

**Robert Earl Parker
Veteran**

**Michael Russert
Wayne Clarke
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on August 24, 2005
Springwater, New York**

Q: Could you give me your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth please?

RP: Robert E. Parker. I was born on August 13, 1922 in Rochester, New York.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering the service?

RP: High school.

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

RP: I was just out of high school and I was working at Kodak as a millwright's helper. I was surprised to hear about it, I guess I would say. My brother was drafted. Then, I enlisted in September of 1942 and they called me up in February of 1943.

Q: Did you enlist in the Air Force itself?

RP: Yes

Q: Why did you do that?

RP: Because I always wanted to try to fly. [laughing]

Q: You had never flown before that?

RP: No, never.

Q: Where did you go for your training?

RP: I was in the Southeast Flight Training Command. Preflight was Maxwell Field, Alabama.

Q: Did you have basic training first?

RP: Well, you have Preflight, Primary, Basic, and then Advanced Training. Preflight is where you get your military etiquette training--like the Army's basic training. Marching and drilling were at Maxwell Field.

Q: What type of airplane did you fly?

RP: In Primary we started in the PT-17 biplane. It had a 225 horsepower engine.

Q: How did you like that plane?

RP: Very good. It was a Stearman and it was very stable. It had a narrow landing gear so it had a tendency to [unclear] but our instructors always taught us how to pull out of it.

Q: Is that what you soloed in?

RP: You had to fly solo at every level of training. You solo in your Primary, then, in Basic you fly solo in the BT-13, the Vultee, which had a 450 horsepower engine. It was a double seater in the front and back. Then I went into the Advanced trainer which was the AT-10, a twin engine aircraft and I had to solo in that. After graduating from that, we went to a deployment staging area in Salt Lake City.

Here we had a crew put together and then went to [unclear] Texas and started flying the B-17. We didn't have an instructor pilot. I was put on the crew as a co-pilot and just learned to fly from the pilot. After that training, they figured we were ready so we went to Lincoln, Nebraska and picked up a brand new B-17. We flew that over to England, [unclear] Ireland. The first six missions that we flew were south of England.

Q: Did your crew all stay together from that point on?

RP: Yes, we were put together in Salt Lake City and stayed together thru the war.

Q: When you went to England and started flying your missions, did you keep the same plane the entire time?

RP: No

Q: Did you ever get a chance to name a plane?

RP: No, I was never that fortunate.

Q: Did you decorate your jacket at all?

RP: I still have my jacket. It's kind of mildewed. When our crew got transferred down to Italy we had rest leave in the Isle of Capris and I had a nice looking girl put on the back of my jacket.

Q: Was that girl painted on the airplane too?

RP: No, just on my jacket.

Q: Did you paint a bomb on your jacket for each mission?

RP: No

Q: Now who did the painting for you, someone on base?

RP: No, I had an Italian artist on Isle of Capris do it. [pause]

We flew 6 missions out of England and then our crew got transferred. Our last mission was right before D-day, I think it was. We flew 2 of them out of England and bombed the gun installations in back of the coast of France.¹

Q: Did you run into any opposition?

RP: Just a lot of flak. I don't recall getting attacked by fighters that day.

Q: Most of your missions out of England were support missions or in preparation for D-day?

RP: I have a whole list of them here. [pause] Brussels, Coudre, [unclear], Seraucourt, [unclear], Bologna where we flew on 2nd of June.

Q: Were they long missions?

RP: They were 4 hours 55 minutes and 6 hours.

Q: June 2 was the last missions you flew out of England?

RP: Yes. My records show I got credit for 2 missions on each one of those. Out of England you have 25 sorties. Out of Italy if you fly above a certain parallel you get credit for 2 missions. Below that parallel you get credit for 1 mission.

Q: First you were with the 8th Air Force in England and when you went to in Italy you were with the 15th?

RP: Yes [counting] I flew 29 trips.

Q: Were you ever escorted by the Tuskegee Airmen?

RP: Yes, they were in Italy too. They were a good outfit. It was hard sometimes to distinguish their P-51s from the Germans Me-109 if they are coming in head on.

Q: Where were most of your missions when you went out of Italy?

RP: I'd say most of them were to Blechhammer oil refinery in Germany. [counting] There were 7 to Blechhammer.

Q: How many times did you fly into Ploesti?

RP: Just once on the 23rd of June, 1944.

Q: You mentioned you crash landed 3 times. Do you want to tell us about those?

RP: [laughs] The first one we ran out of gas. And then about 4 or 5 days later PBV² came and picked us up.

QL: Where did you crash land? Could you describe the landing?

RP: It was on the island of Vis or Vir, I can't remember which one.³ We tried to land on the water hoping to lose speed as we neared the beach so we wouldn't hit the stone fence. Two of our engines had run out of gas so we were flying on the

other 2 engines. We couldn't really get power to go around the fence and we didn't know how much fuel was left. We over shot and hit the stone fence. Naturally that stopped us pretty good.

Q: Were any of your crew members killed on that crash landing?

RP: Two were killed on that landing. Three got hurt, two or three. The Partisans⁴ hid us out in the fence. Germans must have come over on the island that night because we heard a lot of shooting.

Q: Did you have to destroy your airplane or set it on fire or just left it?

RP: We tried but there was no fuel in it. We took a [unclear] pistol and tried to set the plane on fire but it didn't work.

Q: How was the PBY contacted that you were there?

RP: The Island had headquarters where they must have had a radio to contact someone in Italy.

Q: What happened your second time you crash landed?

RP: The second time we had a brand new B-17 they wanted us to test hop. We were testing hopping it and we started screwing around. [laugh] We flew in formation with a P-38 on the water and we almost flew him into a spear of land rising up. We got him mad at us, and then we buzzed an English bivouac area on shore. We went up from this valley. As we were climbing and just about ready to reach the top, we downdrafted. This set the plane downward and the left wing caught the top of the pine trees. We hit along the side of the mountain. Needless to say it ruined the airplane and I have a Court Marshall in that room over there that I could show you too. [chuckling] No one was injured but it ruined the airplane.

Q: And then there was one more time?

RP: When I came back from overseas I was in the ferrying division transporting planes. I was flying with this guy who was a flight officer. He had been a flying sergeant⁵, with 1500 hours flying time. We were ferrying an old RA 37 twin engine Ventura bomber from Reading, Pennsylvania down to New Mexico. When we got there, we lowered the gear and one gear locked. I was going as copilot but I don't know why because the plane had only had one set of controls. I was sitting doing nothing in this empty space that goes down into the nose. He said to pump a certain lever. I started pumping and all this hydraulic fluid came pouring out. He flew by the tower and they said the gear appears to be down and locked. It was the right gear that was locked so the pilot landed mostly on the left. When we lost flying speed, we settled and the right gear gave out and we go [makes circling motions] down the runway. That was my third one.

Q: Did it destroy the airplane?

RP: Pretty much. I don't know what they were using that plane for. Maybe we were just moving it to be stored.

Q: What would you say was one of your most harrowing missions? Which mission or missions stands out more than the others, besides the ones you crashed on?

RP: On one mission we were sent to a northern oil refinery in [unclear] but this officer who was leading us flew over the southern oil refinery instead. We caught flak there and then, while we were up about 20-30,000 feet, he made a big 360 degree turn to go over the northern refinery and at that altitude the God damn planes were strewn out all over the place. We couldn't keep up with him. A lot of the planes couldn't keep up with him. Fighters really jumped in on us then.

Q: Do you know why he did something like that?

RP: Because he picked the wrong one! To hell with the north, he should have just bombed the southern one. I was only a 2nd lieutenant and he was a colonel, so what was I going to do?

There was another mission that stands out too. I was flying this mission with a pilot who had a habit of keeping his feet up on the crossbar where the rudder petals were. Right above the right foot rudder is a switch for the alarm bell. All of a sudden, I get a call from the bombardier who wanted to know what's the matter. I said "Nothing, why?" He responded, "The alarm bell is on!" We are up at high altitude and I'm pointing to get the pilot's attention but he doesn't know what's wrong. I finally take my oxygen mask off and yelled at him to shut the alarm bell off. By the time he realized what was going on, two guys had bailed out of the plane. When we got back for debriefing, he tried to tell the debriefer that I had told him to turn the bell on. If I was going to get another Court Marshall it should have been then because I called him every name in the book. I turned to the bombardier and asked, "What did you tell me Bill?" Bill answered, "I told you to turn the alarm bell off." I stated "Yes, and that is the first I knew of it." Shortly after that, Ploesti was liberated and two airmen who were freed from the prisoner of war camp came back through. The pilot was sent home.⁶ So, I got checked in as first pilot.

One of them kind of bothered me because I had to do something I hadn't done before. This incident was when I was first pilot. Have you guys ever been in a B-17?

Interviewers: Yes, I have been in a 17.

RP: Well, there is ball turret and they crank it up and the gunner gets to it from inside and he controls it from inside electrically. When he gets out for landing, you are supposed to be able to crank it so that the guns are pointing straight back,

not straight down. But this time, when he got out, the guns were pointing straight down. They couldn't crank it. I told them to get a wrench but they couldn't find one. I asked the ball turret gunner if he wanted to land in the turret. He did and he held the guns in the straight back position. After we landed, the ground crew kind of shit in their pants when the gunner opened the door and fell out of the turret backwards. That one was kind of exciting. [Laughter from all]

Interviewer: It's a good thing the landing gear didn't collapse on that landing!"

Q: What were your relations like with the people in Italy? Did you have much contact with the local people?

RP: Just in the nightlife. The best place I went was the Isle of Capris. It was a beautiful place. Then we took a trip to that Blue Grotto that they have underneath the island there. Beautiful! I had no problems with the people in Italy.

Q: Was there a lot of drinking on your off time?

RP: I didn't do much in England but in Italy they had a squadron officers club. We would go there and tip back a few. They mostly had brandy. I didn't like it at first but when it's all you have you get used to it. In fact, when we first got to Italy, the officers got one bottle of whiskey a month and the enlisted men got a six pack of beer a month. I got one bottle of whiskey and then they cut off the whiskey and gave the officers beer and the enlisted men got nothing. So this bombardier and I would save up our beer and sneak over to the enlisted men's tent with our beer to play poker. When the guards came around, we would hide under the tent while enlisted men quickly took our seats. We shared our beer with them.

Q: Did you get to see any USO shows or any entertainment like that?

RP: The only one I saw was the Bob Hope show in Alabama. But I didn't any shows overseas.

Q: Did you wear your flak jackets on most of your flights?

RP: Yes.

Q: How about a side arm.

RP: Yes, a 45.

Q: Where did you encounter the most flak? In what raids, do you recall?

RP: I think it was at the Munich marshalling yards. The yards had flak guns set up on flat cars and when your plane was breaking away following the railroad, their guns would follow you on the tracks – they would go with you and there were black clouds. Munich was where it was heavy with blackclouds.

Q: How about being under attack by aircraft, were you ever?

RP: A few times. I forget what raid it was but on one of them, there were two fighters that went up ahead of us and then came head on toward us. We could see the front of their wings flashing fire but we couldn't tell if they were shooting at us or a plane behind ours. We saw a lot of dogfights going on up there where our fighters would get them.

Q: Did you ever encounter a jet?

RP: Near the end. I actually didn't see the jet but the contrail from it. You could tell because the pilot was going up as fast as the planes diving down. It's a good thing they didn't have those from the beginning!

Q: Did you ever go back with much damage to the plane?

RP: One time they counted 365 holes and one of them was through the number 2 engine. I didn't even notice any change to the engine temperature or oil pressure but the ground mechanic said there was a hole right through one of the cylinder heads.

Q: Did you ever get a chance to fly a B-24?

RP: I acted as co-pilot when I was in the ferrying division but I didn't like the way you had to push the elevators in and out. The B-17s tilted nicely.

Q: When did you finally end up going back home?

RP: February 1945.

Q: When did you decide that you wanted to stay in the Air Force?

RP: Every time they came out with a service commitment form about how long an airman wanted to stay in, I always put down "indefinite." One time they required a 4.0 efficiency rating and I had a 3.9 so I didn't make it.

Q: Did you get called up for Korea?

RP: I volunteered for it. At that time I was a captain in the reserves and I told them I would take a reduction in rank. At that time, Mitchel Air Force base in New York was the command headquarters that I had to write to. I didn't get the call but, I still maintain that another enlisted Robert E. Parker from Chicago who was in Texas when I was there got the call instead of me. [laughing] I had even gotten a couple of letters from his girlfriend. At the time I volunteered for Korea, I had been flying C-54s from the States to Paris and Casablanca for Crescent Caravan⁷. Another group had flown planes even further back in 1945 or '46.

Q: In the reserves you were based out of Niagara Falls Air Force base? How long were you there?

RP: That was the only one I belonged to. I was there until 1968 I think.

Q: Anything you want to talk about during the time in the reserves?

RP: That P-51 that I flew scared the life out of me I can tell you that. We lived in the city then and I was flying over the city that day. My wife was out with our son who was little then and I was going to dive and buzz them. I was up about 3000 feet and I thought I was back far enough but, to keep seeing, I kept going down, down, down. I could almost see the dust in their eyes! It scared me so much I flew right back to Niagara Falls. When I got home, the guy next door said I shook his chimney. He was mad! That was a nice airplane but I wasn't a fighter pilot. [laughing] I want more than one engine on an airplane.

Q: You retired in 1968 as a Lieutenant colonel then? That's what you wrote.

RP: Let me think. I think my son wrote that.

Q: What were most of your duties while you were in the reserves.

RP: Just the flying. They made me a flight leader because I was a captain at that time. The only duty is to go up there one weekend a month and two weeks during the summer.

Q: Were you ever the company commander.

RP: No, no, not me. [chuckling]

Q: Did you ever make use of the GI bill?

RP: I took courses at RBI for two years on the GI bill. I took up business administration and accounting.

Q: Did you buy a home with the GI bill?

RP: I got a reduction on taxes but I didn't get a loan.

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

RP: The American Legion in Springwater, New York.

Q: Did you stay in contact with anyone who served with you?

RP: No, well, I heard from our sergeant of our flight crew once.

Q: How did your time in the service have an effect on your life?

RP: It made me enjoy it more.

Q: Do you think you would have had an opportunity to travel or fly like you did?

RP: No, I never would have been able to do those things.

Q: Would you talk us about some of your medals?

RP: [pointing] This is the Distinguished Flying Cross and an air medal, and a Victory in Europe medal. This is a 97th bomb group patch.

Q: Could we see the flight jacket you were talking about? [gazing] The Italian artist did a beautiful job on this.

Footnotes

1. unsure what the back of the coast of France means.
2. a search and rescue seaplane,
3. islands in the Adriatic Sea.
4. Resistance movement soldiers
5. an enlisted pilot
6. possibly these Ploesti prisoners could now take up their previous positions in the crew, enabling the pilot to be sent home.
7. Air Transport Command, delivering aircraft all over the world.
Presumably Robert was suggesting he was very well qualified to be called to serve in Korea.