

James H. Shaw
Veteran

Wayne Clarke
New York State Military Museum
Interviewer

Interviewed on: 26 March 2012
New York State Military Museum
Saratoga Springs, New York

WC: Today is the 26th of March, 2012. My name is Wayne Clark we are at the New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, Saratoga Springs, New York.

WC: Sir, for the record would you please state your full name, and date and place of birthplace please?

JS: My name is James H. Shaw, my birthdate is 28 February 1924. I was born in Schenectady, New York.

WC: Did you attend school in Schenectady?

JS: I graduated from [unclear] high school in 1941.

WC: After you graduated, did you go on to any schooling or college or go right to work?

JS: I went to work for a little bit for the American Locomotive Company when I was a young kid at 18 years old and they really didn't have a work job that was good for me. I left there and went to work at GE. Their conditions for young people was worse than anything; worse than being in the military, and at that particular time of course we had the Pearl Harbor...started off...

WC: Yes, well let me ask you about that, do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you heard about the attack?

JS: That was Sunday afternoon, I was home and I heard about it in the living room. And at that time, of course, all the young kids, a lot of the young kids, decided they were going to go gung-ho, and get in the service. A good buddy of mine, he wanted to join the Marine Corps, in which he did, and I wanted to join and go with him, but at my age I wasn't old enough for me to get the okay from my mother, and so I didn't go in. But my mother is a World War II bride, World War I bride I should say, and my father served in France at that battle, and they both knew about wars and they didn't want me to go in. I stayed out of the service till around November of '42 when I got my draft papers to fill out and I

knew what was coming next. So instead of filling out the paperwork, I enlisted in the Air Corps and I wanted to be an airplane mechanic...

WC: Had you ever flown in an airplane before?

JS: No. No, but like the military after I did my basic training...

WC: But where'd you go for basic training?

JS: I did my basic training, you're going to love this, I did my basic training in Miami Beach, Florida. In those days, they took up every hotel then whatever combinations to put people into basic training. After basic training I got on a troop train and headed north, which out of Miami you got to go north on a train, and I think I'm coming back to Schenectady or close by Schenectady; but five days later, five nights, five days later I'm in California, New York waiting for assignment there. Then I found out that I was no longer in the Air Corps, I was now assigned to the Signal Corp. With that I needed some training, so they sent me to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to become a radio operator mechanic which I graduated from those courses.

WC: How did you get out there, by train?

JS: By train, I have a lot of train time.

WC: And what was your training like?

JS: Well as a mechanic we used to make radios, and understand radios from building one, to understanding how they worked, and from the communications part of it, the signal, and the code training.

WC: Did you have to learn Morse Code?

JS: I had to learn Morse code and we were actually so busy that we went to school in the evening because they were pushing people fast in those days. Now as I said before, I was in the Signal Corp, and I understood that after I finished that mechanic operator school that I would go back to California into the 957 Signal Radio Intelligence Company for assignment. With that particular time in history, World War Two, the B-17s and the aircraft in Europe were taking a big beating from the Japanese [sic: Germans] and they were losing in some days, 60 airplanes in a day, which is 600 guys a day.

WC: You mean through the Germans?

JS: Yeah, they got shot down there, whatever. And now they needed aerial gunners really bad. So now no longer am I assigned to the Signal, I'm back in the Air Corps and I shipped to Laredo, Texas to become an aerial gunner.

WC: What was Laredo, Texas like?

JS: It was hot. [chuckles] But it was good training, it was, again we learned a 50 caliber machine gun inside and outside, and we did some nice flying in an airplane shooting at those targets that were flown up alongside of us and of course...

WC: Now, what kind of aircraft were you flying on?

JS: I can't remember, well I think it was AT6's I think.

WC: Oh, I see, you were sitting in the back seat with the...

JS: I was sitting in the back seat strapped in, two seaters, it makes me laugh again here because as we flew along, we were firing at these targets that were being towed, and they had a mirror on us, the pilot, because when we finished shooting, we knew it, and we must have some kind of expression, especially in our face, and at that time, soon as he knew we were done, he would do a lip around and turn over into a big swoop down to the ground. We were only strapped in by our parachute straps! Of course now we ended up with that kind of training, and I graduated from that school, and then I ended up and went home for some leave time, very little of it - then I was sent to Salt Lake City, Utah for assignment for a crew. At that location we met our pilot, we met the rest of the gunners and stuff like that. After we married up with those people, we were sent to El Paso, Texas for crew training. We flew the B-24's and we went to all aspects of night flying, navigator problems, gunnery training as a crew member. We completed all that training; we were ready to be deployed.

WC: Now let me ask you this, you were your assigned as a gunner and with that crew, what was your position, were you a waist gunner? tail gunner?

JS: My position was a radio operator/gunner, and I fired the waist position ninety-nine percent of the time. I had some occasion in combat to fly other positions, but mostly because of my position as a radio operator, and the other boys who I was by, the engineer of the crew, gave us the flexibility to get to where we had to be, [without being into a turret]. Okay so now we're going to be deployed and we get back on a train, and we ended up being in Miami, and we have no idea where we're going. They put us in the hotel up on the sixth floor, I remember that, and the enlisted people cannot come out at night, we had to stay in-but they didn't tell us what was going on. And later, early in the morning, one morning, we got called and we had to go to the airport, and we left Miami and the C-47's and we flew down towards South America. We went to Trinidad and other places on the way, on our way to Brazil. We got down there after we stayed a couple nights here and there because we didn't have the distance. In Brazil, we waited there until they came up with a four-engine aircraft to take us across the ocean. We left Brazil and we landed halfway across the ocean at the [Ascension Island], it's a little dot in the map, and we ran in there for a refill, and actually that spot was where the British had used during some of their wars down in South America. But after we left there with refuel, then we flew over to Africa, which at that time was called the Gold Coast of Africa, and we got rid of that big airplane we went back to the smaller aircraft, two engines, [Edith 46 or 47's and..]

WC: Now did you go on a single plane? Or was there a group of planes?

JS: We went in a single plane and our group was in the airplane. After we got to Africa, we started our trip across Africa to get to our destination. We had a few stops the way over and ended up going all the way across Africa, over to Pakistan; Karachi, Pakistan is now Pakistan; it used to be India at that time. We got there and then we proceeded to go across India - we got near Calcutta -and we got to our unit at the [Antipodes, India], which is about 150 miles from Calcutta. When we got there, one of the things we found out was that because the monsoons were coming on, we couldn't drop bombs anymore, so they moved an entire unit up to Kurmitola, India, which is now Bangladesh [sic: Kurmitola Airfield is still in India], and we were stationed up there in Kurmitola till the end of the monsoons. What we did there is put bladders in the bomb bay tanks and we flew gas over to China, over the hump, and that's about a five and a half hour trip over there, and we had to fly back. Sometimes we were able to go even further into China and then we would stay overnight in Kunming, that's where we took the gas.

WC: Any contact with the enemy at all?

JS: No, we were down low enough in India when we were there, we were ready to fight, we had all the crew there, machine guns were ready, but we didn't run any at that time.

WC: What was your living conditions like there, were you living in tents or barracks, or...?

JS: In Kurmitola we lived in tents, and then the monsoons are nothing but water and they had wooden walkways so you could get to the airplane. On the airstrip itself, they had metal mats where you can land for [unclear] concrete bases. So we stayed there until after the monsoons, and then we flew that entire outfit back down to [Panama] which was our home near Calcutta.

WC: What time frame was this?

JS: Well, I can't give you exacts ...

WC: This was 1944?

JS: This is 1944. That's where we got back to the old base and we had to begin to retrain again, getting ready for combat bombing trips. We did all that again, the navigators, gunners, and all that stuff, training. Then we started our combat missions. We flew into Burma; Rangoon was a favorite, Mandalay was another one, and then we did our time and that was fixing to be my last mission and I went down to Thailand. That mission was my last mission and we had put in two gas tanks in bladders into the bomb bays. We took four [bombs] and we flew down to Thailand, which was a 2700-mile trip, and we were in the air seventeen and a half hours; we flew home, and that was my last combat mission.

WC: How many missions did you fly?

JS: I had over fifty, but we didn't really go so much by missions, we went by hours, and my hours I had was 457 hours. Another story about that, my co-pilot and all the officers stayed back, and the six sergeants left to come home. My last mission was on the 19th of March 1945, and my co-pilot got his own crew before I left there. As a matter of fact, my last mission - he flew with me on that mission - and I'll put this out that on my last mission the tail number was number twenty-four. Just keep that in mind, it'll come back in a minute. Now after we left, we were on our way home and the copilot had his new crew. We found out that on the twenty-ninth of March, that month, Chuck got shot down over Rangoon. We figured that he was captured, and we couldn't find the body, and we thought he had gone in the ocean, which was pretty close to the ocean. [So fifty years later I interview I saw because his niece, ran across her through a newsletter] and I asked her about, I mentioned the fact that her uncle had got shot down in the water, and she said that was not true. He was shot down and he was captured. I mentioned a number - I find out that the number that he went down in was number twenty-four, tail number 24, the same number that I flew on my last mission. Now after we researched and found out about the..., Charles Wiley is the co-pilots name...we got the investigation from the military about what happened. They had evidence - and I still have that at home - that he was captured, where he was captured, and what they had done with him. The local people had turned him over, and his crew over to the Japanese, and the Japanese took them to Rangoon, Burma, which happened to be a target that he got shot down at. Now on the Fourteenth of April of 1945, the British took over Rangoon, but they couldn't find any bodies. On the paperwork from the war department it says it possible assassination which with [unclear] this is what happened to him. So, then we got back home, some of this stuff I had mentioned before, but anyway I had a leave time in Atlantic City. It was R&R time there, and we got a reassignment. Then I was sent back into service, active into Laredo, Texas, as a B-29 gunnery Instructor. I completed that training and we were ready for deployment, which we were only guaranteed six months in-house...in the country, before our next assignment. Then, after we completed that, I was sent to Topeka, Kansas waiting for reassignment in be B-29 position, and then the war ended.

WC: Okay, let me just go back a little bit - where were you when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?

JS: I was in, I was in Schenectady, and I was home on leave at that particular time. I was driving up near Amsterdam and the word came out that he had gotten..., that he had died.

WC: Was that a shock to you to hear about the...?

JS: Oh yeah, oh yeah, sure it was, because even though the politics of this thing, he was the president, and as far as we knew, he was good.

WC: Now, where were you when the war in Europe ended?

JS: I think I was still in New York. I'd have to refresh the numbers, the dates, but I think that's where I was. And then when the Japanese thing ended up, I was in Topeka, Kansas.

WC: Let me also go back, I wanted to ask you when you were in India, did you fly the same aircraft most of the time?

JS: No. We never flew the same one every day, we didn't have an assigned airplane...because we had more crews than we had bombers.

WC: Now, most of your bombers, were they named, did they have any kind of artwork on them?

JS: Oh, they had a lot of artwork on them. I was just telling my wife just the other day that's what kept us going...look at naked women on the side of airplanes. In fact, I have a book in my collection of nose art, of all the aircraft that they had done...that's a morale booster.

WC: Now you said you had flown about 50 missions, during any of those missions, any contact with the Japanese?

JS: We used to, we ran across some fighters occasionally, but most of it was flak anti-aircraft that we were dealing with.

WC: Was your aircraft ever hit?

JS: We had some hit, a little, not much of anything as I remember. My engineer was taking a camera shot, over the bottom of the aircraft there was a camera trap, and he was leaning over the aircraft, over the camera taking pictures and the flak hit the side of the airplane, not much, but right across, right across his back.

WC: Was he wounded at all?

JS: No, he didn't get wounded.

WC: Now you mentioned you were part of the 10th Air Force.

JS: Yes, the 10th Air Force. I was assigned to the 9th Bomb Squadron, 7th Bomb Group, which incidentally, that outfit was the oldest Air Force unit in the country. The 7th Bomb group went all the way back to World War One.

WC: Now you mentioned training on the B-29, what was your opinion of that aircraft?

JS: Well, it was pretty exotic compared to what we had used for years, and we just trained and we never did actually put it into any action. I think the biggest part of that whole thing was that we were glad when it ended, because we didn't have to go back.

WC: Once the war ended, what happened to you next?

JS: We waited around doing nothing like the military does, and finally I had enough points to be sent home and be discharged. I took the train again and I went to Rome, New York, [the process and location there,] and when that happened, I was put on a train station that took me to Schenectady, and I was out of the service.

WC: Did you make use of the GI bill or the 52-20 Club?

JS: Well the 52-20 Club was, that's how we lived, because that's how we were able to have fun, you know.

WC: I forgot to ask you what your rank was when you were discharged.

JS: I was a Tech Sergeant.

WC: Did you use the GI Bill at all?

JS: No, no. The problem I had when I went to high school, things were such with my family I didn't think I'd ever get to go to college. I took, if you want to use, an easy way through high school, a general course. I did that because I felt...which was foolish...I felt as though I didn't have the credits to go to college. Which now I thought about it, and since then, that all those years that I could of. But I didn't do that, but I did fine without the college.

WC: Now you mentioned in 1949, you ended up joining the National Guard, how did that come about?

JS: I used to work for a fellow and down near [Erie] Boulevard, and he belonged to the National Guard, an infantry outfit in Schenectady. And of course, always, I needed to talk about guys, and what they're doing, and he wanted me to join. He said to sign up for one year which was a big way to go, try it for one year, and if I didn't like it, dropout. So, I talked to my wife. At that time, we had one child, and of course, after being in the service, you have itchy feet about the service, you enjoy being with guys and all that. I went for that one-year thing, but after the first year I was ready...that was it...because there's a big difference from flying airplanes and walking around the world on foot boots, so I was going to drop out. My company commander convinced me to go into the OCS program, which was just starting in New York State, which I did that, and of course I got to be an officer. I enjoyed that aspect of things because now I was one of the guys that make decisions, and not listen all the time to what somebody else said. I stayed into the National Guard...forever...started out as a second lieutenant, first lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel, and retired as full colonel.

WC: And what year did you retire?

JS: What year? 1979. I had put in about thirty-eight years' service, and that was it. Those assignments I had in the National Guard, I had the local training, the low-level officer, but too later, maintenance officer and whatever assignments you had.

WC: Do you want to mention some of the units you commanded?

JS: Yes, one of the things I was also assigned one time is the club officer. I'd have to take care of the club. But as things progressed, I ended up being the company commander as a captain of the infantry. Then my next assignment I served on staff at different various assignments, and then I was made the executive officer of the battalion. Then in 1964, my commander retired, and I was able to take his position, as now I'm the colonel. I was a major at that time, I was the commander of the unit that I had enlisted a few years before that. Then after four years of command of this 105th infantry, they disbanded the 27th Infantry Division, which at that time is an armored division, they disbanded that, and I had to go. I was sent to Albany to assignment over all the headquarters there of the provost officer in that location. Another outfit in Schenectady at that time, was the 7th Maintenance Battalion. That commander of that unit was replaced, and I was sent back to Schenectady as commander of the [seventh of the seventh maintenance battalion], which I served in that position for four years. After that position, I was eligible for O6 position colonel, and I had to move to another location, and I was sent to Troy, New York as a commander of the 205th Support Group, which commanded four battalions in that position. I had two maintenance battalions, one armored battalion, and one MP battalion as my assignment throughout the state. After that period of time, I was sent over to Troy, to the Chief of Staff at the higher headquarters. In those positions I was able to really be involved in all non-divisional units in the state of New York which extended from Brooklyn to Buffalo and Carthage, wherever, covered the whole state so we had units all over, but I was the chief of staff. And of course, during all this training, I had continued my education with the military. I had gone to a company officer course at Fort Benning Georgia...that was a four-month course. In 1962, I went back to Fort Benning to attend a career officer course, which was a six-month course. Then I went to studies at the Command and General Staff College, which was in conjunction with the reserve program and field training tours every four years. And I completed it, graduated from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, can't give you the dates, but makes me eligible for colonel. In the meantime, it was all of other courses, two-week courses, [that I attended to all those kind of courses.] When I was in Fort Benning, in 1962, one of my training was to be a nuclear weapons deployment officer, and we were training as part of our regular courses...that was part of it...and we were into all secret material, that we had to count pages and books, and we had to count empty pages, and we had to account for every piece of paper that we were studying. As a matter of fact, we were locked up into a caged building...they called it Brown Hall...was the name of that building...and we went into this cage, and no papers in or out, and when you finished the course, they counted every piece of paper that you had, even empty pages, and you destroyed everything that you had written anything down. So anyways, I was trained to be a nuclear weapons deployment officer. So, when you talk about nuclear and stuff like that, I have

some background on what I had studied, and of course know what happened in 1945, with the atomic bomb. I have a good idea what can happen if you see the latest thing that happened to Japan and other places...that's dangerous stuff.

WC: Now did you maintain a civilian occupation too, or were you full-time military?

JS: No, I worked, I worked from 1951. I went to work for Schenectady County. I was a mechanic helper, and after I worked in that position, I got to be a mechanic, and then I got to be the shop foreman, and then after that I became the supervisor of automotive repairs. That was the same time that I was doing all this other stuff with the military... pretty busy.

WC: Definitely, now did you stay in contact with anyone you were in the active Army Air Force with?

JS: I was in contact with my crew members, they came from...one fellow was from Long Island, we had somebody from Kansas, the state of Washington. We were all over the country, Missouri's, stuff like that. Every Christmas we always exchanged credit cards, Christmas cards I should say, not credit cards [chuckle]. [So I knew that the people then when I graduate.] When I retired from the military in 1979, we had a retirement party for me over at Albany, and I got the word out to those some of those crew members that I was retiring. The night of my banquet dinner, I sat there with the other people and looked around, and who was sitting there from out of nowhere was my pilot, and my navigator was sitting there.

WC: Wow

JS: Because we had this exchange at that party...after that they decided that we should have a reunion. Now you remember that we were short one guy now because the co-pilot had passed away, so the nine of us went to Connecticut from all over. Met there in Connecticut at the navigators home, and we stayed there for a weekend, and had a heck of a time...with talking and talking and talking, [and we had occasion,] my wife had met the other wives and we had a good time. So that was our connection, but we always tried to, if nothing else, to send a card, or make a phone call.

WC: Now did your unit have any reunions, the 10th Air Force?

JS: Now that was a different type - like a ship they had people who stayed together for years. We were there for one-year period of time, and then people would rotate in, the pilot, crews did stay there long enough to get associated with. I knew some of the guys, but never followed up throughout the years. My connection was with those nine people, eight people. You see the difference is with me, is that I was so active with the National Guard side of the house. Now if you want to talk about friends that I had there, I had a lot there, because we were a stable unit and were there for a long period of time.

WC: Now did you end up joining any veteran's organizations?

JS: I belong to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), a full life member of the VFW. I was a life member for Hump Crewmen's Association [unclear] and I was a life member in the 7th Bomb Group also. All those outfits, like everything else, unless it's a big get-together, each one of those...the Hump Pilots Association that's what that was...slowly, but surely they just dropped off because they weren't enough [covers]. All those units, those with us from World War Two, they're all done away with. Now the VFW, I'm still a life member, because I'm so active with my National Guard, I never got involved in a friendly thing with those kinds of people. But those guys, like everything else, there were sailors and marines, and everything else, but I was too busy with my civilian job plus my National Guard job, I had more than I could handle.

WC: I normally ask, how did your time in the service change or affect your life once you left the active service, you went into the National Guard for a very, very long distinguished career so, do you think that, well obviously, have you not gone into the active army during World War Two, you probably never would have joined the National Guard right?

JS: I don't know, probably not, I would not have done that, but the war brought that up and it changed my life and a lot of other guys lives for sure...some good, and some bad...but because I was, I had that training, and it's all stayed with me. As I tell my wife even to this day, I know how to make a bed because in basic training, the first day, [basically with reception,] at Fort Dix, one of the first thing they told us is how to make a bed, and the guy who was a corporal said "I'm going to show you how to make this bed, and this is the last time I'm going to show you". But those kind of things is how you, how you are in your life, is how you do things. Now you talked about the schooling that I had, I didn't have the college, and now I find out because I'm in an officer branch, serving in schools, I was kind of reluctant to get into that because I didn't have the background for schools. But I found out that I could have done well in college if I had pursued that, because I got into military schools, a couple of [law or long] schools that I attended, the four months, in six months, I was in the upper third of my class, and I competed with National Guard people, reserve people, and also active duty officers in those same courses. So I was able to, if I had pursued college, I'm convinced that I could have done all right...but again I did pretty good as it is, I think.

WC: Definitely. When and where did you meet your wife?

JS: Oh, that's another story. My wife was training in [Ellis or Dallas] hospital as a nurse and my wife was a cadet Nurse, and the thing was that when she finished high school, she would go into the Navy as a nurse.

WC: Now this is during World War Two?

JS: World War Two, we've been married a long time. My wife came from near Cooperstown, and came to Schenectady, and I was gone when she was in that

training. But she was...funny part about that whole thing...she had to go six months at a time to different schools, she spent six months down in New York to a hospital down there, and then when I was just discharged from Rome, New York, my wife so happened to be in a psych Hospital up in Rome, New York. I didn't know her, I hadn't met her, till I got home, and I met nurses, the student nurses, that were pretty nice. The day... [The story,] of my birthday, 1944...1946 was my birthday, the student nurses that were around there, they had a party for me at a local pub. That particular day my wife came back from Rome, New York on the train and she got to where she lived; she lived in Union College at that time because they had taken over a whole building for nurses, and she got back to where she lived. She expected to find all her nurse friends and they weren't there, they're at a party and the story is, between my wife and I is in fact, she found out she didn't even like me at that time because...we kid around about that...but because later on I met her, and we got married in 1947...and still married! (He laughs)

WC: Any children?

JS: We had two daughters of our own and the third daughter is an adopted granddaughter which is the daughter of my oldest daughter. So, for all intent and purposes, we had three daughters and no sons.

WC: Okay, and how many granddaughters?

JS: Just the one that ended up to be my daughter. And she's 40 years old now.

WC: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about, that we hadn't touched on, of your military or guard experiences?

JS: No, I don't think so, I just think the thing I could say in my case, we mentioned this earlier, is how things change your life...going into the military changed my life. Becoming an officer in the National Guard changes my life, and my daughters will say to you or anybody else that I'm strict, but I think I'm fair with everybody. You can't command all the people that I commanded, if they didn't have the respect of you, and in life that works both ways. When we make plans for things I always thought about the guy on the bottom, the private, because I remember the days that I was the private, and I always said if we have to wait two hours for something to happen, why can't we do it in one hour, and that was my whole theory. But I guess by and large, that covers the whole thing.

WC: Well thank you so much for your interview.

JS: This is my appreciation. My wife told me to do this for quite a while, and I just kept putting it off and putting it off. I guess I finally did it because I talked to you, and I'll do the paperwork and get it to you and we can complete this.

WC: Well thank you again, and thank you for your service!