt: Uh, it authorized certain things, in other words, because the company was behind that. But in order for me to get the job at Baraboo there was a Schwartz Farm Equipment Company. So what I told Lester and Bob, they were brothers, I told them, I said, "I'll tell you what, I'll work for you the first month for forty dollars. If at the end of the month you think I'm worth

it, you can pay me.” At the end of the month, Bob says, “You’re worth more than that. We’ll give you sixty.” But I eliminated 200 people.

McIntosh: Oh really?

Rortvedt: Yes, because jobs are hard to get in 1940.

McIntosh: That’s right. The depression wasn’t quite over was it?

Rortvedt: In October, honorable President Roosevelt, the Conscription Act of 1940. And everybody had to sign up.

McIntosh: You had to register for the draft.

Rortvedt: Correct. So I went over to the courthouse, which was in the center of Baraboo, right in town. The whole company did, because we were all under thirty-five. And so then I went, I like to hunt deer, so I went deer hunting and so on and so forth. This was in November. So I went deer hunting and I sat up in the woods, and I was leaning against a tree and I thought to myself, “Well, if I was a city father of Baraboo I sure wouldn’t take my local boys. I’d get some guy from out of town, in Iowa, from out of town.” And I was from out of town. So I think, but I wanted to go into the Air Force. I didn’t want to be a gravel agitator or a Seabee or whatever you call them. I mean, that’s not nice, but that’s the way it is. So I went up and I went to the federal courthouse here and asked where I could go in the Air Force. First of all, you had to do some things and so on and so forth and so I accomplished that, then they said, “Where do you want to go? Panama, Philippines, or Hawaii?” Well, I said, “Hawaii. That’s where I want to go.” [laughs] That’s what I signed up for. At that time you signed up for two years and you got a credit for a three year term. That was the way it was aspirated. So that’s when I took a bus to Milwaukee and was sworn in the federal courthouse there on Lake Michigan.

McIntosh: And then where?

Rortvedt: Then I went to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. That was the first time, I was twenty-one years old. I had never been in a hospital, didn’t have anything; then I got the flu. At Jefferson Barracks they called it, didn’t know what it was, but it was terrible, because you couldn’t take that moist air and foggy business; Got sick. No nurses; I mean, you had to go and get your own medicine. And so I went through that and then drill, didn’t have any equipment to drill with, so I drilled in my work shoes, or my Sunday shoes which I had. And then the 15th of January, I boarded the train, the Southern Pacific for California.

McIntosh: This is in ’41?

Rortvedt: This is in '41. This becomes '41, because December 3rd I had enlisted. And I got purified in San Francisco. Backtrack a little bit there, because I got to Angel's Island, because see, at that time that was a military. And that's where we staged, did some things. Then we went over on the USS St. Mihiel, went underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. I thought, we all thought we wouldn't get sick, but I got sick, and I'm Norwegian; I'm supposed to be good. [laughs] Supposed to be able to take the sea [laughs] Oh anyway, that's the—

McIntosh: Now what training by this time had you had?

Rortvedt: I had half of basic training as soon as I got to Hawaii—

McIntosh: The flu stopped that, is that right?

Rortvedt: Well no, I got over the flu. For some reason or other, I didn't have any repercussions of that. But then we went to Hawaii and Honolulu. And we took the narrow gauge railway up to Wheeler Field. That's where I got the rest of my basic training at that time.

McIntosh: How far was Wheeler Field from Honolulu?

Rortvedt: I would say—

McIntosh: Roughly.

Rortvedt: Roughly, I would say ten to fifteen miles. Went through pineapple patches and so forth, because that's all they had over there, pineapple and sugarcane. And then I went through the basic and then I was assigned to 58th Bomb Squadron, which was stationed at Hickham Field. They had A-20 attack bombers.

McIntosh: That's what they were flying?

Rortvedt: Yes.

McIntosh: A-20s?

Rortvedt: A-20s were supposed to have gone to France; they were made for France. They were low-level attack planes. They were supposed to have gone to France, but then everything kept on going, so they changed that.

McIntosh: What was your specific duty there?

Rortvedt: I was a mechanic.

McIntosh: A mechanic.

Rortvedt: An aircraft mechanic.

McIntosh: By this time you're rating what?

Rortvedt: By this time my rating I think was maybe corporal.

McIntosh: Corporal.

Rortvedt: Corporal and kept—

McIntosh: And your job was maintaining the aircraft.

Rortvedt: Maintenance on a crew. During the summer or like in October maybe—November, December. In October I went to mechanic school. They sent the certain ones, because I had some training from the university, but I didn't have training in aircraft. So they sent us to the Hawaiian Air Force Depot Mechanic School. And that's what I was on December 7th. But they knew something was going to happen, because we were on a sabotage routine. We were all assigned to different sabotages.

McIntosh: Yeah, but I don't understand what your job was.

Rortvedt: My job at that place was to get up on one of those big towers in Honolulu and guard it. The big tanks, them fuel tanks for the Navy.

McIntosh: Oh, that was your second assignment.

Rortvedt: That was my assignment in case anything happened.

McIntosh: I see.

Rortvedt: But in the meantime—my job. I was going to school, I was on detached service and going to school and that's what happened on December 7th; I was in school at that time.

McIntosh: Okay, now were you sleeping?

Rortvedt: No I didn't eat breakfast, but if I probably would have eaten breakfast I wouldn't be sitting here, because they hit the Buckingham Palace, we called it, that was the big barracks.

McIntosh: That was your headquarters? That's where you slept?

Rortvedt: No, I slept in tents. We were in tents.

McIntosh: But at 8:00 o'clock in the morning—

Rortvedt: 7:55 was the first raid—

McIntosh: Right.

Rortvedt: And we did not—

McIntosh: Where were you?

Rortvedt: I was running for my life.

McIntosh: I mean, where were you when you suddenly realized there was trouble?

Rortvedt: I think I was on the way to the latrine.

McIntosh: Okay, and then what?

Rortvedt: It was just all of a sudden. You see, that was normal for on a Sunday morning. It was normal for the Navy to play war games. And so that's what they thought it was at first, because they heard some explosions and things, and thought, "Oh they're playing real good today."

McIntosh: That was the first thing you heard was the explosion?

Rortvedt: Yes. Then all of a sudden the plane came over the housing, non-com [non-commissioned officer] housing. Big zero on the bottom, Japanese.

McIntosh: Red ball.

Rortvedt: Red ball.

McIntosh: And did you recognize that as being Japanese?

Rortvedt: Absolutely.

McIntosh: And so then you started running when you saw that?

Rortvedt: Yep, I started running and I dived and hit the ground, because the bullets were coming. And after a while, that was the first raid; then there was a little time in between before the second raid.

McIntosh: Yeah. The first raid how many planes came over you?

Rortvedt: Woo, probably five, six, seven.

McIntosh: Okay, okay. And their mission was to—?

Rortvedt: To drop the bombs on Pearl and then strafe Hickham Field.

McIntosh: Hickham, right, strafing is what they were after. They were trying to knock the airplanes out.

Rortvedt: And they did a good job.

McIntosh: Right. Now all those airplanes that you had worked on, were they all destroyed?

Rortvedt: No, our squadron only lost one airplane.

McIntosh: They were covered?

Rortvedt: Our planes were dispersed. At Wheeler Field, they were boxed in. See what happened is, they would just go down the road, strafing and they'd hit the airplanes with bullets and the pyrotechnics and flares would explode. The magnesium would explode and burn.

McIntosh: That was at Wheeler? But at Hickham they didn't have them lined up wing tip to wing tip.

Rortvedt: No, but they hit the hangars; they ruined the hangars.

McIntosh: I see.

Rortvedt: And they hit the barracks.

McIntosh: So, but you didn't lose many of your A-20s?

Rortvedt: No, we didn't lose many.

McIntosh: Got out in pretty good shape then.

Rortvedt: We were dispersed. So we were spread out on the perimeter, they didn't know that.

McIntosh: So the second wave came, then what?

Rortvedt: In the meantime, they got a little organization. I was on the machine gun, on the flagpole, on the .50 caliber gun. There were three of us there. We fired at them.

McIntosh: Had you shot that gun before?

Rortvedt: No, because that wasn't—we didn't know how to do that, but you could learn how pretty fast.

McIntosh: I'm sure it wasn't very difficult. So when the next wave came over, you were at least ready to do something.

Rortvedt: Yes, we were ready to do something, and we tried to do something, but we didn't succeed. Then after a bit, when the second one was over with, in the meantime there was another raid that came through around ten something. [coughs] Is that going to be showing up on TV, my coughing like this?

McIntosh: Sure. Doesn't make you a bad person. Don't worry about it.

Rortvedt: [Laughs] Okay. Then the infantry came down. We had an officer who was in charge of us, he was an old timer, he probably stayed in service because things were tough in those days. They weren't very helpful as far as those things were concerned.

McIntosh: What did he tell you to do then?

Rortvedt: He told us what to do, but he wasn't very good.

McIntosh: He didn't know either?

Rortvedt: He didn't know much of anything. In fact he was afraid. More afraid than we were!

McIntosh: Confusion reigned though. Everybody really didn't know what to do. So what were your thoughts at this moment? Were they going to attack again? Or were they going to land?

Rortvedt: There were a lot of rumors around, just after—I saw the third wave that was high level bombers. I saw them way up in the sky and then you could see the bombs drop away, and then they'd disappear. Boom, a little later the noise would come. That was after that.

McIntosh: Right, and you were being prepared to repel [unintelligible]?

Rortvedt: Our squadron was not prepared. The fact is our airplanes took off from Hickham Field. They were the first ones, the A-20s. We were the only ones that were operational. Some of the stories are that they didn't drop the bombs because they were afraid. I don't know what the reason was, but some of them landed again and they still had the bombs.

McIntosh: They never found the Japanese ships. So then, now things are changing. Then what did they have you do?

Rortvedt: Then they had us go back to our squadron, because school was dispersed. Back to operational work. Then we went from Hickham, we went to Wheeler Field. We ended up there, and we changed airplanes. The A-20s, they were passed away and we got different airplanes.

McIntosh: What came in then?

Rortvedt: We came in with B-18s. We ran a navigation school between—

McIntosh: B-18s? Those were old airplanes.

Rortvedt: Yes, we picked them up because we ran the navigation school. We fixed up the airplane inside, and then we had five or six or seven tables for the navigators to operate on. And then they'd go and fly at night, a night mission.

McIntosh: Practice.

Rortvedt: Yes, practice, correct.

McIntosh: And you had to maintain those airplanes?

Rortvedt: Yes, we maintained those.

McIntosh: Okay, so what other aircraft did you have at Wheeler?

Rortvedt: Then we picked up some A-24As, they were Navy airplanes. They were two-seater, one pilot and a gunner.

McIntosh: Were they different engines for you?

Rortvedt: They were different engines. The A-20 has two engines, but the A-24A was single engine.

McIntosh: That was a Navy airplane.

Rortvedt: Right, we were the only Air Force squadron with those planes.

McIntosh: That was an unusual assignment.

Rortvedt: During the summer, we were sent to Kanton Island. Kanton Island was a refueling base.

McIntosh: That was way the hell out in the Pacific. I interviewed the guy that was on that island before the war.

Rortvedt: Oh yeah? The Japanese had that—there was only one tree on the island. That was a very unusual place.

McIntosh: When did they send you there?

Rortvedt: We went there, and we pulled submarine duty with the A-20s for a while.

McIntosh: Wait a minute, I'm getting confused. When did you go to Kanton Island? A year or two later?

Rortvedt: Year or two later, yes.

McIntosh: Was it '43 maybe?

Rortvedt: Yeah, '43.

McIntosh: How did you get out there?

Rortvedt: By boat, or ship.

McIntosh: Was it the whole crew.

Rortvedt: The whole crew, yes.

McIntosh: How many of you were there?

Rortvedt: Oh there was probably 150.

McIntosh: All of you doing mechanic work?

Rortvedt: That was the pilots and everything.

McIntosh: Everything, oh the whole squadron. And the squadron was flying these—

Rortvedt: A-20As.

McIntosh: What about those Navy airplanes?

Rortvedt: Well, the first trip, there were two trips to Kanton Island. The first trip was A-20s. We patrolled a perimeter for submarines. Then we went back and got refitted, I got a little ahead of the story there, with the A-24As. While

we were at Kanton, that's when the Gilbert Marshall Campaign started. So we went to Makin Island, and we bombed them. That was with A-24As.

McIntosh: And this was in '43?

Rortvedt: '43 or '44.

McIntosh: And then you said you went back to Hawaii?

Rortvedt: We were pulled back to Hawaii and we picked up P-38s.

McIntosh: How long were you in Hawaii? Six months?

Rortvedt: Possibly six months, it could have been that.

McIntosh: And then you had to learn a new skill. It was a new airplane. At least you had been with two motors before.

Rortvedt: Oh yeah, and the P-38 was a very good ship. That's the one that Bong made us.

McIntosh: I know all about that, I interviewed a pilot who flew those planes, and he met Richard Bong.

Rortvedt: We outfitted the first group that was sent down; some of them went to Australia.

McIntosh: Were those engines better than the others?

Rortvedt: They were, yes. They were very good.

McIntosh: You were impressed with the difference?

Rortvedt: They had super chargers on them.

McIntosh: The first ones with super chargers—

Rortvedt: That we had worked with.

McIntosh: Oh, I see. So after you got orientated with that you went back to the Southwest Pacific?

Rortvedt: Then we went back.

McIntosh: To Kanton Island again?

Rortvedt: No, I told you about the Gilbert and Marshall. I skipped a little bit in between there, because in the third, fourth, or fifth of May of 1942, the Battle of Midway. We were in that. We did work on the airplanes from that.

McIntosh: But that was in Hawaii?

Rortvedt: Right.

McIntosh: I understand that, I'm trying to get you back into your second stint out in the far southwest Pacific. You didn't go back to Kanton Island, or you went to Makin Island?

Rortvedt: We went from Kanton Island to Makin.

McIntosh: After you got the P-38?

Rortvedt: The P-38, that's when they came back to Hawaii. We got them when we were all done with Gilbert and Marshall. Then we came back to Hawaii and were assigned P-38s. In fact they assembled them in the Hawaii Air Force Depot, and then the military took them and okayed them. They had to go through certain things.

McIntosh: You're still on Hawaii now.

Rortvedt: The P-38s, that was the end of '44 in November in Hawaii because the Iwo Jima camp, our squadron commander called us together. There were fourteen of us. Fourteen section chiefs, they were all first three graders. Most of them were tech sergeants, and he wanted us back. So he said "I'll give you three weeks furlough, and then you come back. We got another campaign then." But he didn't say what it was.

McIntosh: So he sent you home for three weeks?

Rortvedt: No, I didn't go back. It was either go home or get discharged. We had points. All those points were accumulated up, and made us eligible for discharge because the war was winding down. This was in '45. And so that's when we came back, in November of '44 and then I was assigned to Camp Beale, California, and was assigned to P-61s, the night fighter. Then I came back to Madison and discharged in '45. I came back here and I went back to the University.

McIntosh: We'll get to that in a second, you're rushing ahead here. Tell me about the P-61.

Rortvedt: The P-61 was a—

McIntosh: I know what it was, tell me about the engine.

Rortvedt I think it was an R2800.

McIntosh: I mean how did it compare with the other engines that you worked on?

Rortvedt Very big. I think it had seventy-two spark plugs.

McIntosh: More complicated?

Rortvedt More complicated.

McIntosh: How did you learn to deal with that, because it was a brand new airplane? Did they give you manuals to read?

Rortvedt Oh yes, manuals. I was line chief there, at Hammer Field, because the ones that were in there didn't have as much experience as the older ones had.

McIntosh: So you just picked up the manual, and started looking at the engine until you worked your way through it?

Rortvedt: Well, your 201 file comes through the channels, and there's always something added to that telling you what to do. So they assigned you that. They assign you certain things.

McIntosh: Like what?

Rortvedt: Like I was a crew chief, but they didn't need any crew chiefs, so I got line chief because I had the experience.

McIntosh: What's the difference in what you did as a crew chief versus a line chief. What different activities?

Rortvedt: A line chief had sixty or seventy mechanics under him.

McIntosh: And he was responsible?

Rortvedt: He was, I might say a straw boss.

McIntosh: I see, and the crew chief, he was—

Rortvedt: The crew chief, he was chief of the crew on the individual airplane.

McIntosh: Yeah, but he wasn't doing repairs.

Rortvedt: Yeah he would do the work. That's the way it was in that time. But nowadays it's different then it was at that time.

McIntosh: I expect, but I'm used to that time.

Rortvedt: [Laughs] That time the crew chief worked.

McIntosh: Did he have one engine to deal with?

Rortvedt: He had both engines to deal with.

McIntosh: Both engines on the aircraft?

Rortvedt: But he could assign, maybe he had four men working for him. He could assign two men to each engine. He was the controller; he did the book work and so on.

McIntosh: So the crew chief had one airplane to worry about, the line chief had several airplanes to worry about.

Rortvedt: Correct.

McIntosh: Okay, I'm a little slow on learning this. So did you take the engines apart and put them back together, or?

Rortvedt: No, the engines had so many hours and then you had to change them. They would come assembled in a box, and you had to take the components off. Alternators, or generators in that time, and then the carburetor for the old one and put on a new one.

McIntosh: I'm missing how you could learn so quickly on an engine you had never seen before.

Rortvedt: They were at that time, they were reciprocating engines.

McIntosh: Pretty standard?

Rortvedt: Pretty standard.

McIntosh: Oh, so then it didn't take very long before you knew what you were doing.

Rortvedt: No. That was different then it is nowadays, because now you have jets.

McIntosh: That's a different story. So, you got more and more experience with the engines. Did they get more and more complicated as you moved through the war?

Rortvedt: The basic things were not changed very much, you had the airline and the router, and they were all run by cable. That was the stick and throttle, all that. That was all basically the same.

McIntosh: But you weren't concerned about that.

Rortvedt: Oh yeah we were concerned. We had to pre-flight them. The crew chief had to pre-flight them.

McIntosh: And how did you do that? Tell me how you did that.

Rortvedt: We pulled on patrol in Hawaii a lot. You'd get up at 2:00 o'clock in the morning because you had to pre-flight the airplane. The first thing you did, you'd drain the tanks, because the gasoline at Hickham Field is under the landing strip. I don't know if it's the correct name, but that's called the aqua system or something. But the water is below that, and it's pumped up. When a boat comes in to load a jet or fuel, it pumps the gas out, and pumps the water in. Ballast. Otherwise the boat would go up in the air. On the field, they had pumps that would push the gas up to the top. The gas goes up to the top, and the water stays down below. But, there was always the possibility of condensation getting into the airplane, so you would have to add little pincocks underneath all of the fuel tanks on the wings and on the bomb bay or wherever they had a fuel tank. You drained that out, you let it fall on the concrete and water would come out in bubbles. As soon as it stopped you'd tighten it up again. Every morning. That's called a preflight.

McIntosh: Did gas come out too?

Rortvedt: No, the water will come out first, because it's been overnight and there's been a drop in temperature. Condensation. And then what happens is, that little round ball on the bottom of the tank that extended just a little bit; that would be where water would be. So when you opened that pincock, that water would come down and you could just look on the pavement and see when the gobules quit.

McIntosh: But no gas came out?

Rortvedt: If you let it open long enough.

McIntosh: So you're saying you could tell the difference between the gas and the water because the water bubbled?

Rortvedt: Yes, it comes out in goblets.

McIntosh: Right, and the gasoline didn't.

Rortvedt: No.

McIntosh: Okay, then you knew that you were okay. Then you'd close it, and what was the next move?

Rortvedt: The next move, you'd do it on all of them, you probably had two or three guys doing it so you'd accomplish it in a hurry. Then you'd pre-flight it, go inside the airplane and start it up, run it, check out the mag needles.

McIntosh: Do one engine first and then the other?

Rortvedt: One engine first, and then you do two of them at the same time.

McIntosh: And run them up?

Rortvedt: Yes, run them up. Hope the brakes held.

McIntosh: [Laughs] Otherwise you'd become a pilot. How did you run them up? Just put on full throttle—

Rortvedt: You ran them up to check the magnesium. See if there was a drop, if any sparkplug was fouled or anything, you could tell. You were allowed a tolerance, I don't recall what it was. A drop in RPM was too much. You had to shut down and find the problem. You'd abort the mission.

McIntosh: You ran the engine at full tilt for a few minutes.

Rortvedt: Not to the maximum, it was just to the RPM, 2500, or 3000, or 4000, whatever the rating was on that particular airplane.

McIntosh: Whatever the rating was. So you ran it up for how long?

Rortvedt: Oh, probably for five seconds.

McIntosh: Okay, and then you could drop down and watch all your gauges, and if then all responded then you knew the plane could fly. Right?

Rortvedt: And you okayed it in the book.

McIntosh: Okay, and if one engine didn't seem to respond properly, what was the next move?

Rortvedt: The next move was you had to fix it. Take the cladding off and find out what's the mess.

McIntosh: I was going to say, the next problem is the diagnosis. But you knew from your experience, that generally it was what?

Rortvedt: Generally it would be a sparkplug.

McIntosh: I see, and you could quickly—

Rortvedt: You could diagnose that in a hurry.

McIntosh: It didn't take long then, and it's fairly easy to replace?

Rortvedt: Yes.

McIntosh: Then you go back and start over?

Rortvedt: Right.

McIntosh: Then the pilot knew that the plane was ready to do it.

Rortvedt: Yes, you would okay it. Then if the plane was not operational, then it couldn't fly that mission.

McIntosh: I understand. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**. So, when you got all the airplanes checked out, that was it for the day?

Rortvedt: No, then they'd make their patrol and make their run.

McIntosh: The patrol? Tell me about that.

Rortvedt: You had certain sectors that you'd patrol.

McIntosh: The field?

Rortvedt: No, of the ocean.

McIntosh: But, I didn't know that you flew.

Rortvedt: I didn't fly.

McIntosh: Oh they did, the pilots did that. I'm not worried about them, I'm worried about you. What did you do?

Rortvedt: Waited until they came back.

McIntosh: You had no other duties?

Rortvedt: Well, if there was anything wrong in the books, you had to bring it up to date and all that.

McIntosh: What I was getting at, I was wondering if you had engines in the hangar that were in a state of repair.

Rortvedt: Our operations was not that way, we didn't have a hangar. We had all outside maintenance.

McIntosh: Now the P-38 engine, was that easy to work on?

Rortvedt: That was a little bit of a problem. That was an Allison or a Packard.

McIntosh: Why was that a problem?

Rortvedt: Because it was so much different then the other ones. It was an inline engine. It wasn't like a radial engine, a radial engine is round.

McIntosh: Yeah, I know what you're saying, but I want to know why the difference?

Rortvedt: Well it was just a different piece of equipment. It was designed to operate like a car engine. It wasn't straight line, and it really ran smoother.

McIntosh: I had an interview with a Marine who did just exactly what you were doing who repaired Corsair. He had done other airplanes, but he liked the Corsair better because it was a radial engine. He said they were a lot easier to repair than the inline engine. He said he could get at the bits and pieces more readily. That was his excuse for liking the radial engine of the Corsair. It was easier to repair.

Rortvedt: It's true.

McIntosh: Okay, so most of this was done--you'd say you lived in tents?

Rortvedt: Tents.

McIntosh: Not in Hawaii.

Rortvedt: Yes in Hawaii.

McIntosh: You still lived in tents.

Rortvedt: Most of my overseas duty was in tents.

McIntosh: And at Kanton Island, of course you were in tents there.

Rortvedt: Yes we were in tents there, and on Makin Island we were in tents.

McIntosh: Tell me the difference between those two islands, living on them.

Rortvedt: On Kanton Island there was nothing. No trees. Only one tree on one end of the island. It was round, and the lagoon was inside of the island. It had been used as a Pan American jet fueling place. On Makin Island there were palm trees and everything. We lived on tents, but the water table was so high that you could only dig down about three feet, and then you'd have water. So what we did was we made bomb shelters with coconut logs and sand bags above ground. And then we couldn't go down because we'd be wet all the time.

McIntosh: Were you ever attacked by the Japanese?

Rortvedt: I had a diary and I had thirty-seven raids on Makin Island. To get back to the story, we did have some attacks on Kanton Island, by submarine at night. They'd shell and come up out of the water.

McIntosh: So that was too far for the Japanese airplanes then.

Rortvedt: Right, the Japanese flew on Makin Island. They bombed at night; they would come in at night, and the search lights would pick them out. Then the aircraft would pound away at them.

McIntosh: Did you ever shoot any of them down?

Rortvedt: I think there was one if I recall, one was shot down.

McIntosh: Did bombs do much damage?

Rortvedt: Most of the time they missed.

McIntosh: The island, or anything important?

Rortvedt: They missed us. We didn't lose any man because of the bombing.

McIntosh: And on Kanton Island, you had the problem with submarine shelling.

Rortvedt: Shelling is correct.

McIntosh: So that was probably a three-inch gun probably at the most. Did they hit anything?

Rortvedt: No it was more or less to make it so you wouldn't sleep good. You know, worried about something was going to hit you.

McIntosh: Did you have any attack airplanes that would attack that submarine?

Rortvedt: We had A-20s. They would go out when that showed up. But they could never find it. It came from that direction, it might two miles out or twenty miles or thirty miles. And you don't know which way.

McIntosh: Now tell me about living on Makin Island, did you get any beer or anything like that?

Rortvedt: We got P40 beer. It was "near beer" I suppose it's called.

McIntosh: Three point two. [3.2% alcohol by volume]

Rortvedt: Yeah, three point two. What a lot of them would do, a lot of them didn't drink beer. So they would save the beer, and then they would sell it for a buck a can. There was always somebody making money in the military.

McIntosh: Sure. How much beer would they give you?

Rortvedt: I think it was six cans a week, if I recall.

McIntosh: Did you have trouble getting mail?

Rortvedt: No, it was fairly good, because the Air Force, we had planes that could handle that.

McIntosh: How was your food on both islands?

Rortvedt: The food was pretty good. In Hawaii we had—

McIntosh: Milk or cereal?

Rortvedt: No, we only had rations. But we ran the navigation school so we went over to helo every, and as you got paid. You got paid in cash. The first three graders would put in three dollars, the next graders would put in two, and so on. So we had a mess fund. So we ate pretty good in Hawaii.

McIntosh: You bought food from the civilians.

Rortvedt: Right, and we also got our military rations.

McIntosh: Between the two of them.

Rortvedt: Between the two of them, the mess sergeant could trade, you know how they operate.

McIntosh: Yup, like bandits.

Rortvedt: Legalized bandits.

McIntosh: So you didn't have any connection with any of the civilians on Hawaii?

Rortvedt: No, we were pretty well isolated.

McIntosh: Were there natives on Makin Island?

Rortvedt: Yes there were natives.

McIntosh: Okay, tell me about them.

Rortvedt: They had a Dutch Missionary there. He lived like a king. He was kind of interesting. They had bantam chickens and they had pigs. We didn't like to do our clothes or anything. So we had them do the clothes and things like that.

McIntosh: Oh, they did your laundry.

Rortvedt: Yeah they'd do laundry, and we'd provide them with soap because soap was wonderful. The girls like the soap.

McIntosh: How did you pay these girls?

Rortvedt: With cigarettes, candy, no money. The English didn't like us on Makin because we were paying them too much. We were disrupting the economy.

McIntosh: Everywhere the Americans went they ran into the same complaint. What were the English doing there?

Rortvedt: This was on Makin Island. This was the Gilbert Marshall Campaign.

McIntosh: I know that. What English did you run into on Makin Island?

Rortvedt: Well they were pretty up top brass. Some of them were brass, with the cane and the swagger stick.

McIntosh: What were they doing on the island?

Rortvedt: They'd show up. They weren't there on either side, they just showed up.

McIntosh: I mean why did the English come to your island? I don't understand that. Where did they come from? Did they come off a ship?

Rortvedt: I would say that they came off a ship, but I could be wrong.

McIntosh: No British airplanes flew in there did they?

Rortvedt: No.

McIntosh: Well then they had to come by ship then.

Rortvedt: We ate fairly good on that. Because we had rations, and we had reefers.

McIntosh: Reefers?

Rortvedt: I don't know if that's the correct name, but that would like a nice big ice box.

McIntosh: What about this prince that ran the island? What about him?

Rortvedt: He was a missionary.

McIntosh: Did he give you any of those pigs?

Rortvedt: No, but we kind of confiscated some of them.

McIntosh: [Laughs] Appropriated. But you stayed away from him?

Rortvedt: We stayed away from him.

McIntosh: He wasn't friendly at all?

Rortvedt: Oh yeah, he was friendly, but we just didn't communicate. Had no reason to.

McIntosh: Oh I see. I thought perhaps you could get him to give you some of the pigs and chickens he had and help your diet along.

Rortvedt: We didn't do that. We also caught fish by dropping a grenade in the water, in the lagoon.

McIntosh: Was that pretty productive? Did you get a lot of fish?

Rortvedt: Yeah.

McIntosh: How did you know? Did you wait for certain times when the fish would come in or could you see them? How did you decide where and when to throw the grenade?

Rortvedt: We watched the porpoises. When they showed up, then right after that is when we'd do that, drop a grenade in the water.

McIntosh: Just throw from shore?

Rortvedt: Yup. That's how we'd get fish.

McIntosh: Then go out and drag them in?

Rortvedt: They would come in.

McIntosh: Did you have a little boat to go out there?

Rortvedt: No, no boat.

McIntosh: How did you get them in?

Rortvedt: We'd ride the natives.

McIntosh: Got the natives to go get them. Did the natives speak any English?

Rortvedt: I can't think of what the name of it is. Pidgin English. They could communicate.

McIntosh: Sure. The Dutch Missionary spoke good English?

Rortvedt: Oh yeah, they were, sure.

McIntosh: Did he have a family there? Or was it just him?

Rortvedt: We never could figure that out.

McIntosh: Or maybe he had three or four native girls.

Rortvedt: I think that's true.

McIntosh: He didn't want to show those I'm sure. I'm sure you had strict rules about privatizing with the ladies.

Rortvedt: Yeah, that was the law.

McIntosh: None of that.

Rortvedt: You didn't want to do it anyways because you didn't know if they had anything. My first experience there is when I saw a man with elephantiasis, that's when we decided to stay away from them. Just like AIDS is today.

McIntosh: You didn't need that movie.

Rortvedt: We didn't need the movie, because you know what elephantiasis is?

McIntosh: Yes, of course.

Rortvedt: Makes your organs swell up.

McIntosh: I know about that.

Rortvedt: I shouldn't have to tell you. See I went in the second enlistment, too. I got discharged in June of '45. And then I went to the university at the long course, and then I ran out of money and went back in, in April of 1947.

McIntosh: Back in the service?

Rortvedt: Yes, back in the Air Force. I spent two years recruiting in Wisconsin, and in the third year I taught engine operation and testing at Chanute Field.

McIntosh: You're a regular then.

Rortvedt: I got my rank back. I tried to get a job, but I got more pay—

McIntosh: What was your rank then?

Rortvedt: Tech Sergeant.

McIntosh: And so you had two years—

Rortvedt: As a recruiter. Here in Madison, and Mayville, and Columbus. Then I wrote a letter to Washington, the Air Force Headquarters, and I got assigned to Chanute Field as an instructor. I taught engine operation testing at Chanute, and I helped set up the first test flock for a jet engine in Chanute.

McIntosh: Well that was an interesting experience.

Rortvedt: That was a very interesting experience.

McIntosh: How did you learn about jet engines?

Rortvedt: I didn't get into it because I got discharged the 7th of April of 1950.

McIntosh: You had quite a few years in the military.

Rortvedt: Eight years.

McIntosh: So then what did you do after you left the military?

Rortvedt: I wrote an exam at Paxton, Illinois, for farm foreman in Wisconsin here, for Chippewa Falls. The Northern County Training School. And there was three of them and I got the job. Because what I didn't know at that time, I was so interested in getting a job, is that the other two turned it down because it wasn't enough money. So I took it, I worked for two years—

McIntosh: In Chippewa Falls.

Rortvedt: In Chippewa Falls, I was farm foreman, on a farm.

McIntosh: Was that a tough job?

Rortvedt: No, it wasn't bad. At that time it was known as a state home for the feeble-minded. They had a thousand acres of land, and we had eighty patients a day and eight hired men. Each man had ten patients. They would move field crop, we had our own cattle, and we had our own hogs, we had our own slaughter house, we had our own creamery, we made everything. But now it is different. Now they're gone.

McIntosh: How did that get established, for feeble-minded you say?

Rortvedt: In 1860, right after the Civil War. That's when all of them were built, all over the country.

McIntosh: So your job was to keep their hands out of the machinery so that they could—

Rortvedt: I was farm foreman. My job was like on a farm, needle foreman you might say.

McIntosh: Where did that produce go?

Rortvedt: Right at the building. There was 1400 patients and 400 employees. They had their own mess hall.

McIntosh: Who were these people that you were taking care of there?

Rortvedt: People from all walks of life.

McIntosh: Were they all from Wisconsin?

Rortvedt: They were all from Wisconsin.

McIntosh: And they were mentally deficient?

Rortvedt: Right. At that time, you had the Southern Colony, and you had Sparta, and you had Chippewa Falls. The last stayed with Chippewa Falls.

McIntosh: These were people who could function if they were under direction? That was their level of intelligence?

Rortvedt: Yes.

McIntosh: So, simple-minded. They took direction okay?

Rortvedt: Right, you might say you had to babysit them. I think they moved them out of the buildings, because the buildings were old.

McIntosh: Moved them out of the buildings because the buildings were old?

Rortvedt: Well they started to phase it out. See now they have medicine now.

McIntosh: They treat them as out-patients now.

Rortvedt: They're not on the streets.

McIntosh: Right, now what else do we have? So after that, then where? After you left the job at Chippewa Falls?

Rortvedt: I came here to Madison, my training I went to work for North Central Airlines, now it's called Northwest.

McIntosh: Right.

Rortvedt: I was on engine buildup there. I worked on that. This was in '52, then I got the chance to move to Minneapolis. I had just bought a house in '52, and I didn't want to go so I turned it down. Then I bought a filling station out on the south beltline on the curb shop there. That's when I started that, and it just kept going.

McIntosh: Do you still have that filling station?

Rortvedt: No I'm retired now. And I went up town, and I was on the corner of North Hamilton and East Dayton for twenty-seven years.

McIntosh: Station?

Rortvedt: Arco Station. On the corner of East Dayton right across from the McCormack Ramp, that was the parking lot there and sold gas. Then I left there, and the last twelve years I was out on Johnson and Third. And that's where I retired from in '79.

McIntosh: When you worked for Northwest Airlines, what was your job there specifically?

Rortvedt: I was a mechanic. I was an engine builder. I built up engines that came in and needed to be worked on.

McIntosh: Now where did you learn about jet engines?

Rortvedt: That wasn't jet engines, it was still reciprocating engines.

McIntosh: Ahh, so you knew all about those.

Rortvedt: It was no problem.

McIntosh: Well that was a job you were really prepared for.

Rortvedt: Yeah, I had accomplished that.

McIntosh: Are those engines harder or easier to work on than the ones you had in the military?

Rortvedt: They were the same ones.

McIntosh: Same Cadillac engine, or Packard or whatever it was.

Rortvedt: Pratt & Whitney, they were BMW.

McIntosh: Probably bigger though.

Rortvedt: No they were the same thing. Like a C-47, you've probably heard about them, the work horse of the Air Force in World War II.

McIntosh: Still flying. Did you join any veteran's groups, other than your Pearl Harbor Association?

Rortvedt: I'm a life member of V.F.W. [Veterans of Foreign Wars] I joined some right away when I got back, and then I was out for a few years. Then I decided to go back in again.

McIntosh: Have you kept contact with any of your crew?

Rortvedt: There is one, Robert Brust in Milwaukee he was in my squadron on Hickham Field. He was part of that.

McIntosh: That's pretty good, you're still in contact with him.

Rortvedt: We both belong to the Pearl Harbor Survivor's Association.

McIntosh: Sure, I understand. Well that's nice, and your Pearl Harbor Association meets several times a year I understand. That's what a fellow said, they have two official meetings and one picnic every year.

Rortvedt: Yup.

McIntosh: Boy, that's more than any veteran's group I have ever heard of, meeting three times a year.

Rortvedt: Well my 58th Bomb Squadron, we meet once a year. Have been for the last four years. Now next May we're going to Huntsville, Alabama. Last year we were in Branson, Missouri, the year before that we were at Colorado Springs, the year before that we were at the Air Force Museum.

McIntosh: That's an active group.

Rortvedt: Yeah, that's the group I showed you with the pictures.

McIntosh: Well that's terrific. That's really nice to have all of those associations don't you think?

Rortvedt: Yes it is. They're getting younger now. You've probably seen all that.

[End of Interview]