

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RAYMOND STRASSMAN
Bomber Pilot, Army Air Force, World War II
1999

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Strassman, Raymond. (1924-2003). Oral History Interview, 1999.

Master Copy: 1 video recording (ca. 45 min.); ½ inch, color.

User Copy: 1 audio cassette (ca. 45 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Raymond Strassman, a Verona (Wisconsin) native, talks about his World War II service with the Army Air Force in the Pacific theater as a member of the 400th Bomb Squad, 90th Bomb Group, 5th Air Force. He mentions basic training at Greensboro (North Carolina), radio school, serving as a radio instructor, volunteering for overseas duty, and gunnery school at Yuma (Arizona). Strassman discusses crew assignment, bombing runs in a B24 aircraft, and the differences between a B27 and B17. Stationed at Mindoro Island, he mentions flying in group formation, bombing Hong Kong, encounters with anti-aircraft fire, and the mission where his unit lost a plane. Strassman comments on rest and relaxation in Australia, seeing Bob Hope and Frances Langford in a USO show, and ship ride back to the United States. Strassman also mentions visiting the family of a friend who went missing in action.

Biographical Sketch:

Raymond Strassman was born in 1924 in Verona (Wisconsin) and was drafted in 1943. He was sent to basic training in Greensboro (North Carolina) and was then trained as a bomber pilot. Strassman was sent to the South Pacific and flew forty missions before the war ended. He returned to the United States and went to the University of Madison, where he met his wife and became an architectural draftsman.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999

Transcribed by Craig Penkert, 2010

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: Okay. Here we go. Now, your unit was—the official—

Strassman: 400th Squadron. [400th Bombardment Squadron]

McIntosh: 4-0-0?

Strassman: 4-0-0.

McIntosh: 400th?

Strassman: Squadron. 90th Bomb Group. 5th Air Force.

McIntosh: You were born when, Ray?

Strassman: May 13th, 1924.

McIntosh: Where?

Strassman: 75 [years old].

McIntosh: Where?

Strassman: What?

McIntosh: Where?

Strassman: Oh, Verona, Wisconsin.

McIntosh: You entered military service?

Strassman: 1943, April.

McIntosh: You volunteered?

Strassman: Ah, no. I was drafted.

McIntosh: And where did you go?

Strassman: I went to Fort Sheridan. Is that what you want to know?

McIntosh: Let's go [inaudible] in order.

Strassman: Yeah, I went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and at that time, ah, they were looking for Air Force personnel, and they picked certain guys. I'd had

some college behind me. I think that's the only reason I got picked. There were other guys just as qualified as I. And, ah, we passed this test, and I ended up in the Air Forces. I was headin' for the infantry at Fort Sheridan. And that's how I got into the Air Forces.

McIntosh: And so they sent you where?

Strassman: To Greensboro, North Carolina for basic training center. Basic Training Center #10. I had six weeks of basic training there, and then I got shipped to radio school at Scott Field, Illinois and, ah, I had five months of radio training there, code and mechanics. And after I graduated--by the way this was a two year course--

McIntosh: In probably six weeks?

Strassman: The Army pushed together into five months, and, ah, after that I was an instructor for a little while, a code instructor. But I didn't like teaching so then I volunteered for flight. I wanted to fly. Get on a bomber. From there I went to, ah, gunnery school in Yuma, Arizona. And I don't know how many weeks that was, but after that we were sent to [inaudible] where we had flight training. We met our crew; our crew got together. And, ah, if we weren't compatible we were washed out, put on another crew, whatever, you know. But that's where the crews were formed—flight training together on a B-24.

McIntosh: But then--from there where did you go?

Ray: From there, ah, we went to [inaudible] California for overseas. It was a POE [port of embarkation] center for the Air Corps people. Quite awhile before they put us on a C-54 [transport plane] and flew us over to Nadzab, New Guinea. I had no idea, in my mind, where that was. And we didn't know when we took off we could only open up the orders after we got on a plane. So we got over there, Nadzab, New Guinea, we got started bombing targets. Practice like, (??) might say, the first couple of missions. There is a lot of this I probably don't remember.

McIntosh: What sort (??)—

Strassman: It's a long ways off.

McIntosh: If the details are—just your experience. That's what I want.

Strassman: Well, it's a—from there, from Nadzab, New Guinea, we went to ah, an island—archipelago group, British East Indies, the island of Biak, and we flew out of there and were hitting southern Luzon in the Philippines, targets in southern Luzon. From there, ah, from Biak we got transferred to

the island of Mindoro, which is in the Philippines, a one hour (??) flight from Clark Field in the Philippines, which is a major airport in the Philippines. We finished up the rest of—well, we flew our missions most of them finished that I had done up to that point. I got up—I had forty, and then we were supposed to fly fifty.

McIntosh: That was standard?

Strassman: That was standard before you got the same home (??)—

McIntosh: Was that the same plane at the time?

Strassman: No, no. That was different airplanes. We did not get assigned to the same airplane. Every time we went off to the line, or briefed—

McIntosh: You didn't know what airplane you were going to get.

Strassman: We didn't know what airplane we were going to get.

McIntosh: Did your pilot know?

Strassman: Oh, yes. He had us going over everything with a fine tooth comb.

McIntosh: [inaudible] totally equipped to do it (??)—

Strassman: All my radio equipment—why, he'd knock on another doggone airplane—didn't care what mechanics said.

McIntosh: He checked it.

Strassman: He checked everything. He didn't like that. He wished he could be assigned to one plane.

McIntosh: Right, but then you had to recheck everything.

Strassman: We did toward the end of our missions. We only flew forty because the war ended. We didn't get to fifty. And, uh, toward the end we did get our own plane. A pretty brand new Model J. It wasn't the one (??) we were supposed to. Most of the B-24s went to the South Pacific rather (??) quickly so they had a lot of miles on. But we finally got a good one, and Red got bumped because he became CO [Commanding Officer], and he pulled a few strings and he got (??) a regular plane all the time, maybe the last ten missions. Went on for like missions, and the war ended. They started processing everybody to go home. They didn't waste no time. We shipped out of there to Clark Field in Manila and then our banana boat which was one of the Liberty ships. Which, ah, I always flew everything

in the United States. When we trained in the United States I flew. Every place I flew but there they put us on a banana boat, and that was a Liberty ship that rocked like a son of a gun in the ocean. And I was sick for the first three days. I might have had 1,500 hours flying time by that time; never got sick, but I got on that boat, and I was sicker than a dog right away. For three days. I kinda got over it, but they had medicine for it, but it didn't work with me. It helped some of the guys. So we just stayed top deck the whole time. So we could do what you had to do, and then we'd feel good. Well, that's about it. And landed in the United States, 1945. The war was over—June or July? And I was there. November 1st of that year I was out, eight (??) months later.

McIntosh: Okah. Now, we have to backtrack here. Your training was adequate at Scott Field and--

Strassman: Oh, very good, except, you know--

McIntosh: The way you'd been trained you found it to be the way you found it?

Strassman: Oh, yeah.

McIntosh: In addition to your radio you would've had to learn a gun, too.

Strassman: Oh, yeah. That's why I got it at Yuma, Arizona Gunnery School.

McIntosh: How was that?

Strassman: That was very good, too. I enjoyed that immensely. Some of the particulars of that—well, I knew how to handle a gun. I was not afraid of a gun. My dad was a hunter, and he took us kids with us, and he taught us how to use them, and we went hunting, and after we were 12 years old I got a gun. I used it after that. Before that I was just his wrangler (??) or his dog wrangler (??). But, ah, so I had no problem with gunnery school.

McIntosh: Right. But did they not tell you to use it until you were in the air?

Strassman: Oh, absolutely.

McIntosh: Tell me about some of your missions, how they were different or dangerous or something.

Strassman: Well, that's the kind of stuff I really about forgot. Haven't thought about for so many years to try to relate to one particular incident. I don't think I can.

McIntosh: Did you fly in a big group?

Strassman: We flew in a group of about six bombers. And the group had twenty-four in the group, so it was four groups of six. That's usually the way we flew, and we stuck together as close as we could. And we really formed this over the target. We'd come in for quite a few minutes over the target in this group, and same way out. And everybody followed the lead ship because the ack-ack [antiaircraft artillery] was bad. As soon as we dropped our bombs many times Red would peel it off to the left, and we would lose altitude fast. And the rest of the group would follow. The only thing that I can--

McIntosh: You usually bombed at what height?

Strassman: Oh, ten thousand feet. There was a few times when we bombed at twenty-five to thirty thousand, but not very often. Those were bomb runs to China. Hong Kong, China. There was a seaport over there that was completely taken over by the Japanese. And, uh, they had a lot of supplies. It was supply center for the Japanese. And, ah, we tried to cripple that supply center so that they couldn't take care of their troops. And that was infested with ack-ack, and they were very good. We'd be at twenty-eight to thirty thousand—the [inaudible] was right out there in front of ya.

McIntosh: Did you lose a lot of planes?

Strassman: Uh, we only got hit once in our plane. We had to land, emergency.

McIntosh: Where? In a different field?

Strassman: No, no. Coming back we made it all the way back. We had four engines going, but we were crippled. The only people that got hurt in our crew was—well, they didn't get hurt on the run. Back--they got sick, and they didn't fly with us guys for two, three days 'cause we flew one day, we rested one day. Every other day you flew, no matter what day it was, Saturday or Sunday--

McIntosh: Any kind of (??) weather?

Strassman: Weather? That hardly ever stopped us. It had to be really terrible if they were gonna stop us. And that just didn't occur. I thought it was terrible, and we took off anyway.

McIntosh: [laughs] They didn't ask you?

Strassman: No, I saw--because of weather conditions I saw the bomber ahead of us blow up into smithereens, and we were right behind--

McIntosh: From lightning?

Strassman: Ah, I don't think it was lightning. Red was CO at the time when we first caught it (??), and he determined that it was fumes in the bomb bay. So he gave an order to which he cracked the bomb bay eight inches on each side of the catwalk. There is ventilation there because everything was electrically, hydraulically operated, and there were sparks in there.

McIntosh: That would do it, wouldn't it?

Strassman: So you had to have plenty of ventilation, open up the back hatch, out the waist windows then--ventilation on that takeoff.

McIntosh: And you carried what kind of bombs? Usually 500s?

Strassman: Ah, no. A lot of hundred pounders. We had 500s, too. But that was the most I ever knew of, size-wise.

McIntosh: And incendiaries?

Strassman: Pardon?

McIntosh: Incendiary bombs?

Strassman: No. Never was or use incendiary, no. They did I imagine, but not where I was.

McIntosh: Any way you gained (??) contact by radio with whom (??)?

Strassman: Home base. I would have to phone in a strike report after I got the information from the navigator. Of course, I knew pretty well at the time. The radio operator worked with the navigator. I would get tips this way (??) with my radio, and I made up (??) practice courses and stuff like that. We worked together.

McIntosh: And a usual mission was how long? How far--

Strassman: Ah, six to eight hours, but there was a lot of them that got into ten and twelve. And that was when we went to Hong Kong, flying the coast.

McIntosh: From?

Strassman: Mindoro in the Philippines across China Bay.

McIntosh: That's quite a stretch.

Strassman: Oh, that's a good stretch. It was a good six hours one way.

McIntosh: What about Japanese fighters?

Strassman: Ah, we had fighters frequently. They weren't really that much of a test. They'd come through our flights and break through the center (??) and everybody would be shooting like mad at 'em. A few times we got 'em, but nobody knew who got 'em because everybody—we had this six—everybody was firing, and we had these six airplanes in a group.

McIntosh: [laughs] And all these [gun]ports in each airplane.

Strassman: And we were only concerned about stopping about him, keeping him away from us. Ah, I can't say that fighters were that deadly in the South Pacific. We had P-51 [long range fighter plane] cover most of the time.

McIntosh: Oh, you did?

Strassman: Yes, we did. I got pictures from a P-40 [fighter plane] cover, too.

McIntosh: The P-40s could keep up with you? How'd (??) they do that?

Strassman: Ah, they would only be over the targets. And the P-51s would most of the time, we'd meet them at the rendezvous point. That was a few minutes away from the target.

McIntosh: Well, that's comforting.

Strassman: Yeah. Oh, I loved to see those guys, and when they intervened there'd be [inaudible]. They never really gave us a bad time. They fly through all the time. And you can't be effective when you fly through them, a group of bombers. You gotta nail one right down, and then you might knock them out.

McIntosh: I see. And that was a Japanese mistake perhaps.

Strassman: Yes, yes. That was a Zero—Jap Zero [long range fighter plane]. They couldn't begin to maneuver like a P-51. They might sound more capable depending upon the pilot, but the P-51 was faster.

McIntosh: The problem with the Japanese is, of course, is they didn't—they kept their pilots flying. They didn't bring 'em back to teach new guys. In their air force you flew until you got killed or the war was over.

Strassman: That's right.

McIntosh: And no parachutes.

Strassman: Is that right? I didn't know that. Well, I heard too that they were poorly, toward the end especially, were very poorly trained. If they could get the thing off the ground they were gone. That's the way they went. If they got in a tight squeeze or a dogfight, they didn't know what was going on.

McIntosh: They weren't well taught. The good pilots, they were killed.

Strassman: Yeah, that's correct.

McIntosh: They should have brought back, you know, half of them and trained the others.

Strassman: Yes.

McIntosh: [inaudible].

Strassman: See, we did that, you know.

McIntosh: Oh, of course.

Strassman: Yeah. If the war had been over, I'm sure that I'd have been training in radio school somewhere teaching because I had some teaching experience at Scott Field in radio school. I know that's what they were after.

McIntosh: I have a good friend of mine who went through school at Scott Field. He went to Italy, shot down in Italy.

Strassman: Uh huh. Fortunately we never got--we made one bad landing. We lost a copilot because he had to catch up on hours (??) so we could go home together. That was the idea, keep the same amount of missions so we could go together as a crew go home, and, ah, he was behind so he got another crew. They took off one very stormy morning. I don't know why in heavens name operations would even put that plane in the air, but he went up and they never heard from him after that.

McIntosh: You never heard anything?

Strassman: Amazing. We spent three days in the air looking for them, but we thought they should have been by that time--nothing. I got letters in there from his mother. She wrote to my mother, and she wanted to know, "If Raymond had heard from or given any information about Mac." He and I were pretty good buddies. He was an officer. I was a staff sergeant. We

weren't supposed to fraternize, but we did. So she called. My mother didn't know anything, and I couldn't tell her anything either.

McIntosh: Okay. Now tell me about the two weeks of in Australia.

Strassman: Talk about that?

McIntosh: How did you get—earn that?

Strassman: You finish, ah, half your missions, twenty-five. That was supposed to be half. But, you know—

McIntosh: And then you earned that—

Strassman: Two weeks of R&R, rest and recuperation.

McIntosh: In Australia?

Strassman: In Australia, Sydney, right. Yeah, they had a place down there for you and everything. It was all set up.

McIntosh: Is this from the Philippines or from somewhere else?

Strassman: This one was from the Philippines. Right. By that time I had twenty-five missions in.

McIntosh: So that was an enjoyable experience, I imagine.

Strassman: Oh, yes. It really was. Ah, there were an awful lot of things I liked about Sydney. I always wanted to go back there. We made an awful lot of trips in our day all over the United States and in Europe, but Marilyn couldn't see going to Australia. That's 10,000 miles away. Yeah. It's just too far, and she wouldn't probably be that interested anyway.

McIntosh: It would mean a great deal more to you.

Strassman: Yes.

McIntosh: Did they have a nice setup for the GIs there?

Strassman: Yes, they did. Yes, they did.

McIntosh: Put you up in a hotel?

Strassman: Ah, no, we had to get our own places, but they had a list of places to go to.

McIntosh: Hotels?

Strassman: No, not hotels. Private residences.

McIntosh: Oh, now tell me about this. This is different now.

Strassman: Ya. Jake Stahl. Ah, I got his picture here [shows picture]. He and I stayed--we got our own apartments. We it through references at the, ah, center where we meet. We could stay there and visit. They had to bring girls in for dancing, and they had a pool table and all of that stuff. But we went off our own so we took a couple of references of private residences, places for rent, and that's what we did. We had our own two bedroom apartment—

McIntosh: How nice!

Strassman: With a kitchenette and--

McIntosh: Those people must have treated you very well.

Strassman: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes, the people were fine. Yeah. There was a few. I had a girlfriend down there. That picture is in here too. Her father didn't like us because—I told him [inaudible], "I've got nothin' against you, Mr. Mitchell. Why is it you show this prejudice against me?" He says, "You guys got too much money, and you blow it all like crazy, and you wreck the women in this town."

McIntosh: Just like in England. [Laughs]

Strassman: [laughs] I'd always make 'em—

McIntosh: They were afraid it was [inaudible] over here.

Strassman: I was makin' a heck of a lot more than any of their soldiers were.

McIntosh: But his daughter was charming.

Strassman: Pardon?

McIntosh: His daughter was charming.

Strassman: [Excitedly] Oh, yes. Yeah. Peggy. Ohhh, yeah [both laugh]. Yeah, I went out to the house. I'd visit there.

McIntosh: Do you communicate with her at all?

Strassman: No. I never did. No.

McIntosh: You never--even after you left that—

Strassman: No.

McIntosh: You never--

Strassman: No. It was just a friendship and a date. Then I got to know parents. Mr. Mitchell had a brother that had a ranch out a ways. Took me out there, a sheep ranch. So I got that experience. But, ah—they were—I felt as though they were very good to me. We had a place, an island, peninsula like, out from in the town, in the city rather. That's a city, believe me. I rode for a half an hour on a trolley to get to Peg's house. They were on the outskirts of town.

McIntosh: Oh, you didn't meet her at the center?

Strassman: Yeah, I met at the center. Right. And then there was another place we used to go, her and I. A big dance hall. Boy, that was really quite a place, called the Torcadero.

McIntosh: Did any of these guys that you knew marry those girls?

Strassman: Yeah, I guess one. He was on this ranch that Mr. Mitchell took us to. He had gone AWOL [absence without leave], and he had no reason to go back.

McIntosh: He's American?

Strassman: Yeah, American, and he married this girl and stayed in Australia. He was one of the first ones to get over there.

McIntosh: The Americans didn't ask to have him sent back then?

Strassman: No. They couldn't find him. They didn't know where he was. As far as I know he is still a citizen of Australia.

McIntosh: He [inaudible].

Strassman: That's correct. He intended to. He married the girl. He was working on this ranch, and he intended to. He had no intentions of going back. He said he had nothing back. He come from Arkansas.

McIntosh: I see.

Strassman: He had nothin' [inaudible].

McIntosh: Tell me some more here. Tell about when the USO [United Service Organizations] visited you. Where was that?

Strassman: Ah, well, there was—that center had a USO area in Sydney, Australia. They were very good about helping, too. Those were usually the people that were giving you this information. It wasn't Aussies or people. It was the USO within this center giving me information like these rooms that were for rent. We had to pay the rent so I didn't want to go to a hotel. I figured I could get a room out someplace. Jake did too, and we shared it, the rent. I don't remember what it was, but it wasn't bad. It couldn't have been too bad.

McIntosh: At you base in the Philippines, you said you saw the USO there?

Strassman: Yeah, we were based at the Philippines at Isle of Mindoro for quite awhile.

McIntosh: And who visited you there with a USO show?

Strassman: Oh! Yes, we had USO groups there. The only one I can remember—it didn't have a big name like Bob Hope's gang, which was at the end of the island of Biak in Netherlands, East Indies. We had, ah, a group of magicians that came in one time. I remember that distinctly because this guy--it was hotter than heck, and this guy could take a towel (??) [laughs] and hypnotize them and then tell him that he was facing death (??) and he was cold, and he'd be shaking like a son of a gun. I was in the front row, and I went up there. I wanted to touch him, and he was cold [laughs]! Here it was hotter than heck!

McIntosh: Did you ever see Bob Hope over there?

Strassman: Yes, I did.

McIntosh: Where was that?

Strassman: It was the island of Biak. That's where I danced with Martha Tilton [American popular singer, best known for her 1939 recording of *And The Angels Sing* with Benny Goodman].

McIntosh: Martha Tilton?

Strassman: Martha Tilton was there.

McIntosh: Oh, gee. I really—I admired her when I was in high school when she was singing for Benny Goodman.

Strassman: Yeah.

McIntosh: Was she pleasant and nice?

Strassman: Yeah, and there was another girl who was with Bob Hope, too. A shorter girl, dark haired girl, but I can't remember her name. She went many, many times with Bob Hope. She was like Frances Langford [American popular singer and entertainer on radio and TV and in movies]. Of course Frances Langford was there, too.

McIntosh: Oh, yes. Well, that was Bob Hope's live in—

Strassman: [inaudible]

McIntosh: Yeah, they had a thing--

Strassman: Oh, okay. Yeah, 'cause she always was with him. I even got a tape on all that stuff at home where they talk about their experiences on the road all during the war. Bob Hope, his guitar player, he always had his guitar player with him. He said, "I couldn't sing without that guy [laughs]." His And then Frances Langford, and it was fun to listen to 'em talk about their old times. They told about some of their experiences, too, where they had some narrow escapes going to different islands in the South Pacific. It was mostly about—well, there was narrowing European [inaudible], too. He had all the better ones I guess listed on the tape.

Jim Did you run into the Salvation Army at any time?

Strassman: No, I didn't.

McIntosh: Red Cross?

Strassman: Red Cross, yeah.

McIntosh: They were at your base?

Strassman: They were at Mindoro for awhile. And then I—always at Clark Field in the Philippines. The one thing I remember about them, I wish I'd have never got started, it took me twenty-five years to quit. They gave away cigarettes, free [laughs]. That didn't help me tryin' to control that habit 'cause I wasn't a smoker in high school. I started in service. That I remember about them. But they were pretty good. They always had

information for you. All you wanted to know, there was always somebody there to help you.

McIntosh: Back to the airplane now. Tell me about again about why you thought to B-24 was better than the B-17.

Strassman: Well, first of all, it was a long-range bomber. It'd fly for twelve hours without refueling. It would have a bomb bay tank in it to do that, which was in the bomb bay area of the plane. It had four engines. It could fly on the two inboard engines. We could have the outboard engines out, and it could fly with two engines on the inboard. We'd lose altitude but very slowly. A good pilot could keep it up there flyin' right for a long, long time. So you could—if you knew where land was you could get—if you gotta down on water it would be near land. That was the big thing. It landed real slow. It was easy to land. I had to land it once. Red made us—engineer Schwartz and I—an emergency land that plane once. Take out--

McIntosh: They weren't teachin' then (??).

Strassman: Teach us. And then we had—he did it a couple of times. He'd show us what the procedure was, and then we had to do it. Up, one circle around, and come in for a landing. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** Coming up off was not a problem. Comin' in we bounced a little bit, but Red was satisfied. He said, "You'll be all right."

McIntosh: Just enough [laughs].

Strassman: To get close enough. The interesting thing that I found out [inaudible] was that the altimeters at that time did not register below 100 feet. So that dead reckoning and your perception of depth was what made you land that airplane after that. And, ah, we may have [inaudible] started the first and then I did it. I'm sure glad I never had to do it in an emergency.

McIntosh: They seem that—statistically they seem to be easier to shoot down than the B-17.

Strassman: That might be true. They're bigger, bulkier, but they were quite maneuverable for their size. And then they got an awful big tail that they could shoot the devil out of. I would say valid (??) to a fighter, we were very more vulnerable.

McIntosh: Bigger target.

Strassman: Well, you gotta remember this now. I just thought of it. They called it “The Flying Coffin.” But that’s not why—the reason they called it “The Flying Coffin”—it had a history of blowin’ up on takeoff.

McIntosh: Oh.

Strassman: And I think—

McIntosh: Was that because of the extra gas tank underneath the bomb bay?

Strassman: We had an extra gas tank in the bomb bay, and they had all our [inaudible] pumps in the bomb bay. The contact places produce sparks. I think that my first pilot was the guy that solved that problem in our squadron. I don’t know what they did in other squadrons, but it was solved in our squadron, and he became CO because they never had a problem after that when they opened up the bomb bay on takeoff.

McIntosh: So those fumes were vented (??).

Strassman: Yup. So there was plenty of air going through. The fumes were cleaned out. It was a little harder to get the plane off the ground because you had that extra drag, but it didn’t blow up.

McIntosh: [inaudible]

Strassman: Uh, it was easy to land. I think that we were going maybe about 100 to 120 miles an hour. That was slow [both laugh]. You didn’t move the stick very much. It was fast enough where you had to be very careful—or not stick. We had a wheel.

McIntosh: When you were out of the service, did you keep in contact with your mates?

Strassman: No. Not until the engineer Schwartz in 1985 contacted me. That’s when—

McIntosh: So from ’45 to ’85, for forty years you had zero contact?

Strassman: Right. Zero contact and a couple of years before that members of the 400th had started this reunion thing, and that’s when everybody started getting in contact with each other. But before that no one ever had.

McIntosh: And now you have a yearly reunion?

Strassman: Yearly reunions, yes.

McIntosh: Do you enjoy those?

Strassman: Oh, yes. Yes. They're getting a little tougher now, though, because we can't find people capable of putting them on in a different city of people that are from that city who were in the 5th Air Force 90th Bomb Group. This one coming up is in Colorado City, Colorado. Now, I don't know if I'll go to that one or not. It's pretty hard—far to drive. I'd have to fly.

McIntosh: It's easy to get there in a plane.

Strassman: Yeah. Last one I was at—not the Lincoln, Nebraska—where Father Flanagan had his—

McIntosh: Omaha.

Strassman: Where?

McIntosh: Omaha.

Strassman: Omaha, where was it at Omaha. And I sat in the lobby there watching the guys come in. They were coming in with wheelchairs. Carts with oxygen on. Oh, man, I tell ya—

McIntosh: Depressing?

Strassman: It was an awful lot of that. I was using a cane to walk, but I was there, right, and I didn't have any other problems, you know.

McIntosh: Well, these are WWII veterans that they're just now getting—

Strassman: Yeah.

McIntosh: You're in that age group now.

Strassman: Yeah, yeah. So the last one I was at was at Omaha, Nebraska. That was a dandy because, uh—well, part of their—they had tours, and the tours were excellent. And one of the tours was to go to Father Flanagan's Boys Town. All I ever about all my life was Boys Town. My dad was not a philanthropist or a very "give away money" man. But every year he gave a chunk to Boys Town. He never missed, whatever he could afford. That's the way. He talked about him all the time, too. So it was something for me to see what I had never seen before. I'd heard about it all my life.

McIntosh: What medals did you earn?

Strassman: Air Medal with ah, four stars on it. I don't know how they [inaudible] that. Every 100 hours of combat? Yeah, something like that.

McIntosh: I see.

Strassman: 400 hours of combat.

McIntosh: Tell me about the mission where you had trouble landing.

Strassman: Well, it happened when we, ah, went out to look for Mac, our copilot, when he got lost. Took off that morning in a storm and never found him again. We went, ah, [inaudible] and I, the navigator were working together because to carry our direction back set heading because we had turned the plane several times. We were all over water. There is no dead reckoning spots to figure out where the devil you are. So—he knew pretty well where he was, but he kept saying, “Geez, I hope I’m right. You know, I hope I’m right.” Well, he stopped talkin’—

McIntosh: You hoped, too.

Strassman: We hoped, too. He’d give me—he’d grin a little bit, But, anyway, we finally saw the lights. It was getting dark. It was—saw the lights of the strip. They had flares out, that’s what it was. Oh, we felt real good about that. Then they started putting the landing gear down, and one wheel wouldn’t come down. So then we quick went to the mechanical. We could wind it down. I was down there trying to get that thing wound down, and I was spinnin’ it like crazy, and it was coming pretty hard. I got it down, but then it missed the lock. You could see it’s locked by looking out the base in the back of the plane from the waist window, and you see a yellow block. When you see that yellow block it’s locked. Well, I backed it up and bring it down so the weight of the wheel would make it lock. We circled around a couple times fiddling around with that, and, ah, then one engine ran out of gas. Favor of the Lord it was an outside one. That wasn’t a problem. Red could handle that easily with two inside and one outside. And we finally went around, and by golly after about four tries I got that yellow block to show after I wound it down. And we went in on a landing, and we came in all right. It was not a crash landing, but it could have been. The wheel held. I could see the yellow so I figured it was locked, but we didn’t know. Red even put it on one wheel sort of. It came down lightly on the other one. That guy was good. I swear that’s the reason I’m here today [laughs]. He was a good pilot and thorough.

McIntosh: Where did he go after the war? Did he continue flying?

Strassman: He stayed in the service for a long time. Ah, he probably would have made his—he flew the “Hump” in Europe later on bringing supplies to the Russians and West Germany, flying supplies to West Germany. So he stayed in. He got about, oh, ten, twelve years in, I think. His wife just

didn't like this setup at all, and if he was going to maintain his family he had to quit. Well, the man was a mechanical engineer graduate. So he had a profession, and he quit then and went to—

McIntosh: Did you use any your GI benefits after you got out of service?

Strassman: No, I never knew quite why. At \$54 a month for one year I had plenty.

McIntosh: Until we got out of the—

Strassman: I took—well, I took—yeah, I didn't take advantage of that, but I took advantage of college. Right.

McIntosh: Oh, then you did take advantage of—

Strassman: Yeah, yeah that part I did, yeah.

McIntosh: Sure, when you found something you probably wanted to learn.

Strassman: Yeah, yeah.

McIntosh: That was great, great [inaudible].

Strassman: Well, then I met my wife. In those days there were very few kids that would stay in college if they were married or were gonna get married. Later on they did, but not when I was there.

McIntosh: Where did you go?

Strassman: University of Wisconsin. I only finished up one year, and ah, so I got married, and then I figured time to go to work. That's what I did. I had some experience on the drawing board but I ended bein' an architectural draftsman.

McIntosh: All right. Anything else you can think of? Bad? Any interesting experiences that you might have forgotten?

Strassman: I have relatives in Mississippi. This is the state that the copilot who got killed, or missing was from. Merigold, Mississippi, a little town. Mack was a guy that had a good sense of humor. That's one of the things I liked about him. He's always joking and joking. He always used to tell us about his little town of Merigold where they owned most of the town or ran the town. Well, Mack was such a joker that we just kind of chuckled and laughed like about the rest of his stuff. Never paid any attention to it. Well, in the process of visiting relatives in Mississippi I stopped in Merigold one time. He had a brother living yet. I located him. It was just

a little town so it wasn't too difficult. He was extremely glad to see me. He knew about me because Mack and I had been pretty close. He told his mother. His mother told his brother and so on. But to meet that guy, afterwards—this was quite a few years later, but he told me it took ten years before the Army officially notified them that he was missing in action, and they had considered that's what happened. That was it. That was the end. Ten years he said they wondered. Then of course I told my experience when we went out looking for him and how long—what it took and what had really happened. They didn't really know what had happened. All they had was "Missing in Action."

McIntosh: When you were out looking for him, did fly across the water and look for pieces of airplane?

Strassman: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, including—

McIntosh: What, at 500 feet?

Strassman: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I think maybe a time or two we were quite closer than that. Oh, yeah. Yeah, never very high. We were low most of the time.

McIntosh: And how far out did you go?

Strassman: Just one area, say 150 miles in diameter.

McIntosh: I see.

Strassman: They figured when the storm was the most intensified that's where something would have happened. That's how they—operations officer told us. They figured out where to look. But, man, it was just water. To me it meant nothin'. I mean, there were no sides, no top, just water on the bottom. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. But they did spend three days. And we weren't the only plane. There were five or six other planes out on the same duty. These people were very appreciative, I'll tell you that. And this was a long, long time afterwards, like twenty-five years. And when I walked in there it was just like I knew him. He looked like Mack. He didn't have his personality, but it looked like him and very much interested. He was an artist. He sold pottery stuff. He made pottery. His wife was an artist. She had beautiful pictures to sell. His pottery was really something. In fact, he gave one to Marilyn. She was eyein' a cute little, shiny pottery [inaudible] hard faced finish on it. It looked prettier than heck (??). He gave that to her for a present.

McIntosh: Oh, that was nice.

Strassman: Well, that's an experience from my war days, but it happened twenty-five years after the fact.

McIntosh: Oh, still interesting.

Strassman: Yeah.

[End of Interview]