

**Robert Edwin Harris
Veteran**

**Michael Russert
Wayne Clarke
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on
23 March 2004
Otego, NY**

Q: We are in Buffalo, New York and it is the 23rd of March, 2004 approximately 3:45 pm. The interviewers are Wayne Clark and Mike Russert. Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

RH: Robert E. Harris, October 8th 1918

Q: How long of a training period did you get to be able to work?

RH: I believe it was 3 months.

Q: 3 months, okay. After you did your training out in Colorado you said and then where did you go from there?

RH: Well let's see, Salt Lake City then we had our overseas

Q: That wasn't Wendover was it?

RH: No. it was Salt Lake City and Kearns, Utah and there I had my basic training and overseas I can't think of what the training was called but then basic training was in Miami Beach and I can't think of what the word was.

Q: That's okay. Now when you were first assigned to the 21st Bomb Squadron that was your first assignment?

RH: Yes

Q: And you were on B-24's and where were you based?

RH: I would guess it was Amchitka it was one of the several islands I was on

Q: So you were signed up to the Aleutians?

RH: Yes

Q: Did they have to do much maintenance on the plane because it was so cold up there or?

RH: Well, they did say that the B-24s worked better in the cold weather and the B-17s worked better over in Europe so we hit the B-24 and B-25 but I never knew of any serious problems.

Q: What did the B-24s, what were their missions?

RH: Well, first the last was the Faller and Kiska and we were backed up in the middle of the street and through that winter we had the B-24 they refilled in Japan for a while and they had a mission center. We rode down the middle of the chain and the people that had been in the B-24s had been there through most of the campaign and I came in later and I was with him through the Kiska thing and some of Japan but that winter they didn't do an awful lot but they did bounce up to the weather there and the next Spring I believe it was, we came down to (?) that's the little island 4 miles long and a mile and a half wide I guess that's pretty well up towards through and from there we bound Kiska until one morning suddenly we wake up and there's nobody there so they came in and separated from the island overnight I guess.

Q: Now you eventually said that in September '43 you went over to the 77th bomb squadrons?

RH: Yes, yes we were based on that tube and bound Corrales North of Japan.

Q: Now this is the 77th bomb squadron would strictly be 25.

RH: Yes

Q: Now you say they didn't use the bomb site that often because they flew so low

RH: They used to put your hand inside you had a square box here and that leveled captured plane east of turning and kept going in a straight line and the top part, figuring out all the topping angle and the drift and all those things, they didn't use it they just put the bottom half side on and navigated by that but we just put 1 plane

Q: So you made modifications on the bomb site then changes

RH: No the base kept it pointed in the right direction and kept it leveled and all that and then up on top of that, you had a whole little thing about 6 inches round and a foot and a half long laid downside and the gyroscopes in the base kept it pointed at the tire going straight ahead depending which way you're aiming at and you had another gyroscope in there that kept everything level and as you got rid of the bomb, the plane the pilot kept the plane at the right altitude but the rest of it would fly the plane, set up the course, drop the bomb all at once the pilot didn't even control the plane going on in just the direction level of it. As you approach the target, you're looking through this telescope that's driven by a motor that keeps coming down and you keep it on the target and down there you had 4 little arm handles that you turned to get it lined up and you just kept your eye on the gyroscope to make sure it's leveled which is the hardest part. Some of those guys could do it better than the others but then as you approach the target and you saw that we were getting over it you had a shaft that had 2 knobs on it and one of the knobs that were right together and if you're off going left or right, you turn one of them and that knob would bring your course back and at the second time the same time the second knob would set up the changes and adjust the thing to keep it on the target it was quite a complicated thing and what they went by was they'd say it's like you're flying through a block of air and when the wind blows on one side that whole block of air is moving in that direction and everything goes straight through the air normally it doesn't go to the corner with the air but the effect is that if you go forward it also slides sideways so you have to set it in the angle and not get the far upwind and things like that. It was a nice little toy and I enjoyed working with it.

RH: You said there really weren't many repairs that you had to do

Q: No they didn't break down that much, you had to keep them perfect they were very sensitive gyros and everything at least a little bit of pressure on it and it would just go crazy and it had to be very accurate. They said if you shot in the sea and you missed by one degree that was a no. Figured that was a precision job and another thing they said was that you couldn't do it with a pickle barrel and that was true and especially the biggest problem in the whole thing was the night the guy on the ground had the same equipment you did he wasn't even at you but he did not fool those gyros he said there's no solid ground and you're trying to keep your plane solid level and everything and he was aiming at you. When they got pretty close I think those boys got scared dropping around a lot of times I don't blame them.

Q: So they could override the bomb site?

RH: Well they could think it's much simpler for them to aim their air guns at the plane and drop it at the target because we had all those arrows and stuff to deal with it they did that or they just sounds like sitting on the table shooting it.

Q: Now you must have had quite a security clearance to be able to work on those?

RH: They checked us over pretty carefully because everything is secret

Q: Were you allowed to talk about your work at all even after the war?

RH: Oh sure after the war nobody said anything about it

Q: How many men were in your unit that worked on the bomb sites?

RH: I don't know I just worked on the bomb sites there was some of the times 3 some of the times 4 I guess all the time even each side who had 30 days I realize you ran it through a certain process of examination and adjusting and creating like that and if there's any problem and one wasn't working right it was just a matter of adjusting it right. They didn't break they were very very carefully made and they were expensive they had one little hole about a big old good sized apple at the bottom I think and the lower unit and that all I did before the war they had a different system to follow up well that little thing there water turned and put pressure on the gyros and tamed them and steered the plane but by the time we got in there they used a whole new system all through the war they put that little water on the bottle around every bounce light that came through they cost 400 dollars apiece somebody made money there on the side.

Q: Did either of your units ever lose many planes over Japan?

RH: Those memories are long lost well I have a picture right there that covers even the Dead Sea it shows the mountain work over a busy night

Q: Okay well why don't you hold this over you and if you could hold it straight up we can focus on that. So, that's the 77th squadron this would be 25 squadron. Let me see and get each group in. Now some of the pilots wore a leather jacket did you wear a leather jacket all the time?

RH: Well not all the time but the flight crews and crew men they had pretty nice fancy jackets and they had one that is lighter and one that is heavier

Q: Did you have them with the decorations on them at all? Like some of the pilots did?

RH: I know one of the ones I had were the lightweight ones but I don't remember if I had anything on it.

Q: How long were you up in Attu and Kiska?

RH: It was 27 months I remember I was in 39 months all together

Q: What did you do for entertainment in your time off?

RH: Well we had a movie place and a church and play cards

Q: Any USO shows come to visit you?

RH: Oh yes we had some of them I was on there 27 months I think up there and I got there and almost at the end of my time someone said they're down there 2 miles down that way that's a nurse because that was the first woman I had seen up there so we didn't have that many women to entertain us

Q: Did you see Bob Hope at all?

RH: They would tell us what island we're on and my mother had the radio on Christmas night afterward after Christmas night when Bob Hope's program was on and he said that on Christmas night we read and entertained the boys on so then she knew where I was but that night the fellas got a hold of some whiskey and they all became drunk on winter night so I didn't even see him there.

Q: So you had pretty warm winter gear?

RH: Yes, we had warm winter gear made out of sheep shearling you know the skin and layers.

Q: Now what kind of buildings did you live in?

RH: The Pacific house they were like a hut made of plywood

Q: Were they kept pretty warm?

RH: Oh yes we had all the burners and heaters

Q: How about food, were you fed pretty well up there?

RH: Most of the time yes, the only time we were a little low we had to rough it a little bit more in Shemya that little Island there because that's where we bound Kiska from and we went in there and it was just 4 miles long and very level I think 20 feet or something like that and it rained all of our there and the weeds screwed up and you'd walk along on that island and all the water went down that hole and it ran off and the water would wash off the deep trench and it was just wide enough to fall in and all these weeds go around and bend over and if you walked right along and he's standing right there in this ditch

Q: Now I noticed in this photo album you had you were catching fish

RH: Oh yeah they used to go out once in a while and I think once we took a boat out and stand out in the harbor and taste a little bit there

Q: So were you able to eat the fish

RH: The ones we ate those that we caught out in the ocean were mostly contaminated and we didn't eat them much but they had a whole ditch there did you see the dog in the picture? That was a little creek down in the mountains. We're running up there and you can see there the salmon and what happened is that they would lose 2 eggs along and a nice big trail would follow them along to eat the egg so all you had to do was pick up a few eggs.

Q: Now where was this photograph taken, is that the dog you were talking about?

RH: Yes

Q: Now where did you get that dog?

RH: Well whenever troop ship left Seattle there's another better picture of it there. There were lots of dogs out there.

Q: Now where are you in this photograph?

RH: I'm on this side, I took the picture I turned the switch on to get the shot

Q: Now this is you up there?

RH: No I'm not sure but I think that's the picture of the fella who lived over here in Masonville, he was an aerial bomber

Q: Now is that showing the winter uniforms that you had the winter clothing of?

RH: I didn't have those the flight crew wore those.

Q: Oh okay, that's interesting and it shows some of the buildings you lived in?

RH: Yes this was our bombsite shop and the air conditioned thing with all the fancy tools and stuff that you're supposed to work on the bomb sites in there and the generator and everything, we didn't use that much we just used the other part.

Q: Now this is the dog you showed about hunting there?

RH: He was chasing the fish here, there's Bigfoot

Q: One of these you?

RH: Is it me? I look like a fish?

Q: Now I noticed you were discharged in November of 45, where were you discharged?

RH: In Jersey down by Trenton there

Q: Did you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard of the dropping of the atomic bombs?

RH: Yes as I was too, everyone was happy. It's such a bad thing to be happy about but we didn't realize that was going on and that they were going to do that.

Q: Could you hold this up and tell us when and where that was taken?

RH: I believe it was in Denver well and we lived in these barracks there

Q: Do you remember what year it was taken?

RH: Well, just before I went overseas I think it was '42

Q: Did you ever get used to the GI bill when you returned home?

RH: No as soon as I got discharged that was all I wanted

Q: And did you make use of the 52-20 club at all?

RH: No

Q: You didn't get a mortgage or anything?

RH: No, I never asked for anything I could get tax breaks and things like that but never did.

Q: Did you ever join any veteran's organizations?

RH: No

Q: How about did you stay in contact with anyone that was in service with you?

RH: Yes, so we had a radio man there, Matthew and he and I were very good friends he helped me so I could build a radio and things like that but then we got to be good friends then after the war he and his wife would come out and visit us here but I don't know how many times we were there.

Q: Where did he live?

RH: Where they make the automobiles, Detroit.

Q: How do you think your time in the service affected or changed your life?

RH: Well I don't know if I did very much or not I was substituting on the mail route before the war and the day after I got back, postmaster called and asked if I wanted to go and work in the office and I guess in '49 I got appointed so I probably would have done that anyway.

Q: How many years did you have with the post office?

RH: Just about 40, I was a substitute carrier before the war for 3 years I believe and then they gave me credit for the time I was in the war so it all added up to about 40 years but I think I only got credit for 29 due to some of the records that weren't kept to the post office so I didn't quite get credit for all the time but I can't complain.

Q: And you got married after the war?

RH: Yes, my first wife lived 12 and a half years and then she died she had heart trouble then it was quite a while after that I think it was about 20 years before I got married again. I married Dorothy she was my customer and now we have 18 years.

Q: Ok well thank you very much for this interview.

RH: Thank you.