

Richard T. Baker
23 April 2003

Wayne Clark and Mike Russert
Interviewers

MR: This is an interview with Richard Baker. Ramada Inn, Watertown, New York, the 23rd of April, 2003, approximately 1:00 p.m. Interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clark. Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please?

RB: Richard T. Baker. Date of birth was 10/27/20.

MR: Ok. Where were you born?

RB: Born in the town of Champion.

MR: Ok. What was your educational background prior to entering military service?

RB: Just high school. I graduated from Copenhagen.

MR: Ok. When you first heard about Pearl Harbor, where were you and what do you remember about that?

RB: About Pearl Harbor? That was in '41, right?

MR: Yes.

RB: I was probably working at the paper mill there in Carthage, at that time.

MR: Do you remember what your reaction was when you heard about it?

RB: Well, that it shouldn't happen. But that's the way it did. Nothing I could do about it. I got no...

MR: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

RB: I was drafted. I tried to enlist, oh I don't know, April maybe, in '42. And when the lad I was talking to, the recruitment officer I guess, I was going to be a, enlist in the cadets, you know? And when he found out I had false teeth he uh, that was it. So then they drafted me in August and I went to Syracuse for a physical and I went right from there to Fort Niagara and then Miami Beach and...

MR: Now what did you do out in Fort Niagara? What kind of...

RB: Just basic, just getting the civilian mud off you, you might say, or whatever. Shine your shoes, and we had to stand Reveille and Retreat and all this good stuff. And they'd take us out there and march us around the parade ground for, yep...

MR: And where did you go after that?

RB: Miami Beach. That was more or less a staging area, I guess. We wasn't there but like a couple weeks maybe. Then I went to Amarillo, Texas for mechanical school.

MR: Uh-huh. How long were you there?

RB: I don't know. We left there shortly after Christmas. Mighta been into January. Went to Seattle, Washington. To Boeing aircraft plant. And studied B-17s, only. Nothing else. Just B-17s. Anything pertained to a B-17.

MR: How long were you up there?

RB: Oh, couple of months I would guess.

MR: And after you were at the Boeing factory, where were you sent?

RB: Went from there to Salt Lake City. And that's another staging area.

MR: I noticed it says you became a turret gunner. Where did you go for that training?

RB: Well, I went from Salt Lake City to Wendover, Utah. That was the aerial gunnery school. And I was there probably... Well, I went from there to Ephrata, Washington... So that must've been in like the middle of May, maybe. Because I trained with one crew. Skeleton crew. We had about five or six men.

MR: Uh-huh.

RB: And then we got our first phase of training done. And then I went to the hospital for appendix. So I was there two weeks. So when I come out of the hospital the whole crew had shipped out. So I had to start from scratch again. Yeah...

MR: When were you assigned your crew that you stayed with, or?

RB: Well, it would have to be, maybe it was right around the first part of August. Probably.

MR: Ok. Where did you pick up your crew?

RB: Well, most of 'em was right there. When we got, we went from there to Walla Walla, Washington, and there we had a full crew. Ten men.

MR: Where did you pick up your B-17?

RB: In the war? England.

MR: So you went over as a crew? You didn't fly over? Or you...

RB: Went over in a boat.

WC: You went over on a ship. Oh, okay.

RB: Yep. Went over on the Queen Elizabeth.

MR: Uh-huh.

RB: At that time that was the biggest tub in the water.

MR: So this is your whole crew went across on a ship. Did you go in a convoy?

RB: Yep... No!

MR: Just a single ship.

RB: She went by herself... Yep.

MR: So you didn't pick up a plane until you reached England then?

RB: Right.

MR: Oh, okay.

RB: We didn't get the plane until we got to the air base where we were stationed.

MR: Uh-huh. Where was that?

RB: Framlingham. Parham Air Base is what they called it.

MR: What unit where you assigned [to]?

RB: 390th Bomb Group, 571st Squadron...

MR: Okay. Did you get a new B-17 or was it one that [cut off]

RB: We started the first, the first mission we made was a new one.

MR: Did you get a chance to name your plane or did it already have a name?

RB: We didn't uh, that one was right fresh out of somewhere. I don't know where it came from. Well, they probably built it in Seattle or... But we flew that one plane, maybe a couple of times. Then we got another one.

MR: Uh-huh. Did you...

RB: That's the one we put the name on.

MR: What was the name of the plane?

RB: Hap's Hazzard.

MR: Who named it that?

RB: Well, I don't know what the story was on that naming business. The pilot's name was Harry, and a lot of people called him Hap, or at least that's what he wanted to be called. So that's what we called it "Hap's Hazzard".

MR: Did you ever decorate the front of the plane, at all?

RB: Well, we had, just had the number of missions painted on it.

MR: If you hold that up in front of you, Wayne can take a picture of that.

RB: This is a diploma [shows interviewers]. That's a college education.

WC: I've never seen one of those before.

RB: I don't think you'll see very many of them.

WC: No. Hmm. Now what did you have to do to get that?

RB: What happened?

MR: How did you get that diploma?

RB: From making 30 missions. This is the name of the places I run. [points to diploma]

[close up of diploma, showing names of missions completed]

WC: How long did it take you to fly 30 missions?

RB: Oh, let's see... Probably from November till May. I made my last mission the 19 of May, 1944.

WC: Did you run into a lot of flak on your missions, or enemy fighters?

RB: Oh yeah. We got a lot of 'em. We seen 'em all. I got a chunk of... That's something I meant to bring to you. To show you that. I've got a little chunk of flak that I've got.

MR: Where was your first mission?

RB: I don't know. Right off the top of my skull I can't tell you. The first one listed here is Emden, Germany.

MR: Were all of your missions into Germany?

RB: I don't think... Well there's one... Well, some of these France, there's 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, one is Belgium. There's seven or eight was France. Twas all German occupied though.

MR: When you were with your plane did you wear a bomber jacket? The leather jackets?

RB: Now, what about it?

MR: Did you wear a jacket?

RB: I had an old Army field jacket. Cloth job.

MR: You didn't have any of the leather ones? Did you ever decorate it or anything?

RB: Yeah, I had a leather one. It had every mission I ever flew. They stuck a bomb, or a painting of a bomb on it. Had "Hap's Hazzard" across the top and then the bombs was across the bottom with the missions we'd completed.

MR: What did you ever do with your jacket?

RB: I give it to my daughter.

MR: She still have it?

RB: Yep. As far as I know.

MR: Okay. Alright. Were you ever, was your plane ever seriously damaged on any of your missions?

RB: Yep. We got... We got... We got shot up pretty good. One time, I'll let you read this. You can start right there by my thumb. [passes sheet of paper to interviewers] Go down. Them were what my mother picked out of the, that was in the paper years ago.

MR to WC: Do you want me to read it?

WC to MR: Yeah, if you want to read it.

MR [reading]: March 24th, 1944 Staff Sergeant Richard T. Baker, 23, Carthage, 8th Air Force. Engineer, upper turret gunner was a crew member of the flying fortress "Hap's Hazzard" when it recently limped home from an attack on Kiel, Germany and made an emergency landing in England on one wheel and one engine.

"Hap's Hazzard" was blasted from formation after it had dropped its bomb load on the Nazi naval installations at the Baltic Sea port. A heavy burst of flak near the nose knocked out the two inboard engines, disrupted the electrical system, played havoc with the controls, and narrowly missed injuring or killing the navigator and bombardier. Facing the North Sea with only two engines, one of which was already developing trouble, Baker and his mates shook off three Nazi fighter planes and landed at the RAF field on the English coast just as the fort's gas supply was giving out.

With one wheel down and no time to lower the other, the pilot landed the ship and brought it to a stop just short of the bomb dump.

Sergeant Baker is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Forest Baker of Carthage. Also in March 1944, he is credited with destroying a German fighter plane which he shot down with his .50 caliber machine gun during an attack over Berlin. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal and an oak leaf cluster. Wow.

WC: That's pretty impressive.

MR: Yes.

RB: There's a... This paper here, that come from England right there. At that time. I don't remember what the story was on it, you know.

MR: Oh, that's the same...

RB: Practically the same.

MR: ... mission. Yes. Now when your electrical system was knocked out, did you lose the heat in your flight suits? Do you remember?

RB: Well, a B-17, everything runs electrically. Practically. And of course, I don't know what... Today I wish I'd found out what did really knock that electrical system out. If the wheel that was up, if the tire was flat... That I don't know.

MR: Were any, none of the crew members were wounded when you took the flak?

RB: No... We had one mission, bombardier got a chunk of iron went through his leg. Right where my hand is here. [shows interviewer the spot] Right through the muscle of his leg.

MR: Uh-huh. Did you wear flak jackets?

RB: He... I don't know whether he did or not. We had 'em. At that time. And I thrown 'em in the North Sea.

MR: Were you throwing things out to get rid of weight?

RB: Yep. Weight. So he could fly it. She wouldn't fly with a... We kept throwing out this and that. Anything that made weight. Guns. I kept my gun. I think the rest of the boys, we threw them in the North Sea.

MR: How were you able to shake off the German fighters that were after you?

RB: Just lucky. Lucky. There was a B-17 nearby. Er, B-17... a B-24. And the German fighters took after him instead of us. And I guess they was an easier target, maybe, than a B-17. But that saved our neck on that one.

MR: Was your plane flyable after that mission? Or...

RB: No.

MR: ... was it ever able to be repaired?

RB: I think they fixed it. I heard they fixed it and flew it afterwards.

MR: Uh-huh. How many missions did you fly, of your 30, on "Hap's Hazzard"?

RB: That I can't tell you.

MR: Do you know what mission this was that this happened? What number mission?

RB: I would think [looks through papers] about the fourth, maybe.

WC: So the rest of the missions did you fly on the same plane? Or did you fly on all different...

RB: No. We was... Well, after we crashed that one, then we had a different airplane. But I can't remember whether we painted that up or not. I think probably we did. Put "Hap's Hazzard" on that one and...

MR: Do you think that was your most harrowing mission that you had?

RB: Yep.

MR: How did you...

RB: I don't know about the mission part, but the getting back from it.

MR: Yes, that's right. What mission was it that you shot down the German fighter?

RB: One of Berlin's.

MR: Yes. Describe that mission and how you did that?

RB: I made about five trips to Berlin. One right after another. Then the last mission I made was Berlin and there was another one in between there somewhere. Well, the 28th mission was Berlin. And these others in a row were 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15. One right after the other. Got kinda monotonous.

MR: The flak was heaviest over Berlin? Or was it...

RB: Well, sometimes. Sometimes it wasn't too bad.

MR: Ok. What were your relations like with the people in England? Did you ever get to fraternize with the people much?

RB: Well, we had a pub we used to go to to get a little mild and bitters and whatever they had there. And if we had time off, we had a week off, the crew, and they flew us to Bornemouth, England. That was, we was right around, close to 20 missions. They said, "Well, we'll give you a little rest from this flying business. You go down there and you do what you damn please."

WC: Did you get to see any USO shows while you were over there?

RB: I don't think so.

MR: When you finished your last mission and came back to the United States, when was that?

RB: The last mission was the 19th of May, in 1944. I got back in the States, probably, right around the first part of September.

MR: Were you involved in any of the bombings during the D Day campaign?

RB: No.

MR: No. How did you return to the United States?

RB: By boat.

MR: Did your whole crew return together?

RB: No. No, on that boat I was the only one out of my crew.

MR: Uh-huh.

RB: Because I had a sore throat and they socked the salt to it. It got rid of the sore throat, but it dried up my vocal chords so I couldn't talk and they grounded me. So I had to fly two extra missions, on that account, I lost two trips over that deal. And the last two missions I flew with pick up crews. Spare men. Odd men, or whatever.

MR: Besides being a turret gunner it said you were an engineer. What kind of work did you do on the plane as an engineer?

RB: Anything. Anything except radio. I didn't know nothing about radio. Anything that needed doing; engines, wings, fuel tanks.

MR: When you returned to the United States, you weren't discharged until March of '45. What did you do in between?

RB: I went back to Amarillo, Texas and I worked in a hangar there, oh, I don't know how long. Then finally I got, my back got to bothering me so they took me out of the hangar on account of working on the cement.

MR: Uh-huh.

RB: Give me a desk job doing some cussed thing. I can't remember just... taking care of, world events, I guess maybe you'd call it.

WC: How did you feel when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?

RB: [shakes head] Well, we've all got to die someday. I don't really know, to tell you the truth. But, you kind of felt sorry for them people but... That's just the way it is today.

MR: Did you ever make use of the GI Bill when you, after you left the service?

RB: Well, I applied for mechanical training there when I was in Utica. But I didn't finish it.

MR: Did you ever use the 52-20 club at all?

RB: Come again?

MR: The 52-20 club; you received \$20 a week for 52 weeks after discharge. Did you ever use that?

RB: No.

MR: No? Okay.

RB: I got a lump sum after a while. I can't remember, that wasn't too much. \$100, maybe \$125 or something like that. But that was, oh hell... I was trying to think how many years that would be after I got discharged. About 4-5 years afterwards.

MR: Did you join any veterans' organizations.

RB: Well, the VFW there in Carthage.

MR: Are you still a member?

RB: Yep. Life member.

MR: Did you ever, have you ever joined the 8th Air Force historical group?

RB: No. I've sent in money for this World War II Memorial there in Washington.

MR: Uh-huh, right.

RB: I donate to that every once in a while. I'm a charter member of that.

WC: How do you, did you stay in contact with anyone that you served with?

RB: Well, I and one of my waist-gunners, they lived in Bridgeport, Pennsylvania. And we used to run back and forth some. Then he passed away about, oh hell, 25 years ago or so, almost. Roughly 25 years. He had a cerebral hemorrhage. He didn't hang around long.

And our radio operator lived in Amherst Junction, Wisconsin. And I and the wife went up there in 1954. Went up and visited him for a couple of days.

WC: How do you think your service, do you think it ever changed or affected your life in any way?

RB: Oh, I don't know. I do not know.

WC: Do you have anything else there you'd like to show us? Do you have any photographs, or?

RB: Well, I've got a picture here, I picked this out of the paper, that's a piss poor picture. [holds up newspaper clipping with picture of B-17 bomber]

WC: Now uh...

RB: Tell me when I can throw it away.

WC: What's the story about that? Is that...

RB: Well, I think it says here the... Shows the bomb bay doors open, and these white streaks are vapor trails from the airplane.

WC: Okay.

RB: Temperature had something to do with them. I don't, don't ask me what that would be.

WC: Okay.

RB: But they'd... Most of the time we flew 21 planes. Once in a great while we'd put up 42, but that didn't happen very often.

MR: Do you have any pictures of yourself in your uniform that you brought, or?

RB: Well, now I don't know... I don't think I have with me. I had, they took one picture after this deal here with the... But that was more or less just a, a [hands paper to interviewers]

MR: Oh, that's telling the same story about your...

RB: Yep, that's Stars and Stripes there. Was that war paper they used to publish.

MR: Uh-huh. Okay.

RB: We could...

WC: What's that book you have there?

RB: That's more or less to do with the 8th Air Force. It'll show you, well it shows you a lot of stuff in there.

WC: Okay. Is that something that the 8th Air Force put out, or is that something you picked up after the war?

RB: I don't know when I did get it. I think probably I got it in a... They might have given me that when I finished my missions too. That's a possibility.

WC: Yeah, that could be.

RB: I can't remember. I don't think there's anything written here that tells you that either. Them days, you was just glad to get out of it, you know?

WC: Oh yeah.

RB: You didn't... Today it's write all this stuff down.

WC: Okay. Yeah, that was probably a book they gave you when you left.

RB: I was going to show you the... I think they've got that how you flew in formation. The airplanes set up in a V. Didn't make any difference which way you looked at them, it was always in a V. Looked at them from the side and they were in a V, and if you looked at them from the top or bottom they were still in a V. I don't know whether that'll explain too much to you right there or not [pointing to a picture in the book].

MR: If you hold it up in front of you, Wayne'll be able to...

RB: That isn't quite what I was looking for, but...

MR: Uh-huh.

RB: Tell me when I can drop it.

WC: Okay, you can drop it.

RB: No, they run seven planes in a squadron. And any way you looked at it, it was in a V.

MR: Did you have a bombsight on your plane? Or did you run off the lead bomber?

RB: Most of the time we dropped off of the leader. They had what they called a... What the hell did they call it? But they had a bombsight. That lead plane had a bombsight and everybody, when he give the signal, everybody'd drop their bombs.

MR: Uh-huh.

RB: If everything worked right, that's where the bombs went.

WC: Carpet bombing? Isn't that it?

RB: Pardon?

WC: They called it carpet bombing, I think?

RB: Well, I don't know whether they called it carpet or not. But they dropped them in a bunch, you know? I guess maybe that'd be about it.

WC: Okay.

RB: Carpet bombing would just about do it. There was one here with a, here's one here with a tail gone [still paging through the book].

MR: You were always in the top turret?

RB: Yes.

MR: Did you ever get in the ball turret down below?

RB: Yep. In training I did. But it was pretty tight. I had my ear stuck right in the, my knees stuck right in my ears.

MR: Uh-huh.

RB: But I could get into it, and run it.

[shows picture of 14" chunk of steel to the camera]

WC: Okay.

RB: That's a chunk, it says "Rocket fragment. 14" piece of steel tore the pants off a turret gunner without hurting him." So he had a close one.

WC: I guess so.

MR: Did you ever get any effects from frost at all, or?

RB: Get what?

MR: Did you ever have the frost bother you? Or was your suit always...

RB: Frost?

MR: Frostbite.

RB: Frostbite was bad.

MR: Did you ever have any at all, or?

RB: No. No, I was out of the... The waist-gunner, when we first started flying over there, the waist-gunners, the window, there's a picture of the... The windows, both side windows you had to open them to operate the guns. And you got the wind in there, and, well of course it was 40 below zero centigrade. And that's kind of chilly.

WC: Okay, I got it [videoing pages from the book].

RB: And I have seen 60 below zero on a centigrade thermometer. And that's cold.

MR: Yeah, I guess so.

RB: We could, we would have to urinate, you know? They had a relief tube in the plane but you might as well not had it. On account of the cold. Because the time you urinate, it's froze. Just like that. [snaps fingers] So then we carried a coffee can. You'd pee in a coffee can and before we could set that on the floor, that was froze solid.

MR: Uh-huh.

RB: You didn't need to worry about spilling it. Because before you could set it on the floor, it was froze solid. Then when we got down where it was warmer, it started warming up, lower altitude, then we'd throw it overboard.

Yep, a lot of the boys, well later on, well, the first planes had the side windows where in order to operate the guns, you had to open that window. One gun on each side. The newer

planes got a window in there with a gun mounted right in the window, so you didn't have to have the window open, and that helped with the frostbite. Them boys was getting up here [points to forehead], on their cheeks, and down here on their neck. See, the oxygen mask covered up from about where my fingers are [bridge of nose] down around here [mouth and chin] and that didn't freeze. But the frostbite was around the outside of them. And the ball turret gunner, if he pissed his pants he sat right on a chunk of armor plating and you can imagine what that was. He was froze right to the metal. Course, they had a padding on it, but...

I don't know what I got here, to tell you the truth. Well, I got some of these oak leaf clusters, what the hell is that?

MR: Yes, that's ours. That belongs with the video tape.

RB: I hadn't better throw it away then, had I? There's an oak leaf cluster. I don't know how many of those I've got. Half a dozen? Probably.

WC: [videoing citation for oak leaf cluster to Army Air Medal] Alright, I got it.

MR: Okay. Well, thank you very much for the interview.

RB: Here's, there's for the Air Medal, right there.

WC: Okay.

MR: Do you have the citation for your Distinguished Flying Cross?

RB: Yeah, that's here somewhere. I think that's in some of this... oak leaf cluster...

WC: Air Medal...

RB: Oak leaf cluster... oak leaf cluster... oak leaf cluster... I thought I had it. No, that's for... No, that's oak leaf cluster... I think, this is where we was promoted. That's where I was Tech Sergeant, and here's ball turret gunner, waist gunner, 'nother waist gunner and a tail gunner, we was all made sergeant. I don't know whether there's a date on there or not. There should be. 26th of February, 1944.

MR: Okay, well thank you very much for your interview.

WC: Yes, thank you.

RB: I thought I had that for the DFC, but apparently it's not. I missed it somewhere.

MR: I'd like to be able to copy these [recording seems to have stopped for some time]

WC: ... You were with what? The first replacement?

RB: The first replacement crews that went into that bomb group. During the war. That's in the fall of '43.

WC: What was it like, coming back after a mission and finding that some of the people you flew with, guys from other planes, were gone? I mean, that must have been pretty tough to take, wasn't it?

RB: Yeah. Yeah, one of the crews that went overseas with me went on their 25th mission...

WC: Uh-huh.

RB: And at that time they had to make 25, and then they'd send you home. But they didn't come back.

WC: What did the guys do to relieve the pressure? I mean, they'd come back after a mission, the guys probably drank a lot?

RB: Yeah, I'd say so. Yep. They'd go down to the pub, and whatever. If they had time they'd, well, my ball turret gunner and the tail gunner, well they turned 20 years old. We was flying missions when they turned 20 years old.

WC: Uh-huh.

RB: But they was partying boys. Well, they had time. I had a lot of work to do. I had to, you know, check on the airplane all the time. And if the ground crew had two men for a ground crew, Sergeant Buchey [unsure of spelling], at that time was from Rochester, NY, and I can't remember the other lad that worked with him...

WC: Uh-huh.

RB: ... but uh, they'd have more work than they could do, you know?

WC: Uh-huh.

RB: And I'd help them.

WC: Okay. Well, thank you again.

RB: You bet.