

Oliver M. Csontos
Sergeant First Class U.S. Army Airforce
Veteran

Michael Russert
Wayne Clarke
Interviewers

Interviewed May 5th, 2003
Latham, New York

Q: Alright. This is an interview at the division of military naval affairs Latham, NY June 5th 2003 approximately 9:30 A.M.. Interviewers are Michael Russert and Wayne Clark. Could you give me your full name and date of birth and place of birth, please.

OC: My name is Oliver M. Csontos, [spells name], my date of birth was 7/17/23, I was born in Detroit. Michigan.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering military service.

OC: Well, I went through grammar school and high school and I went to school of aviation trades, which I didn't graduate from, but it was two and a half years and I went right into the service at age eighteen.

Q: Where were you and what do you remember when you heard about Pearl harbor?

OC: I as just coming back from leave thanksgiving, I was stations Dow Field [AFB] Bangor, Maine, and I was coming back on the bus in Boston, [Massachusetts] when I heard the boys shouting 'extras!' and I looked out the window and saw 'Pearl Harbor Bombed'. I was heading back to my base in Maine. I reached the base the following morning, and there were guards all around, but I had no problem getting in, I got in. There was a big buzz going on of what we were going to do. No body was sure of what we were going to do. So we started packing, packed and boxed up the 43rd bomb group.

Q: You entered service prior to...

OC: I went in July 22nd.

Q: Were you drafted to did you enlist?

OC: I enlisted.

Q: Why did you select the Air Force?

OC: Because I had gone to the school of aviation training.

Q: Why did you go to the trade school?

OC: I was interested in aviation.

Q: Had you ever flown?

OC: No, no, I was just very much interested. I made models as a youngster. I went to the school because I originally intended to be a pilot. I got into the air force, but it didn't turn out that way. So, when I got back to Dow field we packed up and it was several weeks later that we all got on a train and went to Boston, Massachusetts. And there we got onto the Queen Mary.

12,000 troops. Four sittings of meals, four groups. And then we took off from Boston, [Massachusetts] and we sailed down the coast. We got into the gulf of Mexico and we refueled and resupplied ourselves and from there we went down to Rio de Janeiro. Again, refueled and resupplied.

Q: Now, were you a convoy or a single ship?

OC: No, it was a single ship. Because the Queen Mary was a quite fast ship and they didn't think the subs could catch us. So we got into Rio de Janeiro harbor and refueled and restored ourselves and we stayed there a day or two. And then we got across to Cape Town, Africa. The whole trip took about forty days. We got to Cape Town and again resupplied and everything, came around the cape horn and went through the Indian Ocean. We went through a horrendous storm, even the English crew were quite concerned because we were tipping, they thought we would keel over. We got into the west coast of Australia, Fremantle, Australia. We were there for a day or two, I don't know how long. We came around the straights, came up to Sydney. We were bivouac in the racetrack. We had big burlap bags with straw for mattresses, [chuckles] and that's where we stayed. And then we went on from there and got several places we went to. We went up the coast of Australia and stayed in different areas. Finally we wound up in the very northern part of Australia where we hooked up with our B17's.

Q: Now, how were the B17s brought across?

OC: I'm not sure. I would imagine they were flown across with larger fuel tanks because their fuel capacity wasn't that great to make a flight completely across. So we picked them up there and we formed our groups. We had headquarters, squadrons, 63rd, 4th and 5th. And we started flying missions out of the northern part of Australia.

Q: Were you with the same crew the entire time?

OC: No. No. We were with different crews at different times. I was in various positions. We flew bombing runs up into the different islands of Rabaul, [Island of New Britain], Wewak, [New Guinea], Milne Bay, [Papua New Guinea], all of these areas. Here's some more of the photos if you're interested.

Q: Okay, why don't you hold these up to the camera and tell us a little bit about them.

[NOTE: Please see video for images]

OC: This is our crew of the Black Jack, this one I was tail gunner, I think, at the time.

[Indicates 8 x 10 image of crew with plane nosing left]

Q: Where about are you?

OC: I'm right here. [indicates on image, back row third from left]

Q: Now did you name that plane?

OC: No that was named already, I guess the crews got together and named them all.

[Camera man converses for better shot of images]

Q: Now tell us about that one, it is a different plane, isn't it?

OC: No this is the same, its the Black Jack from a different angle. This is one side and this is the other side.

Q: Oh okay, show us the other side because the nose decoration is a little different.

OC: Yeah a little different it showed up all our different bombing runs and what not. [Shows second 8 x 10 images of crew with plane nosing right, missing engine cover, showing munitions damage to nose hull]

Q: Where are you in the second picture.

OC: Down here at the bottom [indicates image, bottom row center]

[Camera man converses for shot]

Q: Now in the bombing runs in the Pacific did you receive a lot of flack when you went into the bombing runs?

OC: Yes, we did receive a lot of flack. We received all kinds of flack. Enemy aircraft. These are the crews we had, and the pilots. Many of our guys didn't come back. [searching images] I had some stuff here.

Q: You were with the 5th Air Force, then?

OC: Yes.

Q: What were the majority of your mission? What kind of targets?

OC: Japanese airports. A lot of shipping transports. We had to hit the Bismark Sea Battle. We hit the Bismark Sea Battle and we sunk I don't know how many transports. It was because of this that our crew, most of the crew was awarded a distinguished Flying Cross. As I was, too. We hit the Huron Gulf, Bismark Sea Battle, Milne Bay, all of these ports were where the Japanese were for a good while. We were bombing transports, we hit an awful lot of transports. Japanese transports, we sunk them.

Q: What was it like a bomber against a ship. Can you describe that?

OC: Well, we were say maybe 10,000 feet. It was up to the bombardier and navigator to get us in position. Of course we experienced a lot of flack from the ships. We tried to drop- in fact we did sink a destroyer. We tried to sink a couple cruisers. But then because the probability of hitting ships from that height with the small bombs [was so small] we developed what they call skip bombing. Now this is a thing where you come in say maybe 500 feet over the water, and you're heading at a ship, a transport, and you are maybe a thousand feet from the transport and you drop the bombs and they skip along the water. And then of course we peel away and these bombs make a definite hit on the side of the transports. That's how we developed that and we sunk a good number of ships in that way. In fact one transport we dropped the bomb and it skipped over the transport and hit then a destroyer on the other side. So we were good that way.

Q: Now this was with the B17 that you came in like this.

OC: The B17 were flying fortresses, they were really *terrific* ships. Best ever. We came home... I'll give you a summary. This was the 24th we were ordered to attack a convoy-

Q: 24th Of what, Sir?

OC: November 24th, possibly in '42. We were loaded to attack a convoy of five destroyers coming presumably to Leyte, [Philippines]. Part of our bombs were fused with four second delays. The others were 1/10th second delays. We spotted the convoy climbed to about three thousand five hundred feet, cut our throttles and RMP back and made our first skip bombing run at 200 feet at 250 miles per hour. The bombs just hit off the end of the boat and the ack-

ack [antiaircraft fire] hit in the tail gunners ammunition can exploding about seventy shells. A fire started and then we rushed back and put out the fire.

The next run of skip bombing a bomb hit directly on or very near the boat starting a fire. And on the right side of the ship. This time the radio operator and two more men were injured, but not seriously. There were a number of flights like that. That's the way we did it.

Q: You mentioned here in the form you filled out that you were a flight engineer but that you also served in gun positions also?

OC: Yes. I started as a tail gunner when I first got onto the crews. And then I went up to assistant engineer, and because of my background with the school of aviation trades, and everything that I learned at that trade school, they gave in the army but I already had so that way promoted me to the top turn as flight engineer. And in this I assisted the pilot and copilot adjusting the throttles and pitch propellers and transferring fuel from tank to tank so they would be balanced out.

One instance is where we hit Milne Bay, [Papua New Guinea] and we skip bombed a ship there, too, and turned around and hit some storms, very bad storms. We didn't think we were going to make it. We were running out of fuel [chuckles], so we were looking for the first place to land that we could. As we were coming into an emergency strip, because our fuel was that low, our ball turn operator had the guns down and he was trying to get them back up because they were jammed. So I came down from the top turret to get the gun back up, but we couldn't do it. Finally the pilot said we got to come in because we're out of fuel. As we were starting the approach coming in, it was midnight and the storm was horrendous. Finally the turret was able to eject up and we landed safely and we taxied to the end of the runway and the engines stopped- we were out of fuel. That was one of the things... we refueled from fifty gallon tanks and then flew back to Port Moresby, [Australia].

There are a number of instances like that. Where we went through a lot of electrical storms down there, too. One of them I remember well because we were at about 10,000 feet and the plane was all encompassed with Saint Elmo's Fire. The propeller tips, the antennas, the edges of it. We were going along and we dropped from 10,000 feet to about 2,000 feet. Looking out alongside the pilot and copilot, the wings of the B17 must have curled about two feet or so, it seemed like it. Unbelievable. We dropped down to 2,000 feet and then stopped. Now in the back one of the assistant engineers was holding onto this this railing that was guide rail he was holding with two hands. And he was holding on with two hands and he was holding on so tight that when we stopped he had pulled that whole thing right down into a big U shape. [chuckles] That was quite an experience and we had quite a number of other experiences like that.

One time we were going along, we were on a reconnaissance mission and we were hit by seven zekes [Likely Mitsubishi A6M Zero, possibly A6M8 64?], these were the bigger type zero's I believe. The ship that we took wasn't our own B17, it was an older one we used for reconnaissance missions. And we were flying along and these zekes spotted us and they came along and they attacks us and hit us along the front, side, the back. And unfortunately none of our guns operated. We had one .30 cal gun that was able to be operated but the rest, the .50 cal the shells were jammed the shells were old split casings so we could not shoot. There was one zekes coming in off our right wing and I was up in the top turret I had the sights on him and I thought, 'I can maybe get this guy' he was leading like he was maybe on fire from the

shooting. So as he's coming in close I tried to fire... my guns wouldn't fire. I didn't know what was the matter. So I grabbed the cables [mimics grabbing upward and pulling down hard] to eject the shells or to put new shells in and I kept doing that several time and he is still coming in on us. And he went overhead and he missed us completely, and I couldn't get him. But I lifted up the casings of the .50 cal and there was a slug in each one of the chambers and there was also one in the bolt and I was slamming them... I thought my head would have been blown up and my knees turned to water and I sat down on the turret and I just couldn't move for a couple minutes.

But I think it was that mission there that we got a flack hit and the pilot got flack in his left thigh. And because we couldn't fire, shoot our guns, the only evasive tactic we could take was to get down low on the water. Now, the zekes had firepower but their firepower wasn't as great as ours so to reach us they had to get in real close. And getting down real low on the water they had to pull out before they could actually hit us with any kind of firing. We were that low on the water that we put four wakes into the water from the propellers. And standing where I was I could look into the bomb bay, and the bomb bays don't close tight, and I could see sprays of water coming up, we were that down low. That was the only way we could get away from them.

We had other missions that we had, that we received, I received anyhow, the distinguished flying cross. As did the crew members

Q: Let me just ask you something. Were there any repercussions, did anyone get in trouble because the guns didn't work?

OC: You better believe it that they got in trouble. We chewed and chewed on people. There were the armament people that were supposed to take care [of it]. Whether it was an older ship and just used primarily used for reconnaissance but those guns were supposed to be working and working well.

Q: Now were those guns supposed to be cleaned daily like after every mission?

OC: On our regular ships, yes. We pre-fired all the guns as soon as we got up, pre-fired them all to make sure they work. But this time for some reason or another we didn't because we were on this 'easy' recon mission which didn't turn out to be too easy.

Q: How many missions were you on total?

OC: [Reaching for more papers and pictures], Well, I flew officially fifty-one missions. Actually I flew fifty-three, but the pilot that I was with at that time had been ill and had been in a hospital so he was lacking the amount of missions that he needed. He needed about two more, and I had about fifty-tw at the time. So he asked if I would finish up with him. And I said 'jeez I dunno, I don't wanna push this too much.' So I did fly the last two missions with him which was a total of fifty-three. But they only credited me with the fifty one which was fine. [mutters]

Q: Did you wear a flack jacket at all?

OC: No. No we didn't wear our chutes or flack jackets, nothing. We just flew our regular overalls.

Q: You had them in the plane though?

OC: Oh, everything was in the plane, yeah. The parachutes were in the plane and the flack

jackets but we never really wore them because sometimes they were cumbersome.

Q: Did you have to wear the thermal suits like they did in Europe

OC: No, no because our altitudes weren't as high. I think in Europe they went up to 20,000-25,000 feet. Rarely we went up to twenty, because then you'd have to take oxygen. Because of our area we were flying more in the 10-15,000 foot range.

Q: Did you ever have the leather jackets.

OC: We always had the leather jackets, the fur lined ones.

Q: Did you decorate yours at all?

OC: No.

Q: Did they decorate them in the Pacific, were there a lot that decorated them?

OC: The leather jackets? No, I don't recall any of them having decorated leather jackets. General [George Churchill] Kenney decorated us, we were all on line with the DFC.

Q: Well I mean painting things on your jacket like your plane-

OC: No, I don't recall that.

Q: I wasn't sure because a lot of the European-

OC: Yeah I know. No, we didn't do that. Can I read this small excerpt from this?

Q: Sure.

OC: This episode occurred February 14th, this was the night raid on Rabaul. Our plane harassed the enemy and drew anti-aircraft fire so the other bombers and the formation could make the runs without interference. The situation read: this sacrifice was at great risk, and the bomber narrowly missed being forced into the sea, that was us. One engine was put out of commission by a concentration by Jap batteries but the B17 leveled off and made its own bombing run over the target. The second part of the exploit unfolded on the return flight to home base some where in Australia the plane, we encountered, one of those terrific mid-summer tropical storms and we was hit by lightning a second engine damaged and our radio was made useless. So we went home on about one and a half engines I guess. Gasoline supply began to run low the ship bucked the storm, but we got home okay. That was the deal there. There were other instances where this gives you a great account of what different missions we had. The pilots and...

Q: How long were you on the Pacific.

OC: Well we got down there... I think it was... we were on the Queen Mary for forty days so we landed some time in March. I'm not sure just of the dates now. And I came home in November of '44... [Asks Nan, wife, off camera]... '43. So that's a good eighteen to twenty months I was down in the Pacific there.

Q: Now you were still in the service of July of '45. What did you do when you returned to the states?

OC: I got recommendations from all the pilots I went to flight cadet school. I signed up as the flight cadet. But at that time they weren't training many pilots. So I was just, we were just status quo. So I decided instead of just being status quo I resigned the flight cadet session and then I was sent up to West Overfield, Massachusetts as a flight chief, as a crew chief, servicing

planes. That's where we were. Not much else I think.

Q: What was your reaction when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt? Where were you and what was your reaction?

OC: President Roosevelt? I can't tell you. I don't remember that at all, where I was or what my reaction was.

Q: How about, did you have a reaction to the dropping of the atomic bombs?

OC: Well. I don't know. It was- Of course it saved a great many American lives, and I think that was idea of it to save as many lives as we could. And I think in the final analysis I think president Truman did the right thing. Even though it was really devastating for the Japanese people. But I don't think without that bomb dropping of that bomb they had any intentions of surrendering as quickly as they did. But that was it I guess as far as that goes.

Q: Did you ever get to see any USO shows?

OC: I don't think so. [chuckles] Because in the Pacific in new guinea there it was nothing like that, that I can recall, that we had any USO shows for any of us.

Q: I notice that you said you were injured or wounded, your left knee and right foot? Was that-

OC: Yeah, I was injured even before I went overseas. When we were up in Bangor, Maine. We were loading big boxes and my leg got caught and twisted and I pulled my knee. It was pretty bad but I decided just to let it go and stay with my outfit. When I was overseas I injured it a second time and I injured my foot, both feet. And I was in the hospital for a month or two, and the doctors said they would send me home. But I said no I wanted to go back to my outfit. I thought if I had a problem I could take care of it when I got home. Which is what I did, I went back to the outfit after that. And I've got the service disability because of the first knee. The second knee went back and I've got steel pins inside my left foot and my right foot is slightly malformed because of the injuries that I received while I was in the jungle.

Q: Did you have any problem with jungle diseases, like dengue fever and malaria?

OC: No, they gave us malaria pills, they gave us yellow pills for malaria. But we did have on occasions, you'd have fevers. I had fevers at different times from the jungles.

It was a crazy outfit we had over there because one time the flight surgeon brought a psychiatrist through. We were in pyramidal tents living in the jungles, and the temperature was about 100-110 degrees. And he brought this psychiatrist through, and we were there I guess about a year and had been flying flying, and he brought this psychiatrist through and they're looking at us- we knew they were coming through so we all put on these heavy wool jackets and we built a big bonfire. And we stood all around it heating our hands like [rubs hands] like it was good to be warm. And they were watching us. And after a while after the psychiatrist was leaving the flight surgeon ask 'what do you think of the outfit?' he said 'I haven't seen a sane man in here yet'. So that was one of the things, but we had a great time.

[all chuckle]

We used to get leaves and go down to Sydney Australia, come back up again and fly. Unfortunately we did lose a number of our people that were shot down to knocked down, crashed. Captain Mccauley was one of the greatest and unfortunately he left 63rd squadron

went into I think for 64th . Really shook [sic] him up. Took off one day and I guess his wheel well or something was on fire and he pulled off and crashed and was killed. That was one of the better pilots over there.

Q: What was his first name?

OC: Kenneth I think was his first name? It's in there [Indicates papers].

Q: How do you think your experience in the services changed or effected your life?

OC: Well it was a terrific experience it was worth a million dollars but I'll tell you I wouldn't take a million dollars to go through it again. I don't think it effected my life too much.

I got married before I got into the service of course. My childhood bride. No, the thing of it was because of the- I had an incident that happened to me. I was on leave and I was up in New York City in the Bronx and I was walking across the street- my knee would give out on my completely and I'd have to manipulate it and do all kinds of things to make it so I could walk again. And I said 'gee, this is pretty bad I'll turn myself into the hospital'. I was on leave, so I turned myself into the hospital- this is not a good story. They were very nice to me they put me in a bed and the next morning the doctors came around and this colonel came around at the same time and he said 'what's this guy doing here?' and they said 'well his knee is bad and he was on leave' he said 'he's on leave and he's coming in now?' and they said 'yes' and he said 'throw him the hell out of here!'. That was a bad experience for me, I said after all being overseas and coming through all this to get that kind of response from even from a colonel wasn't necessary. Things kind of soured me. All the formality kind of soured me. That's why I didn't stay in the service. And it kind of soured me on airplanes too. Overseas it was really very informal, the captains the lieutenants were great guys. We were just all one good crew. And we respected one another and that was it.

Q: Did you join any veterans organizations when you returned home?

OC: I was in the DAV when I was down in Florida for a while, but then I didn't continue. I was on leave in Sydney when the orders came through- I didn't expect it to- we were relieved to fly back home. They had sent all my stuff back down as much as they could. I had a few souvenirs and odds and ends and I never got them. From Sydney we went to New Zealand, stopped there. And then went up to one of the islands to refuel. And then from there we went up to Hawaii where we had to refuel. We stayed there for about two weeks in Hawaii. They had to put in two big bomb bay tanks so that we could make the flight to Frisco [California]. And we took off one night from Hawaii and landed in Frisco the next morning- straight through. That was a good experience.

We saw the bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge. And the crew were yelling at the pilot 'lets go underneath it! Lets buzz it!' Pilot said 'no way are we going to do that, there may be cables hanging from that thing, we came this far we're not going down now!' But we did buzz it. And we landed at Hamilton [Army Air] Field. And from there we got orders and dropped our B17 off in Oklahoma. From there I got a ride from a general to Ohio, bummed a ride with him, and from there I got some other rides to New York City to see my family.

Q: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that you served with?

OC: Yes my ball turn operator, Bill Donahue, was my best man. I did stay in touch several of the guys, unfortunately two of our crew Lefty Keyhan, Tom Hickey, that came back with us- again all the formalities here and what not- they decided they would go over to England and

fly as a flight crew in England on B17s. That's the 8th Air Force. Unfortunately they never made it back.

Q: Did you ever use the GI bill?

OC: Yes, for training. I did different kinds of job training and what not. I went to agricultural school, and on a GI bill I got into the jewelry trade. But nothing ever developed in it for me. And we got into farming and what not. And then I got out of that and then I got into the state. And then I was a heating and ventilating engineer. Assistant engineer.

Q: Did you ever use the 52-20 club?

OC: You got to refresh me.

Q: It was fifty-two weeks twenty dollars a week... kind of an unemployment...

OC: I don't think I did, did I Nan? [asks wife off camera] I did? Yeah, I did. I guess I did she says 'yeah'. I guess I did.

Q: Tell us, you wrote down where these were taken? Where were these photographs taken?

OC: This one was taken in Bangor, Maine, [indicates large portrait of self in uniform] this one was taken in Australia [indicates smaller image of self in flight jacket]- we were on leave at the time and we were in Sydney and I had this taken and sent back to my folks. But this one was up in Dow Field, [indicates larger first image].

Q: How about these, these are different than what we saw earlier.

OC: Yeah this was several crews, this was our crew down here, and this is here right here. These were I think 63rd bomb crew. This was in this book that my wife purchased, it was the entire crew and flight happenings down in the South Pacific of the 5th Air Force.

Q: How about this? We got to get this one in!

OC: This is just before we were married. [indicates portrait of self and wife 'Nan'.] It was a child bride. [laughs]

Q: [laughs] Where were you married?

OC: New York City. And that was on May 19th, and this past May we I guess we have out 58th anniversary. Yeah this is us, we were both much slimmer at the time.

[all chuckle]

Q: Well, thank you very much.

OC: There were a lot of other things, but you can't remember them all.