

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
**WILLIAM STARKE**  
Pilot, Army Air Force, World War II  
1999

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**Starke, William.** Oral History Interview, 1999.

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

User Copy: 2 audio cassettes (ca. 65 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

**Abstract:**

William Starke, an Illinois native, discusses his World War II service as a P38 fighter pilot with the 339th Fighter Squadron of the 13th Air Force in the South Pacific. He comments on enlisting in the Army Air Corps shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, attending flight school in California, and training for the P38 at Chandler (Arizona). He talks about the role Charles Lindburgh played during the war including helping to develop the F4U Corsair fighter, increasing the flying range of aircraft by tilting the propeller, and finding ways to better escort B24 bombers. Starke credits Lindburgh with helping to save the lives of pilots and crews aboard B24s. Stationed at New Caledonia, he describes learning survival techniques from a combat veteran, the excellent work of ground crews keeping the planes ready to fly, and working as the operations officer for the squadron. He details his first mission bombing Rabual where his plane was hit by enemy fire, escorting B24 bombers, shooting down a Japanese "sally" bomber, difficulty bailing out of a P38, and reluctance to ride in small aircraft for many years after the war.

**Biographical Sketch:**

William Starke served as a fighter pilot in the 339<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron of the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Force in the Pacific Theater. He was involved in over one hundred missions during the war. After his service, Starke used the GI Bill to enroll in the journalism and advertising program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He later returned to Chicago to work at U.S. Gypsum in the Advertising Department. After several years, Starke and his wife moved to Fort Atkinson (Wisconsin) where he own and ran a Ford dealership until his retirement in 1989.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999  
Transcribed by Joshua Goldstein, 2010  
Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2012

## Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: In 1941 you entered the military and then what?

Starke: December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1941 I entered the Army Air Corps and was sent out to Colorado to a clerical school because I had worked in a bank before I enlisted. And I graduated from the clerical school and at that time I knew you had to have two years of college before you could be a pilot, a cadet. and I thought, "Well, that's out of the question," but then in the spring of 1942 they decided they're going to need a lot of pilots in a hurry, so they said if you could pass a mental and physical exam that you'd be accepted as a cadet. And I was fortunate; I passed the mental and physical and became a cadet, and went through all the flight schools: primary at Cal-Aero Academy in California, and then basic training at Minter Field in Bakersfield, California, and advanced at Williams Field in Chandler, Arizona, right outside of Phoenix.

McIntosh: What was the one in Chandler?

Starke: It's called Williams Field, yeah.

McIntosh: The last training was what camp?

Starke: Williams Field.

McIntosh: For advanced training?

Starke: Advanced training, yeah; that was in P38s. That was the Lockheed Lightning, a beautiful airplane. I loved it.

McIntosh: Richard Bong loved it.

Starke: Yes, he did, right, and I loved it, boy.

McIntosh: Did you ever meet him?

Starke: Yes. Well, I walked into an operations tent one afternoon. The fella said, "Do you recognize those two people?" I said, "Well, they look familiar." He said, "That's Dick Bong and Colonel Lindbergh."

McIntosh: Oh my goodness.

Starke: And I thought, "What is Lindbergh doing out here?" And I was too shy to go up and get their autographs. I could have had them autograph my jacket, but I didn't have the guts enough to do it. [laughs]

McIntosh: Richard Bong was well known by that time.

Starke: Oh yes, yes. And Lindbergh was out there flying the P38, and that's another story.

McIntosh: Yes, I know how he snuck out there because of Henry Ford.

Starke: Well, I heard the story differently. That he had been out in Guadalcanal working with the Marines and their F4U trying to increase their fuel consumption so that they could fly farther. General Kinney in the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force heard about this and invited Lindbergh over to New Guinea to fly with the P38s and see if the P38s could be improved. And so he started flying with Major McGuire and Bong and those fellas and he always came back with a lot more fuel in his tanks than the rest of them. And they said, "What's going on here?" Of course if anybody could work out fuel consumption it was Lindbergh, and he would always come back with a third more gas left. He said, "Well I fly it"—I don't know—"twenty-two hundred inches of manifold pressure and twenty-three hundred RPMs." The guy said, "You can't do that; Lockheed said you'll blow up the engines if you fly that way." But he flew mission after mission and here he was a civilian flying combat. He shot down at least one airplane, or it could have been two. So McGuire and these fellas started flying with his settings on the manifold pressure and the RPM and they were going hundreds of miles farther on their missions. And we had a real problem in New Guinea because the B24s were flying from New Guinea to Borneo to hit the oil wells over there and there were no fighter planes that could accompany them all the way.

McIntosh: It was too long.

Starke: So the B24s were just getting pasted terribly. The losses were horrendous, and then all of a sudden the P38s were able to fly to Borneo and take the B24s all the way. And it was because of Lindbergh and his fuel-saving operations that he introduced. It was marvelous; yeah, quite a story.

McIntosh: Roosevelt wouldn't give him permission because of his pre-war, sort of Nazi—

Starke: Yes, he was sort of pro-Germany.

McIntosh: Yeah, pro-German remarks, and Roosevelt made up his mind, he's not gonna let that guy in there. The guy who got him out there was Henry Ford.

Starke: I had never heard that.

McIntosh: [inaudible]

Starke: Well, he was building B24s.

McIntosh: Henry Ford was, yes, all around, but he and Henry were fellow anti-Semites, they were very close. So Henry, he used his power to get him out to the South Pacific

Starke: You know, Lindbergh was a student here at Wisconsin and flunked out in 1920 and '21.

McIntosh: Yes, I'm reading a book that they wrote about Lindbergh.

Starke: I read it, yes, it just came out.

McIntosh: It just came out; excellent.

Starke: Yeah, I can't think of the author's name.

McIntosh: Berg[?].

Starke: Berg, yeah, I think that sounds right. It's a wonderful book. He didn't like Wisconsin at all. [laughs] He thought it was too boring, too formal.

McIntosh: So after Chandler, then where?

Starke: After Chandler I went to Muroc.

McIntosh: That's where you were assigned; you found your squadron at Muroc?

Starke: No, no I went to Muroc for combat training out in the desert. And then after that I was sent down to North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego and we flew with the Marines and with the Navy for about two months. And then I had an idea that we were going to the South Pacific, 'cause we were flying with the Marines and the Navy.

McIntosh: In San Diego?

Starke: In San Diego, North Island Naval Air Station on Coronado Island. After that I was sent up to San Francisco and then we flew over to Hawaii, spent about a week in Hawaii then flew down to Christmas Island, Samoa, Fiji, New Caledonia, and ended up in Guadalcanal in December of 1943.

McIntosh: December of '43?

Starke: Yeah. Interesting thing happened on our trip down. We left Samoa Thanksgiving morning and they were getting the turkeys ready in the Mess hall and everything. And we thought, “Well, we’re going to Fiji, we’ll have our Thanksgiving dinner in Fiji.” We flew all day, landed in Fiji, and all set for our Thanksgiving dinner. It was the day after Thanksgiving; we had crossed the International Date Line right between Samoa and Fiji and we lost our Thanksgiving dinner. Of all the times to do it, it was Thanksgiving Day. Anyway, we got to Guadalcanal and they were just getting ready to start pounding Rabaul, the big Japanese Air Base in the South Pacific. I joined the squadron on December 10<sup>th</sup>, the 44<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, on Guadalcanal. Then we moved up to Munda and from Munda December 19<sup>th</sup> they started flying the first missions escorting B24s to Rabaul. I didn’t fly that day, but Christmas Day was my first mission, my first combat mission to Rabaul from Munda. I can remember, I’ll never forget it, we got about a half hour from Rabaul and suddenly it dawned on me I might be dead in the next half hour. [laughs] And I thought, “Starke, what are you doing here? What did you want to be a combat pilot for? You’re gonna be dead in the next half hour.” I was *scared stiff*, I really was. Every muscle in my body said turn around and go back, get out of there before you’re dead. And it was a wild mission. I just stayed with my element leader. Wherever he went, I went. I’d just fly all over the sky, and somehow or other and I got through and didn’t get shot down. I was Tail End Charlie.

McIntosh: Was there air opposition?

Starke: Oh yes, they were all over the sky. It was a big attack. They attacked the bombers and of course we had to protect the bombers. The Marines were flying F4Us just below us and the Navy had their F6Fs below them and the New Zealanders were flying P40s, so we had four layers of fighters and about forty Jap planes attacked our whole—and it was just a wild melee. Planes all over the sky [laughs] and everybody yelling on the mic’, “Somebody get that guy off my tail, get that guy off my tail.” You didn’t know who was calling. It was just panic, absolute panic. And we got back for the debriefing, debriefing after the mission, and I listened to these veteran pilots telling what happened and what they saw, all the battleships and the cruisers and the destroyers that they saw in Rabaul Harbor—Simpson Harbor, it was called. And I thought, “Man, I’m not long for this,” ‘cause I didn’t remember seeing anything like that. All I saw was my element leader.

McIntosh: You flew in how big a group? Six?

Starke: No, we usually had twelve. We tried to get sixteen in our squadron that were flyable.

McIntosh: At one time?

Starke: Yes, we usually tried to get sixteen; you usually wind up with twelve.

McIntosh: Four groups of three, you mean?

Starke: Of two, groups of two, the element leader and the wingman.

McIntosh: I see.

Starke: Yeah, there'd be twelve of us, so we had six elements. It was wild. I thought, "Boy, I am not cut out for this, there is no way I'm gonna survive."

McIntosh: Did you get shot at?

Starke: Oh yes, got shot at. Never got hit personally; my plane got hit but I never did.

McIntosh: What did you think after those first bullets came in from the Zero?

Starke: Frankly, I didn't even know it at first. I didn't even know it. When I landed, the crew chief came running up on the plane. He said, "You okay, you okay, captain? You okay?" I said, "Yeah, I'm fine." He said, "Well look at your airplane." Bullet holes all over the plane.

McIntosh: On the fuselage?

Starke: On the tail surfaces and the fuselage and all over and I never—it hadn't hit anything critical, so I was all right.

McIntosh: Did you lose any of the B24s?

Starke: No, we never lost a B24 when we were escorting, never. Even when we went to Borneo we never lost a B24 when we were escorting.

McIntosh: How many missions did you have there in the South Pacific?

Starke: A hundred and twenty-one altogether.

McIntosh: Missions?

Starke: Yeah

McIntosh: Your group never lost anybody? Never lost a bomber?

Starke: Not that I am aware of.

McIntosh: That's an excellent record.

Starke: It was really amazing.

McIntosh: No 17s, they're all 24s, is that correct?

Starke: Occasionally 17s, mostly 24s, yes, yeah. But the missions went by, you know. I got through the first one and the second one and the third one and the fourth one. Pretty soon I started seeing more, I was more comfortable. I wasn't panic stricken all the time.

McIntosh: You weren't just following that guy?

Starke: Yes, right. Then pretty soon I became an element leader and I had my wingman. And pretty soon I became a flight leader and was leading the flight. Pretty soon I was leading the squadron.

McIntosh: You were up to being colonel, then?

Starke: No, I was a captain.

McIntosh: Oh really?

Starke: The ranks—

McIntosh: Were slow?

Starke: The promotions didn't come through very fast.

McIntosh: Oh goodness. Just the responsibility.

Starke: I was operations officer, which should call for more than a captain.

McIntosh: Yes.

Starke: But that's the way it stayed. They forgot about promotions. So anyway, I was happy, but it was really—one of the things we really got to fear more than the combat was navigation, the weather. The weather, as you know, in the South Pacific is so violent. You get up in the morning, you start your mission and there is not a cloud in the sky. And you fly several hours to the target and by the time you're coming back from the target you've got this huge tropical front that's been built up and it goes up forty thousand feet.



McIntosh: Beyond your capacity?

Williams: Oh yes. So we'd have to either try to fly under it—and there were so many islands that we had to pass that you might fly right into it because there is always heavy rain underneath and you couldn't see, or you'd try to find just a little saddle in the cloud and try to go through that or just try to blindly fly through it, which was always dangerous 'cause—

McIntosh: If you were in formation it would be extremely dangerous.

Starke: It was, yeah, because you'd have mid-air collisions and you can't see that far in front of you. You know you're just flying on instruments, really.

Jim: So one guy knows where you're going?

Starke: That's right, and they're trusting you to know what you're doing. Oh, I can remember I used to be sweating blood coming back because everybody is not paying attention and they're relying on me to get them back, and a lot of times I wasn't really sure 'cause all those islands start to look alike after a while. And our maps, you know, we had our maps, those little maps that we had on our leg, and they weren't all that accurate. There'd be islands that we'd be flying by that weren't on the map. So you had to guess and you had to hope and pray that you were picking the right target. 'Cause you always had those winds aloft that could be blowing in.

McIntosh: That blew you sideways and not even know it.

Starke: Yes, and you wouldn't even know it. Yeah, so it was really scary. Navigation was a real, real terrible problem.

McIntosh: Because of the great distance and few landmarks?

Starke: Oh yes. We'd be going—when Lindbergh got done we were flying with belly tanks and we were going out a thousand miles and then coming back a thousand miles and with all that weather change in between it was a nightmare, really bad news. But never got lost. [knocks on wood] Never got lost.

McIntosh: Good reckoning, dead reckoning.

Starke: Well, I think the good Lord was guiding me, somebody was guiding me. Oh, it was—

McIntosh: Tell me about some combat experience with the Japanese that you personally had.

Starke: Well, I took shots, wild random shots at a plane. I never got anything that I could really confirm as a kill until late, late in the war. We were flying over Formosa and I was leading the squadron one day over Formosa. We had left the Philippine Islands and were flying in to Formosa and looking for targets of opportunity. And all of a sudden I spotted this—I was leading the squadron and I spotted this Japanese “Sally” twin-engine bomber. So I peeled off on it and told the squadron to follow me and I peeled off on him. He was about ten miles away and I poured the coal on and I caught up to him. And he started to use maneuvers back and forth and I just stayed right with him. Got about a hundred and fifty yards from him, I didn’t want to waste ammunition. I got close and just let it hit in his left engine first, then his right engine and he just burst into flames and crashed into the hillside. That was the only—

McIntosh: You were shooting the .50 caliber then?

Starke: .50 caliber—no, we had a 20 mm cannon too, so I hit both buttons and it just destroyed it and it crashed into the mountain. That was my one official kill. I had a lot of shots at planes but things are so wild you that you couldn’t stay with them long enough and you had to be sure to check your own tail to be sure somebody wasn’t on your tail. So I took a lot of shots but I could never confirm. I saw pieces flying off and smoke coming, but that’s all I could say, and that didn’t count.

McIntosh: It didn’t?

Starke: No, that was just a possible.

McIntosh: Did they have cameras in the planes towards the end of the war?

Starke: Yeah, we normally didn’t have camera film. Apparently they just didn’t have a lot of camera film, ‘cause I can’t recall any of us ever seeing any of our combat film, nothing.

McIntosh: I know in Europe that some of the 51s had cameras.

Starke: I remember seeing beautiful—on television, seeing these marvelous shots that they had. We never saw that.

McIntosh: So tell me about your squadron mates. Were they with you all the time? Did you become close friends with them?

Starke: Yes. We started—in 1981 some of us some of us got together and said, “Hey, it’s about time we have a squadron reunion.” So we put it together for San Diego, right across from the Hotel del Coronado, there’s a nice little hotel. And we all got together—when I say all, there were about

twenty-five pilots and their wives that were in our group at the time. So we all got together, and I can remember I came into the hotel and I said, "Where is everybody?" "Oh, they're down the street. They went to a Chinese restaurant down there; they're all down there having a drink." So I walked in and here are all these twenty-five guys scattered around this big table and I could feel the hair just stand up on my head, it was such a weird feeling. They were all gray haired. [laughs]

McIntosh: They were old people?

Starke: Yeah, this is forty years later, but the faces I could remember. I could recall the faces, and we had such a marvelous time. But I can remember what a strange feeling that was; it was just like seeing ghosts out of the past. It was marvelous. And we have gotten together every year since 1981. We were just out in Solvang, California in May and got together, but the ranks are thinning. There were only about fourteen of us that were able to make it. All of the guys are in their eighties now. The oldest one is eighty-eight and I'm eighty, I'm one of the younger ones, but it's marvelous.

McIntosh: Most of the other pilots were the same age as you when you were there?

Starke: Yeah, I'd say from nineteen to twenty-three, yeah, that was the age group.

McIntosh: Older probably than the average soldier was. Probably had a year or two in training?

Starke: Yeah, because we had to go through flight school.

McIntosh: Did the plane always work to your satisfaction, the P38?

Starke: I loved it because in the South Pacific we were going over so many hundreds of miles of water and if you had an engine shot down, shot out, you could come back with that other engine. So it was just ideal.

McIntosh: You could fly it on one engine?

Starke: You could fly on one engine.

McIntosh: Perfectly well?

Starke: Oh yes. Well, you had to make the adjustments, but you could fly just fine. You could fly a hundred and eighty miles an hour on one engine until you ran out of fuel.

McIntosh: With two you could go about four hundred?

Starke: A little over four hundred.

McIntosh: That's excellent.

Starke: We had trouble with the P38 earlier; if you went into a dive and started going straight down you would reach compressibility, which means that your controls would freeze and you could not pull out of the dive. You couldn't do anything and you would just go right on in. We lost two fellows in San Diego in our training down there.

McIntosh: Just trying to learn?

Starke: Just trying to learn. You know, the instructor took us in a dive and he told us what to do. And a couple of the fellows—

McIntosh: Do so much of this but not too much of this?

Starke: That's right, start peeling back and use your good common sense. You can tell when speed is building up you don't want to push it. But later on in the war they were losing so many pilots to this compressibility that Lockheed went to work on it and they figured out a dive break that you can hit before you went into the dive and it would disturb the air enough so that you'd get control on your rear surfaces so you could pull out of the dive. Then it was no problem. But until then—

McIntosh: That was a real benefit.

Starke: Oh, it was a life saver; it was marvelous.

McIntosh: Did you have a chance to fly any of the other aircraft in the area?

Starke: No, not really. No. Oh, I flew—our squadron had an SBD Navy dive bomber that we used for practicing instruments, we'd go up, and that was the only other airplane I ever flew was the SBD.

McIntosh: I was wondering whether you might have had an F6F or something like that.

Starke: No, we were a P38 squadron and that's all we saw.

McIntosh: I thought maybe you ran into some Navy guys and they snuck you aboard one of theirs.

Starke: I wish I had, it would have been fun. It would have been fun, but it never happened. One time I went on a PT boat raid. We had one P38 that we'd

fixed up where you could have a piggyback and take a passenger along and somebody wanted a ride. It was a PT boat commander that wanted to ride in the P38, so Bob Mitchell and I said, “Well, if you let us take a raid over Bougainville some night with your squadron we’ll take you up in the P38.” So we went one night and it was almost our last night on Earth.  
[laughs]

McIntosh: It was a tough mission?

Starke: It was a tough—yeah, the Jap planes spotted us. It was dark, it was dark, fortunately, but they came in and they couldn’t really find us. We were right along the shore hiding among the—

McIntosh: Were you solo or you had a group of ‘em?

Starke: There were three. Three PT boats and we were out on a barge hunt trying to hit the Japanese troops as they were moving troops along the shore of Bougainville. We never found them, but the Jap planes found us, but fortunately we got hidden under some trees right along the shore and the planes finally gave up and we came back the next morning. When the CO heard about what we had done he went right through the roof.

McIntosh: I just spent a million dollars training you guys and [inaudible].

Starke: Right, that’s exactly what happened; we were not too popular.

McIntosh: How did he enjoy the plane ride?

Starke: Oh, he thought it was marvelous, just great. But I never heard what happened, whether they got hit a few nights later or what, because they always went out at night on these barge hunts. That was interesting.

McIntosh: What decorations did you get?

Starke: Just the Air Medal; I never got the DFC. Got the Air Medal with seven oak leaf clusters.

McIntosh: You must have got a unit citation.

Starke: Oh yeah, we got a Presidential Unit Citation.

McIntosh: Everybody gets those.

Starke: Yeah, and all the Theater Ribbons and all that stuff.

McIntosh: When did you come back to the United States?

Starke: In May, the end of May of 1945.

McIntosh: After how many missions?

Starke: A hundred and twenty-one. We did everything. We dive bombed, we strafed, we dropped napalm in the Philippines. We fired rockets, we led B24s, B25s, we did everything you can do.

McIntosh: There was no limit as to when you can come home like in the other branches?

Starke: The European War had top priority. They wanted to knock out the Germans first, so they were getting all the equipment. As a matter of fact, we had trouble getting parts for our airplanes, we couldn't get anything. It was really bad, because we were the back-up and they were just giving us barely enough to survive out there.

McIntosh: That was the Rainbow Plan, you know. Germany first and then—

Starke: And Japan second. It was really funny. As I was coming back on this hospital ship from the Philippines—

McIntosh: What hospital ship?

Starke: The General Polk.

McIntosh: That wasn't designed as a hospital ship; it was an AKA they converted.

Starke: Yeah. It took us twenty-one days to get from New Guinea to San Francisco. And about the first week out all hell breaks loose. Germany surrenders just as I'm leaving the squadron and we're all set to get all this new equipment and everything. I'm on my way back to San Francisco, my tour of duty is ended. My timing was poor. If I'd have been out there another couple of months, the fellas wrote me and said, "Boy, we're getting all kinds of P38s. We're getting equipment and everything," but the war was over in Germany as I was on my way back to San Francisco.

McIntosh: Then where did you go?

Starke: I was at San Francisco, then they sent me down to Santa Ana, the pre-flight center down there or whatever that they called it.

McIntosh: Sent you down as an instructor?

Starke: No, no, they just sent me down there for rest and rehabilitation. We were in Hollywood every weekend and then after that they sent us back by train across the country to Fort Sheridan in Chicago and I was ushered out.

McIntosh: You did stay in the Reserves?

Starke: I stayed in the Reserves, yes, for twenty-three years.

McIntosh: Any veterans' groups?

Starke: Well, the American Legion and VFW.

McIntosh: And you said you were in regular contact with the 44<sup>th</sup>?

Starke: Yes, we are going to have a reunion next year in California.

McIntosh: Did you need any of the benefits or use any of the veterans' benefits when you got home?

Starke: Yes, I enrolled with the G.I. Bill at the University of Wisconsin here in Madison. And I graduated in the School of Journalism, Journalism and Advertising.

McIntosh: Then you returned home?

Starke: No, I went back to Chicago and worked at U.S. Gypsum in the Advertising Department for a couple of years and then my wife's father was a Ford dealer in Jefferson, Wisconsin. He called me one day and said, "We have a Ford dealership for sale in Fort Atkinson; would you be interested in going into the Ford business?" I said, "I don't know anything about the car business," and he said, "Well, I'll teach you." And my wife being from Jefferson, learning that she could come back to Fort Atkinson, she said, "Let's go." So I talked to the fellas at U.S. Gypsum in the office and they said, "Bill, you'd be out of your mind to leave Chicago and go to a little town in Wisconsin. You'll be bored to death." And I was really worried. So I talked to my boss, Budweiser—Frank, his nickname was Budweiser—and I told him my predicament and he said, "I'll tell you what. You go ahead and try that. It sounds like a good opportunity for you, but if you don't like it in a year, you let me know and you can come back here, and we'll take you back." So I thought, "Boy, what can I lose?" And so I went and became a Ford dealer in 1949 and I was a Ford dealer for forty years and I retired in 1989. **[End of Tape One, Side One]** Been playing golf ever since. [laughs] And I do some writing on the side.

McIntosh: Now back to the war. Little details, we like little details. The routine stuff, we can get that elsewhere. Tell me about mail.

Starke: Mail? It was few and far between, and if we got packages they would arrive weeks and months later. Like if someone sent you a birthday cake.

McIntosh: Wasn't much left?

Starke: Your birthday is in April, you'd see your birthday cake in September.

McIntosh: In crumbs?

Starke: Yes, in crumbs, [laughs] that's right. It was sporadic.

McIntosh: And did you encounter the USO?

Starke: Oh yes, that was wonderful.

McIntosh: They were there? Where did you see them?

Starke: At Guadalcanal, Bougainville, in the Philippines. Never saw them in New Guinea in our outfit. I am sure they were there, but I didn't see them. We saw Bob Hope, Jack Benny and a lot of the great stars.

McIntosh: Where they very personable? As they seem to be, from what I have seen.

Starke: Oh yes, yeah.

McIntosh: Very gracious.

Starke: They were wonderful, hilarious, just hilarious. And there'd be a thousand people just watching, all the troops, and everybody just knocking themselves out; it was marvelous.

McIntosh: How about the Red Cross and Salvation Army? Meet any of those folks?

Starke: Yes, the Red Cross was excellent. We'd come into big bases, like we'd come in to Tacloban in the Philippines on Leyte. Red Cross always had a place there and they'd have coffee and things that you could have when you landed. You could even have a cup of coffee and maybe a donut or something like that.

McIntosh: Did they sell 'em to you or give them to you?

Starke: They gave them to us, oh yeah, and they gave us cigarettes if you wanted. I never paid anything for anything. They had cigars, free cigars and things like that. It was just wonderful. When we went down to New Zealand we went to Auckland on rest leave and we stayed at a place called Kiora



which was a Red Cross place for pilots on rest leave to stay. It was a beautiful home that we stayed in and it was just wonderful. There'd be about thirty or forty pilots staying there in this, not a hotel really, it was like a big private home that they had taken over and it was called Kiora which was Maori for "Good Luck," that's what it meant. It was just a great place to stay. The kitchen never closed. You could go in there at two o'clock in the morning, take a steak out of the refrigerator, cook a steak or whatever you wanted.

McIntosh: Cook it yourself?

Starke: Just cook it yourself, yes. And of course we never saw a steak up in New Guinea and so we had to eat steak every day. It was just great, Steak-N-Eggs [New Zealand accent] that was the big thing. Steak-N-Eggs, yes, marvelous.

McIntosh: Alcohol, you had that all the way, right up to the—

Starke: Oh yes. They gave us two ounces of alcohol, of pure grain alcohol after every mission and we were supposed to drink it at that time to kind of—

McIntosh: Pure alcohol? You mean white lightning?

Starke: Yes, yeah, right, two ounces.

McIntosh: That was a high percentage, a high proof?

Starke: Yeah, it was what? 180 proof or something.

McIntosh: Well ninety-five percent alcohol is—

Starke: Anyway, what we did, we didn't drink it. The flight surgeon would save it for us.

McIntosh: For a party?

Starke: Yeah. And we'd get our quantity all set and we'd have a party.

McIntosh: All you need is some fruit and away you go.

Starke: That's right, pineapple. I remember one time, and this was at Guadalcanal and I think Jack Benny was there, and one of the guys in the squadron had gone to high school with Martha Tilton, you know, the singer from Tommy Dorsey.

McIntosh: She sang with Benny Goodman.

Starke: Oh yeah, couldn't remember. Anyway, he went down to see her and invited her up to our squadron headquarters, which was really jungle, for a party.

McIntosh: And she came?

Starke: And she came and she brought Carole Landis with her.

McIntosh: Wow, wow!

Starke: As a matter of fact, I have pictures in my book of the two of them and they brought a bunch of Navy nurses with them and we had a fabulous party.

McIntosh: That just sounds terrific.

Starke: It was terrific, it was just great, boy. And I have pictures in there of the two of them and they both autographed my jacket, yeah.

McIntosh: This was on Guadalcanal?

Starke: Guadalcanal, yeah.

McIntosh: Have you kept the jacket?

Starke: Oh yes, I still have the jacket.

McIntosh: Does it fit?

Starke: It's a little tight, a little tight.

McIntosh: Shrink a little?

Starke: Yeah, those leather jackets shrink. [laughs] I've been offered a thousand dollars for it.

McIntosh: Wow, it's priceless.

Starke: I wouldn't part with it for anything.

McIntosh: You have kids?

Starke: Yeah, we have two boys and a girl.

McIntosh: Are they interested in your war experiences?

Starke: Yeah, they are, but they've heard it all their lives so they know it as well as I do. But I'm very proud of the book that I put together; that's really special.

McIntosh: Yes, you did that book?

Starke: Yes.

McIntosh: The 44<sup>th</sup>—

Starke: 44<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. It's called the Vampire Squadron.

McIntosh: Right. Your mates I'm sure are just thrilled with it.

Starke: Yeah, yes, they just can't say enough about it.

McIntosh: I'm sure.

Starke: It's been just a treasure. I think I told you what these used copies are selling for. Last summer I got calls from three different people. One paid a hundred dollars for the book, another paid a hundred and twenty-five, and the last one paid a hundred and thirty-eight dollars for it.

McIntosh: There's no limit for something like that.

Starke: Well originally in 1985 we printed two thousand and they sold out right away. I had it printed out in Anaheim and the printer, Bill Robinson, was elderly and shortly after that and about a year later he retired and he destroyed all the printing plates, just destroyed everything. So I thought that's the end. Last fall I started thinking, "Boy, I better get this thing reprinted somehow, somewhere." So I checked around and I saw an article in the Milwaukee Journal saying that there was an outfit up in Eau Claire that had state-of-the-art printing presses and what-not, all the latest things. So I went up to see them and I took a copy of my original book, which was hardcover then, original hardcover book. And I took it to them and I said, "You suppose this could be reprinted?" He said, "Could you leave it with me?" I said, "Sure." So I left it with him for a week and called him back and he said, "Yes, we think we can do it. What we're going to have to do is we're gonna have to take the book apart, photograph each page and then compile it, put it together, bind it and put a soft cover on it." And I said, "Can you put the same cover that's on the hardcover?" He said, "Oh yes, I'll reproduce the painting." See, one of the fellas in the squadron is a commercial artist, one of the pilots. And George Gibbs down in Houston painted the cover for the book and it was a special, beautiful cover that he made. So we had the whole thing reprinted, two hundred

copies, and I've had them now since January, and I've got about forty or fifty left. A lot of them have been sold already.

McIntosh: Oh sure. I'm sure the rest of them will be gone and you'll be running some more. Get more from Eau Claire.

Starke: Oh yeah, they've kept everything. He said, "Don't worry, we'll reprint it any time you want to have more copies." So that was a lifesaver because I didn't think that it would be possible to get it reprinted.

McIntosh: Looking back again, did you think the training that you had was right what it should be or were there any defects in the training, preparation?

Starke: Really, I was very pleased. When I left San Francisco for the South Pacific I really felt ready. Of course it was probably my youthful excitement about being a fighter pilot and I felt like I could really handle anything. But when I got down to New Caledonia I was assigned to the 339<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron and Bill Harris took us—there were twelve of us that went down, this group, and he took care of us. He at that time had about twelve planes to his credit and he said, "You guys are gonna fly with me for about a week or ten days and I'm gonna show you what's gonna happen up there." So he took us out and we went through all kinds of things that I had never even heard of. It was the twelve days and I told him—he comes to our squadron reunion—and I've told him that he saved my life many times over.

McIntosh: There's nothing like experience.

Starke: Oh yes, it was marvelous.

McIntosh: That was something you couldn't possibly have received back in the United States.

Starke: No, there was nobody capable. He was coming right down from—

McIntosh: He had special talent.

Starke: Yes. See, the 44<sup>th</sup> would go up and fly for a month or so then we'd come back down, and then the 339<sup>th</sup> would go up and replace us with their P38s. Bill Harris was commanding officer of the 339<sup>th</sup> and so he was an expert.

McIntosh: Generally the routine was that you'd be on flight line, let's say, for a week, or how long?

Starke: Oh, we'd stay about a month on the flight line, flying every other day. Our squadron was broken into two groups, two sections, you might say. And

this section would fly one day and we would fly the next day. We just alternated. Sometimes if it was a big thing we'd both fly together.

McIntosh: And that went on how long?

Starke: For about a month or so.

McIntosh: And then?

Starke: Then we'd go back down.

McIntosh: Australia?

Starke: Well, I went to New Zealand twice. About every thirty missions we'd go down on rest leave. To New Guinea for ten days, so we went to New Zealand twice and Sidney, Australia twice. So that was four rest leaves in my eighteen months. I had four rest leaves, which was wonderful.

McIntosh: Necessary?

Starke: Yeah, we were looking forward to it. About the thirtieth mission you're getting—

McIntosh: A little edgy?

Starke: You're getting edgy. You know the law of averages is starting to catch up to you.

McIntosh: You start looking for the grim reaper behind you and that sort of stuff?

Starke: Right. [laughs]

McIntosh: You know, I can't keep doing this.

Starke: Right. We were ready when they said, "Okay guys, we've cut your orders and you're going down New Zealand and Australia, to Sidney."

McIntosh: Another question. Was it your plane you came back to?

Starke: Oh yes, I had my own plane, "Windy City Wiz." Early I didn't.

McIntosh: So when you were gone for ten days it did not fly?

Starke: Oh yes, somebody else would fly it. Yes. But when I came back it was my plane. But earlier I was flying whatever plane they had available.

McIntosh: There didn't seem to be much of a difference from one plane to another?

Starke: Oh yes, you'd have more trouble—I had an excellent flight crew. They kept my plane just marvelous. One time, one time we were going to Rabaul one day and I was over Rabaul and we were up at thirty thousand feet and all of a sudden I started to see spots in front of my eyes and blinks and what not. I knew there was something wrong, and I happen to look down at my oxygen gauge, which was right between my legs, and the needle was on zero and I thought, “Oh my, here we go.” So I just didn't say anything, I just peeled off and went into a dive, almost went into compressibility trying to get down. [laughs] I got down to about ten thousand feet and just headed back. When I got back I was still kind of woozy and the flight surgeon, Doc Hagan, said I had a mild anoxic reaction or something like that. But that was the only time my equipment ever failed me.

McIntosh: Crew chief said—

Starke: Boy, they were very embarrassed. They couldn't understand it.

McIntosh: What happened? They forget to fill the tank?

Starke: There was a leak. There was a leak that they didn't spot. But that was pretty scary.

McIntosh: You were breathing out of one bottle of oxygen?

Starke: Well, it was a tank and I never saw it, it was always hidden.

McIntosh: It was attached to the plane?

Starke: Yes, oh yeah, it was underneath my seat somewhere and there is a gauge between my legs that showed you were breathing, that it was working and everything, and there was a needle to show—

McIntosh: That wasn't something on your flight check? Pre-flight check.

Starke: Oh yes, you always check that and it was fine when I left. Apparently it was leaking; I didn't look at it at thirty thousand feet. I rarely ever looked at it because you were always breathing fine.

McIntosh: You had other things to worry about.

Starke: [laughs] That's right. But that was scary. And there were a lot of missions where we were coming back low on fuel and just sweating it out. 'Cause

we'd still have maybe two hundred miles to go and you're looking at those gauges and they're getting—

McIntosh: There is no space between the E and the needle.

Starke: Right, getting down to nothing.

McIntosh: What was your plan? So all of a sudden nothing, then what were you going to do? Of course you knew you could radio to your friends and tell them.

Starke: Oh yes. Well, all of us would be in the same boat 'cause we were about—

McIntosh: All on the same amount of gas. What did you plan?

Starke: Well you'd look—it would depend—it never happened. We never really—at least my squadron never fell out because we were out of fuel. We landed with just fumes in the tank a couple of times but we never really ran out. I remember one time we went there was a B25 down off the west coast of New Guinea and they sent us out to try to find the crew and the plane. And two of us went around, took four planes a flight, went around one side of the island and I went around the other side of the island. Harold Sloop, who was flying his flight, went around and got carried away, went way around and way around, went around southern New Guinea and was just completely lost. And the four of them ran out of fuel about two hundred miles from our base in Western New Guinea and they bellied in in a little island, in a little lagoon. All four of the 38s went in and landed in the water and they just swam ashore and they were there about ten days. And finally—

McIntosh: They always had radio contact, so they weren't really lost?

Starke: They were lost, yes.

McIntosh: They were lost as to where they were, but I mean, they had contact with somebody so people would come and get 'em?

Starke: No, they didn't, no.

McIntosh: How'd they find them?

Starke: The Navy PBYS went out searching. You know, the Navy patrol boats.

McIntosh: When a group of four is missing they are obviously looking.

Starke: Yes, and I told them where I had gone and what Harold had done and so they started plotting where he might have gone.

McIntosh: Plotting the same route?

Starke: Yeah, and they could see where he went around the southern end of New Guinea and finally several days later after miles and miles of searching they saw them and they flashed up with their mirrors. You know you had that mirror you could—

McIntosh: Yes.

Starke: They spotted them and went in and picked them up. But those four P38s are there today, I am sure, in that shallow water.

McIntosh: In the lagoon.

Starke: But of course that is salt water, salt water. I don't know what—

McIntosh: Erode?

Starke: Yeah. Yeah, so they're gone, yeah, but that's the only time that we had people lost through navigation.

McIntosh: Did you talk to those fellows much afterwards?

Starke: Oh yeah, he never lived it down.

McIntosh: What did they do?

Starke: They sent him down to Sydney, Australia.

McIntosh: I mean, how did they survive those four days?

Starke: It was a little island and there were coconuts on the island and I think they had some fishing gear and they caught fish. In our survival kit there was fishing hooks and things.

McIntosh: You had a knife.

Starke: Oh yes, you had a knife, you had a machete and all that stuff. They were doing just fine.

McIntosh: They each had a .45?

Starke: Yes, yeah, we each had our .45s.



McIntosh: Did you bring that home?

Starke: No, I should have.

McIntosh: I am sure some of them did.

Starke: I know they did, because when we get together they talk about it.

McIntosh: They confess?

Starke: Yeah, right. But I was so honest I turned mine in. So I've still got my leather holster that I had. We had 'em made down in New Zealand by a leather expert. They're beautiful, just hand made. Really nice.

McIntosh: I bet. The jacket, they didn't want that, you get to keep that?

Starke: I could keep the jacket, yeah.

McIntosh: Did you do any flying afterwards after you got out of the service?

Starke: No. I haven't flown since I parked that P30 out in the Philippines that morning when they said, "Bill, you're going home." I said, "That's it." You know, after a hundred twenty-one missions you figure, I figured I'd used it up and I was happy to go home in one piece.

McIntosh: Flying commercial doesn't bother you?

Starke: I love it. I love it.

McIntosh: It doesn't bring back anything serious?

Starke: Oh, I've flown a couple of times in little planes around Fort Atkinson just for fun.

McIntosh: How does that feel?

Starke: It feels great, comes right back, like a bicycle; once you learn it you never forget.

McIntosh: Oh, you flew it yourself?

Starke: Oh yeah, he let me take the controls, sure.

McIntosh: A Cessna or something like that?

Starke: Yeah, I think it was a Cessna. This was—oh, I don't think I'd want to do it today, but this was probably twenty years ago.

McIntosh: You still had some skills then.

Starke: Yes, right. [laughs] When I still had some reaction left.

McIntosh: That must have been pretty simple?

Starke: Oh yes, it came right back. It was fun. And now I would like to fly, I've got the urge again.

McIntosh: George Bush wanted to jump out of a plane.

Starke: I don't want to do that.

McIntosh: You'd think after he jumped out the first time he'd never want to.

Starke: That's right. I never had to bail out, never had to bail out. Yeah, came close, but never had to bail out. It was a marvelous experience.

McIntosh: Was it hard to get out of your cockpit?

Starke: Yes, it was always tricky with the 38s, you never—a lot of them would turn it over on their back and drop out.

McIntosh: The canopy wouldn't come off easily?

Starke: Oh yeah, it would, but you still had that horizontal stabilizer back there. And sometimes you might get excited, you got to hold the ripcord when you're going down the wing and you might jerk the ripcord and if you do the chute goes over the stabilizer and you go under the stabilizer. I saw one of our boys over in Borneo, exact thing happened to him. He went to bail out, and over and under. And he just rode it down. It was horrible to watch, terrible.

McIntosh: Did any of your mates get shot down?

Starke: Oh yes. Well, we lost forty-two pilots.

McIntosh: Out of?

Starke: Out of over, the two years, we were out there two and a half years. There were pilots—

McIntosh: The 44<sup>th</sup>?

Starke: This was the 44<sup>th</sup> Squadron. Yes, we had forty-two pilots shot down. It would have been—of course, you see, I didn't—the squadron started combat in January of 1943 at Guadalcanal, so I wasn't in the squadron then. I wasn't in the squadron, you had all those fellas coming and going all through 1943 and then I joined the squadron in December of 1943 and stayed on until May of '45. So we had pilots coming and going all that period. We lost forty-two pilots in that whole time period.

McIntosh: Any of these folks live around Wisconsin?

Starke: Not any more. There was one that lived in Milwaukee, but they're all on the west coast, it seems like, or Florida. A lot of them settle down in California, Oregon, and Washington. That's where most of them come from for the reunion, it's interesting. They're a great bunch of fellas.

McIntosh: So you talk to them frequently?

Starke: Oh yes. One of them, Kermit Tyler, Colonel Kermit Tyler, he was a second lieutenant December 7<sup>th</sup> out in Pearl Harbor. They had just gotten radar out in the Hawaiian Islands a few weeks before. Colonel Tyler was in the 44<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron as a second lieutenant and the CO, Major Burke, said, "Kermit, why don't you go to the new radar headquarters at"—I forget, one of the barracks—"and get acquainted." He said, "They have a big map room there, chart room and all that sort of thing, and get acquainted with it and see what's going on." So he went up the Wednesday before Pearl Harbor and went up at night. Not much was going on and he reported back. And then December 6<sup>th</sup> the major said, "Kermit, why don't you go up there, take the 4 o'clock shift, 4 a.m. until 8 o'clock, take that shift and see what goes on." So he did. That morning he was driving out to the headquarters with his Ford convertible and he had the local radio station on and they were playing Hawaiian music. Well, some days before he had been talking to a bomber pilot and the bomber pilot said whenever the B24s or B17s are flying in from San Francisco they play Hawaiian music so that they can tune in their radio compass and tune in from San Francisco they can pick up that radio signal and fly right on the radio signal. As he's driving out to the radar headquarters they are playing Hawaiian music so he said, "Oh, the B17s are on their way from San Francisco." So he got to the radar headquarters at 4 o'clock and sat around and not much was going on. At 7 o'clock these boys were up on the north end of Oahu running their radar screen, all of a sudden they saw a whole bunch of blips on their screen about a hundred-forty miles offshore. They said, "Boy, we'd better call this in; I've never seen so many dots before." So they called it in. There was supposed to be a major there at 7 o'clock; the major was not there. Kermit was the only officer on board at that time, second lieutenant, who knew nothing about the radar

operation. The telephone operator said, "Lieutenant, I've got a call here from some fellas manning this radar screen." So he gave it to Kermit. Kermit listened to him and he said, "Sir, we've got a lot of planes spotted about a hundred and thirty-eight miles off shore." And Kermit thought B17s. He said, "That's okay, that's okay, think nothing of it, it's all right." This was at 7 o'clock in the morning; the Japs hit at 8 o'clock or a couple minutes after. Kermit got into hot water over that. He was flown to Washington and they had a Congressional investigation and when he told his whole story they excused him. They could understand because he had not been told anything about the possible Japanese operations that were going on, because there were rumors that the Japanese had a fleet somewhere out in the Pacific and things were going on, but the admirals had not let it filter down to the lower echelons, so nobody had a clue about what was going on.

McIntosh: They knew nothing?

Starke: They knew nothing. So when he explained his story the Congressional committee—

McIntosh: This man's name was Kermit?

Starke: Kermit Tyler, and he became our squadron leader.

McIntosh: He is well known.

Starke: He was our squadron commander.

McIntosh: He was written up as the one guy who could have done something.

Starke: Who might have. Of course you have to remember, all the planes had all the ammunition taken out, all the fuel was taken out, and they were lined up wingtip to wingtip because—

McIntosh: They weren't ready to fly at all?

Starke: They were not ready to fly, because they were more concerned about sabotage than they were about an aerial attack.

McIntosh: There was no fuel and no ammunition in any of those planes?

Starke: That's right.

McIntosh: It wouldn't have made any difference.

Starke: No, that's it, and that's when he explained the whole story, they said—

McIntosh: Well that responsibility goes beyond him.

Starke: That's right. Yes, and here I read that "Congress is excusing Admiral Kimmel and Short for the things they did that week and that should never happen. They were guilty, they were extremely guilty."

McIntosh: Even though the State Department was sort of lax in there?

Starke: Yes, yeah, that's right.

McIntosh: Put them on a war footing but they never beyond that sort of a vague statement.

Starke: Yes. In the Hawaiian Islands it was sabotage because forty percent of the Island was Japanese. They were more concerned about sabotage of the planes from the Japanese who lived there.

McIntosh: So how do you explain Douglas MacArthur, eight hours after the attack not doing anything with those P17s?

Starke: Oh yeah, that was inexcusable.

McIntosh: And then they gave him a Congressional Medal of Honor.

Starke: Yeah, yup, terrible.

McIntosh: That's the worst injustice in my mind of the entire war.

Starke: Yeah, that's true.

McIntosh: He should have been court-martialed instead of being given the medal like that.

Starke: Those 17s should have been flown out of there.

McIntosh: Take them to Formosa or anything. He had a mental block.

Starke: Yeah. What was he thinking? What could he have been possibly thinking?

McIntosh: I can't imagine what could have been going on in his mind. **[End of Tape One, Side Two]** No one ever really seriously questioned him. I think they were afraid of him, so they never—

Starke: Oh yes, he was domineering, Dugout Doug.

McIntosh: Well, I have come to the end of my questions.

Starke: It was interesting.

McIntosh: Unless you can think of some more stories that you haven't mentioned. Anything that was different or unusual?

Starke: Well, I told you about Lindbergh, which I thought was marvelous, 'cause it probably saved a lot of our lives and he saved a lot of B24 lives 'cause those crews were getting hammered every day.

McIntosh: That was a tough airplane. My friends who flew the 17s said, "I don't see how anyone would fly one of those 24s." They thought they were flying deathtraps. They did not have a good reputation. They were easy to shoot down.

Starke: But they were also going on some pretty terrible missions.

McIntosh: Well, they were good for long distance; because they can fly so far so they were very valuable.

Starke: Yes.

McIntosh: Most of them were in the South Pacific, as compared to—

Starke: Right, the 24s that flew over to the oil wells in Yugoslavia. Terrible mission, they were right down on the deck and it was just—

McIntosh: They had no chance.

Starke: No, terrible.

McIntosh: Either from the planes or from the ground.

Starke: Yes, you were just a victim.

McIntosh: I think it's probably a low point in the Army/Air Force [inaudible].

Starke: Yes. And the daylight missions. Daylight missions over Europe.

McIntosh: There really was no chance for those fellas at all.

Starke: No, no. Because at that time they didn't have fire cover to take 'em to Berlin and things like that. Yeah. It was terrible.

McIntosh: All right sir, I think that will do us.

Starke:        Alright.

McIntosh:     I thank you kindly.

Starke:        I went on and on, I hope—

McIntosh:     That's just what I wanted. You did just what I wanted you to.

Starke:        Okay.

McIntosh:     I appreciate it.

**[End of Interview]**