

**William B. Harris
Veteran**

**Michael Russert
Wayne Clark
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on March 20, 2003, 10:30 AM
The Comfort Inn
Brooklyn, New York**

Q: This is an interview with William Harris in The Comfort Inn, Brooklyn New York. Uh, the 20th of March 2003.

WH: It's my 55th wedding anniversary.

Q: Is it? Congratulations.

WH: It's why I'm dressed. Going out to dinner.

Q: It's 10:30 AM. The interviewers are Michael Russert and Wayne Clark. Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth?

WH: Well my full name is William Borland Harris. B-O-R-L-A-N-D, it's a family name. I was born in Glasgow, Scotland at 39 Brandon Street in Glasgow March the 6th 1918

Q: Okay. And, um, when did you come to the United States?

WH: Uh, we came to the United States in November of 1924.

Q: Ok what was your education prior to entering Military service?

WH: I uh, I had High School and I had about three years of the American Institute of Banking at night while I was working at a bank in New York City.

Q: Where were you and what do you remember about your reaction to the news about Pearl Harbor?

WH: Well, I was drafted months before Pearl Harbor. I was drafted actually march the 20th, 1941. At which time the promise was one year and in the summer of 1941, Congress by one vote extended it to two years. But the irritating part of that period was the fact that the draft was for 21 to 36. Any men who are over 27 years old were stuck because the summer for '41 they said that they wouldn't draft anyone over 27. So if you were 28 up to 36 in the summer of 1941, you were stuck in the army. And that continued on all the way up to about a month before Pearl Harbor where these older men, I was only in my early twenties, but we had guys that were in the middle of thirties so it was pretty hard to keep up with them or for them to keep up with them. Two weeks prior- a

month prior to Pearl Harbor we went on to what they call now The Carolina maneuvers, and uh, at the end of the maneuvers they announced that all the men over twenty-seven years old would be released from the service. We got back to Fort Jackson and uh, they were turning in their equipment and they stayed with us- they didn't have to go out to field with us, they didn't have to drill with us. They laughed at us, kiddingly and all that other stuff. However, on December the 7th, something very serious happened to our country and uh December the 8th, the Sergeant came around and yelled at all those boys who had turned in all their equipment to go back down to the supply Sergeant and get re-equipped. They were in it now. Again, that was December the 8th, 1942.

Q: Do you remember your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

WH: I certainly do. First of all, I never heard of Pearl Harbor, except in the movies. I remember seeing a movie one time and I roughly knew where it was. I didn't know that our entire fleet was there. I never knew that. We didn't know that. I don't think the average American knew that. And uh, it was quite a shock. It was a very very shock. I knew at that instant, we were in it. You know, there was no getting out for anybody. And uh, I had a pretty good uh- When we took the uh, entries examinations going into the service, I had a pretty high mark and they tried to interest me into going to Fort Sill field artillery, training facility to become a field artillery officer. But uh, at that point, the uh group of people from the United States Army air crew were going around asking if anybody had at least two years of college could take the entrance examinations to become a flying cadet. So I took the test, and I past. And the early spring of '42, I was given a 90 day Furlough which the regular Army guys had never heard of because they were taking these boys into the Air Force and there wasn't enough equipment or training to handle themselves. Finally, the summer of '42, I was sent to Kelly Field and from then on went my way through. And our class was one of the fastest classes to go through because they needed the pilots in a hurry. So our class started in August and we graduated in March. Less than seven or eight months later. After that, they increased up to twelve months for pilot training because the watch house was unbelievable.

Q: Can I go back a second to when you were in the Army itself, um you were in a field artillery?

WH: Field artillery, yeah.

Q: Did you ever use the horse-drawn artillery, or...?

WH: No, that was gone when we got there. We had the old stables. In other words, they got rid of the horses and turned the stables into cement flooring and that was where the trucks were kept.

Q: We had interviewed someone who been in the field in the 40s and

WH: IF they'd been in 1940, they had the horses. They were gone by the time we got there.

Q: Alright, so uh, in your Air Corps, what kind of planes did you train on?

WH: Well we trained on the old PT 19, that was the plane that was open cockpit, two men were causing structure itself. Then in basic training, we trained on the, we used to call them the valti-vibrater (?). It had a radio, it had all sorts of instruments. We didn't have any primary trainers. Then in advanced flights, where we got into the multi-engine planes. And AT17's and so forth. And our primary job then was to uh, for two months they trained us with what they call medium bombardment- like attacking railroads, highways, bridges and so forth. So, two months until we graduate that's how we trained. But when we graduated and we were getting our wings and our commissions and so forth, it turns out the Navy had shot down about 80 transport planes in the invasion of Sicily which was kept a top secret for a couple years and our class was going to now be assigned to Del-Valle, Texas to fly transports. I guess 95% of us were very upset because we thought we were going to be flying B-26 Bombers. But we got to Del Valley and the planes they were all commercial airliners. Silver. Beautiful job, so it seemed a little -- thing. We checked out an M, after that. Then we were assigned to the various troupe squadrons. And then, I went back to Georgia where we trained paratroops. Dropping paratroopers and so forth. In the fall, we all shipped over to North Africa and-

Q: How did you get across to North Africa?

WH: Well we were supposed to fly there. We had all sorts of instruction. We had to navigate, actually fly from Fort Wayne in barefield (?), in Indiana, down to somewhere in Florida; Miami, I think. Then on the way down to a place called Nutallan (?) Brazil, and from Brazil, you're gonna fly across the Atlantic the Ascension Island and after the Island, refuel and continue on into Africa south. But at the last minute, that was called off. A brand new Navy transport ship was just delivered to Norfolk and we were all assigned to that. So we came over with a fast Navy transport that had no escort. It just zig, zagged back and forth across the Atlantic and they used, it was mostly a troop ship, but they took all the pilots and turned us into acting Navy officers for a while. You know, four hours on, four hours off on the gun crews. And we didn't know anything about the Navy regulations. We were strictly Army this time. But the trip lasted about ten days, we wound up in a place called Casablanca. And at Casablanca we were assigned to the various squadrons in North Africa. And from then on into Sicily and onto Italy, and to France then the Rhineland and the whole works there.

Q: What kind of unit were you assigned to?

WH: Well, what happened to us. Most of the guys, we were various troop carrier squadrons. At that time General Eisenhower decided he wanted some sort of a service line to be running from Europe into the Mediterranean and keep it up. Actually it was

called Mediterranean Transport Service, MATS, and uh they organized four squadrons of transport pilots. They took most of the guys, including myself and they shipped us to this squadron in Naples, Italy. So what we did was fly personnel. Well we flew blood up to Deransio (?) and all that stuff at first. Then after that we just flew high class military personnel all through the Mediterranean and up to France and all the way to London and so forth. Called MATS, you probably never heard of it. Later on it became ETS; European Transport Service and then finally it ended up with Becket to the old MATS again. Military Transport Service, which was combined with the Navy and Air Force and they'd fly all over the world. But we were the original boys who started it in the Mediterranean. Matter of fact, I'll show you something about it.

Q: Now, did you ever get shot at with flak? Or?

WH: Well I got shot at by Germans and then I got shot up by our own Navy but other than that, nothing else.

Q: What type of planes did you fly?

WH: C-47s mostly, but we flew also B-25s and we had a B-17 that was used mostly for flying heavy mail. One of the boys, a few years back, down in Texas, he brought up a little report once a month for a while and it lasted a few years. Then we all packed it in. It was, see here, Mediterranean Transports Service. And uh, I'd like you to read the epilogue he wrote. It's very interesting and it applied to us. It appears right here, it's only very short. You might be interested in reading it.

Q: Did you want to read that on camera?

WH: I could probably do that. Okay, the epilogue. This magazine, technically wasn't a magazine. It was a newspaper. Turned up by one of our guys, Bob Dean who lived in Texas. And he retired as a full Colonel. He decided to get a little paper together so the boys could sort of write it, see what was going on, who they were, where they were, what they remembered and so forth. And they attached various pictures of the guys and pictures of the planes and so forth. But anyhow, this was his last issue from Bob and he wrote: All you former members; pilots, crew member and ground support personnel of the Mediterranean Transport Service during WW2, should have deep pride in having been a part of an organization that did so much while receiving so little recognition for bringing that war to an end. We can expect that history books will rarely, if ever, even mention the name. Let alone, the exploits of this great organization. But we know, and hopefully our descendants will know. It was with great pleasure that I put this newspaper together knowing it was appreciated by a great many of you. It would not have been possible if you had not contributed to this effort. Thank you for allowing me to be a closer part of our history. God Bless you all, Bob.
I thought it was very nice, Bob wrote that.

Q: Um, how many hours did you fly as a pilot?

WH: Well, when I retired, it was only 2035 hours. But I had put in over 1300 what they call combat hours in the Mediterranean. And they said a thousand was the- At first they said 500 was the maximum for transport pilots and then they raised it up to a thousand. And then, when I was supposed to go home, we were getting replacements and we were told we wouldn't get enough replacements so any of the guys were volunteering to stay on. And I wasn't married at the time so I said, oh, I'll stay on and we'll let the married guys go. So they released about 25 of the married guys, pilots out of our squadron and we received about 25 recruits, pilots coming in from the United States. And I stayed there until May, at which point I ran up close to 1350 hours which was a lot more than the average pilot.

Q: I noticed in the form you filled out, you had a very unique, uh mission in 1944. What was- could you talk a little bit about that, please?

WH: In 1944, they uh, we were in Africa at the time and they woke us up about 3 o'clock in the morning and brought us out to a sort of briefing area and they said that it was a top secret mission. Uh, at the time, our bombers were leaving Italy, and flying across the Mediterranean into Yugoslavia then hitting the -- oil fields. They were accompanied by fighter pilots. Our fighter pilots had wing tanks and it was almost like the Battle of Britain. When the boys gonna cross Yugoslavia, the Germans would come up to meet the bombers in a formation and attack. Our fighter pilots would drop their wing tanks and after an hour or so of combat, according to the bombers, they had to get back. So the bombers went practically unescorted all the way to Ploesti. When they got there they got the hell kicked out of them. And on their way back, the Germans would refuel and supply and they'd come up and meet them on their way back and hit them again. So they came up with an idea that if wing tanks were flown, by transport pilots, all the way from North Africa all the way through Cairo, Egypt. All the way up to Tired, all the way up to Russia to a place called Tavet (?) which was technically a secret Russian base because Russian and Japan were not at war. Russia didn't want the Japanese to know that they'd given the Americans the Air base in the Ukraine. And, anyhow we got to the Ukraine and we delivered our wing tanks and that time the next morning the bombers came in with the fighters and no wing tanks but the next morning they left with a full load of wing tanks and a full load of supplies and they hit the Germans. That lasted maybe 30 days until the Germans found out that the uh, they sent over and we saw the vapor trails and somebody looking for that big base. It wasn't a very large base. Just big enough to hold maybe a couple squadrons of bombers and a squadron of fighter pilots. Plus us. So they hit the base, heavily. The Germans did and they destroyed it. But we were lucky and they moved us off into the outskirts, a smaller area that the Germans didn't hit. But the next morning, our planes were still safe and we were ordered to leave. We flew back through the same route back to Baghdad, all the way back to Cairo Egypt. We landed there, June the sixth which was the day the boys hit Normandy. We never knew about a place called

Normandy. We were very excited, you know, that the boys had finally hit Europe. And the colonel gave us three days to have a good time in Cairo. Which was like being in New York City. They had a drug store call, Gyroppees (?) Drug Store that served you ice cream, sodas, malted milks. Things that you couldn't get in a war zone. It was very good and we were very happy to be there. We lived well, we dined well and the city itself was beautiful. It was just like being in New York. Egypt was not at war, Egypt was a neutral country. Even though the British and the Germans had fought back and forth through there. Anyway, one of the boys wrote an article which is too big to read here about our trip to Russia and, I just took it with me in case you wanted to take a quick look at it. This was taken out of the newspaper the other day, it said that the Russians were going to Goralski (?). And beyond that was a place called Milaskola (?) and that was the place we landed to get fuel and lunch and etcetera. Let's see, one of the boys wrote that after our mission was accomplished. Nobody got any medals. We didn't get a thank you.

Q: Do you have any photographs to show us of when you were in service?

WH: Oh, yeah. A few. How about this one, this is when I was a young boy.

Q: When was that taken?

WH: 62 years ago, in 1942. Now don't give me that smile. You're laughing but one day, you'll be 85 and... I have a couple others if you like, this is when I was a hot shot pilot. When I got out of pilot school and they wanted to take a picture.

Q: Now, when was that taken.

WH: Uh, that was late 1942. Before we graduated. And you may, one other thing I did bring was, I don't know you ever see one of these. Because the Army Air Force, diploma would you like to see that. That gives an example of the old Army Air Force prescribed. I passed the prescribed pilot's training so.

Q: Now you stayed in the service until '78?

WH: Yeah, well what happened was I stayed in the reserve. I was stationed at Fort Bennett after the war for a few years. Then that was closed and then after that they moved us into 640 Washington Street for them, some experience as a financing officer. I used to be a Pilot 1, Finance officer 2. But then as the years past they turned it into finance officer 1, pilot 2. And that continued all the way to when I finally retired.

Q: Now, do you still have your old flying jacket?

WH: Uh, no I don't have my old flying jacket, anymore. I have my uniforms, part of my old uniforms from the war. Then of course we went into blue. You know that. And I'll show you what happened. About three years ago, in the retired officers association, they mentioned that anybody who participated in the old bombing mission in 1944, should contact the Russian Embassy in New York and uh, they were issuing a medal. Not our

government, the Russian government. So, uh I called up the Russian Embassy and they referred me to somebody in Washington and I wrote to them and they in turn sent me the letter back. And I don't know if you can read that, can you pick it up on there, or? Well what happened was, they sent uh- I never knew what Cyrillic's meant in my life. I really didn't know. It is the Russian way of writing from our English translation to their language. It seems from what I've read or heard the Saint Cyrille about a thousand years ago converted the Russians to Christianity. And he introduced their type of writing. And -- signed this card and uh, on top of that card, is my name in Cyrillic's. And they issued us this very pretty little medal.

Q: Now did you, when you returned home, did you ever make use of the GI bill?

WH: No, I never did because I went back to working in a bank and staying in the military reserve, and school's through the bank and so forth, so I advance myself a little bit.

Q: Have you kept in contact with anyone you served with?

WH: Oh, yeah. My best friend was, there was about- I don't know, about sixty of us in the squadron and they're all gone now. The last one is my pal out in Carmel California, Stanley Jorgenson. He was a navigator, and we still kind of have contact with each other. We still talk to each other and uh, about ten years ago we had a reunion, about twenty of us showed up and about two years later we had a second reunion and about 15-20 showed up. We had the wives, it was quite a get together out in a place called Carmel. It was a beautiful city, Carmel, California. That's how the boys and I got together.

Q: Have you joined any Veteran organizations?

WH: Yeah. I belong to the American Legion and also, a member of the retired officers association which is now called the military officers association. They changed the name this year. I don't know if you knew that. The TORA spells out the retired officers association. It's been in existence for about 60 years and they found out that a lot of military officers in their 40's coming out of the service don't like to join anything that says retired. So about a year and a half ago, two years ago they started having a little vote went through. There were a little over 4,000 of us. . So they voted to change the name to the military organization of America. So it said MOA. That went into effect, January 1, of this year. And we went up at reunion with TORA last year at Albany and they had the flags they put up in they call a hospitality room. That's where they keep beer and so forth. The boys up there said that they're still gonna put up the TORA. They'd done that for years, you know. But they feel that by saying military organization, the military officers coming out in their 40's will join. And it's important because they were very active in pushing through the new bills we got. When Clinton took over we lost, a lot. Whether they're republicans or democrats, I don't give a damn. I'm a conservative. Anyhow, we lost dental work, we lost everything. And finally after years of

the TORA fighting in the congress, we got everything back and about six months ago... If you're over 65, which covers my wife and myself, that we're covered by both the military and Medicare. So we still have to pay \$55 a month for Medicare, but all bills through the hospital and military hospital will be taken care of. They finally came up with a dental plan. Taking \$25 a month out of our retirement plan, and I think that's going to be increasing this year. So we're not getting away with anything. We're still paying \$100 a month for military care. So, technically we're not getting away with anything. Up to 12 years ago I could go up to the hospital in Staten Island and they'd fix my teeth up, eye glasses, everything. Now, I buy my glasses. My, dental care, I have to pay for it. They sued the government. They'd said if you served in the military for twenty years then you were set for life, but the Supreme Court said that even though the government promised it, they didn't promise. It was not in writing. And yet up to a few years ago, the Marine Corps was still recruiting their boys by saying that after you put in 20 years, you'll get full medical care for the rest of your life. Which was not true.

Q: Well, thank you very much for the interview.

WH: Yeah.