

**Robert D. O'Brien
Veteran**

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NYS Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed at
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Q: This is an interview of Robert O'Brien. It is Tuesday July 30th, 2002 at the Division of Military Naval Affairs Headquarters, Latham, New York. The interviewer is Michael Russert. Could you tell me your full name, date and place of birth please?

RDO: Robert D. O'Brien. I was born August 11th, 1925 in New York City.

Q: What was your pre-war education?

RDO: I attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx. During that time, I worked forty hours a week as an usher in Radio City Music Hall. At that time, I enlisted in the Air Force.

Q: What year was that?

RDO: That would be 1943. I enlisted after completing a testing program for pilot training.

Q: Could you tell me before we go into your service experience, when did you hear or where were you and what was your reaction to the news about Pearl Harbor?

RDO: I really don't recall the reaction to it, but I do recall was going back to school after hearing of it. All of the windows were taped up. It was a scary proposition for me. It looked like the beginning of a war-torn area.

Q: You mean they taped up all of the windows in the school?

RDO: There were all crosses, so the glass wouldn't shatter when the bombs hit us.

Q: So, you worked while you were in high school?

RDO: Correct.

Q: Why did you enlist in the Air Force, the Air Corps?

RDO: I wanted to be a pilot and after being called up, actually when I was called up I got my orders to report for February 2nd, 1944 and I left my orders on my parent's dresser, so they'd know when I'd be called up. I imagine they were very delighted to see my name wasn't on the list. They never turned it over to find my name beginning with the next list on the back page. I just couldn't understand why they weren't concerned about me going into the service.

So, I got up early in the morning of February 2nd prepared by breakfast. My father heard me stirring about, came in and said, "What's going on here?". I said, "I'm going into the army". That roused the household. I guess, like all teenagers, I had that failure to communicate.

Q: I can relate to that. Where did you go for your basic training?

RDO: First off, I went to Fort Dix for indoctrination. Then I went to Greensboro, North Carolina and just about twenty days after reaching basic training, I got the word that my brother had been killed overseas. That was rather upsetting.

Q: What branch of service was he in?

RDO: He was in the Coast Guard. I thought it fitting that I should go home to be with my parents at that time, but I was told emphatically that no one left basic training for any reason. I went to the Red Cross to appeal to them which was a waste of time. I went to the chaplain which was a waste of time. I went to the base commander and I don't know where I got the nerves, but I just let them know that I either go with a pass or I go without a pass. Lo and behold, I never saw the base commander, but a WAC assistant came out with a five-day pass for me and went home.

I had not money and appealed to the Red Cross and they weren't very helpful. My barracks mates who I really didn't know at all chipped in and collected money for me to go home. Years later, I realized that I never repaid them, and they never asked to be repaid.

I left basic training and we went to flight training school in Florida. We never reached there. We found out that the flight training school had closed. The train reversed route and went off to Arlington, Texas for gunnery school. After gunnery school, went to Clovis, New Mexico for flight training and meet a crew. I was very fortunate the crew I joined had an experienced pilot. He was a pre-World War II pilot. He was a little older than the rest of us. It was a very intelligent group of people, so I was very fortunate they were so good. In Clovis, we had a lot of bad experiences. Many planes went down due to poor maintenance.

Q: What type of planes were you flying?

RDO: B-29's. A B-29, at that time, was still loaded with bugs. There were many crashes due to the engines of the plane plus very, very poor maintenance. It got so bad that the commander of the post issued an order that there would be no permanent personnel on the base allowed to leave until the crashes stopped. Lo and behold, they stopped almost immediately – very poor maintenance.

When our training was finished, we were then assigned to go to a place called Kearney, Nebraska to pick up a new plane to go overseas. We had no idea where overseas would be. Anyway, we got to Kearney, Nebraska. We saw the crews that were waiting there for their planes. They'd been there weeks after weeks which didn't upset us too much. We figured we'd be safe for a while. Two days later, we were sent to Florida and put on a converted B-24 then took off for parts unknown.

When I was in Clovis – going back a step – I was trained as a gunner. They had already filled the slot for a tail gunner, right gunner, left gunner, top gunner and I figured where's my position? They called me a "roving gunner" so I had to learn all positions as well as the bombardier's position.

In a quick order, they said to me you're a radar operator. I had never heard of radar. They sent me off to school, radar training. The radar sets were on a platform and they showed us the switch one way to turn it on and one way to turn it off. Then they showed us how to read a map. So, that was my training.

On the way overseas, I went to my navigator who I knew had been trained in radar. I said what is the radar all about? What does it do? We were never told that. He said that's a military secret. I can't tell you (laughs).

Anyway, we went overseas and wound up in India in a place called Piardoba. We started our missions from there flying over the Himalayas into China to bring bombs and other supplies. So, it would be back and forth on several occasions. That was in November of '44.

Then we started our serious bombing missions. One disastrous one for many of us was to Omura in Japan where we were lost. One of the reasons we were lost we didn't know about the jet stream at the time. We're blown so far off course. The navigator just couldn't understand how the winds could be that strong. He kept on compensating. He did find us. Actually, they were giving the order to bail out over the Himalayas some place, but he found our way home. One mission after another.

Q: How many missions did you fly?

RDO: All together, I had thirty-six.

Q: Did you name your plane? Was your plane named?

RDO: Our plane was named before we got it. We got a war weary one because we were new over there. It was called "The Untouchable" It was a good plane and after several missions, they decided to change all four engines on it. Then we were assigned to take that plane and test run it.

I guess good fortune for us. The officers were given a three-day pass. The rest of us took off to parts unknown. We didn't know that we had been assigned to that plane to test fly it. A young fellow that I had met just the day before who had graduated from grammar school with me, a fellow by the name of Morrissey. He took my place and the plane went up, caught fire, the wing burned off and the crew plus, I think, fifteen joy riders were all killed. Strangely enough, though it scared me afterwards, it was almost the anniversary of my brother's death. All I could think of, if I was on that plane and my folks got that message just one year after my brother, it would have been devastating.

Anyway, we went on many missions there. We went and bombed Singapore and Bangkok on several occasions. By the end of February, we learned that we were going to be off to parts unknown. Our plane was no longer with us, so we had to go by ship. We

went off and wound up in Tinian Island forty-seven days later. It was on Tinian Island that we completed most of our missions.

Q: So, you had a totally different plane?

RDO: When we got over there, we had a different plane.

Q: What was the name of that one?

RDO: We had several different planes.

Q: You didn't always have the same plane?

RDO: Not always. We were finally assigned a new plane which was unnamed and unpictured because some leading Admiral or General's wife decided it was obscene to have the pictures on the planes and they didn't want any other names on them. So our final plane had no name. It just had a number.

We lost our pilot just about July of 1944. We were all assigned, again fortunately or unfortunately, we were assigned training missions. That July, we knew the war was winding down. New crews were coming over and needed a little bit of training.

I was out goofing off swimming when my crewmate told me to get myself up to get on a plane for a training mission. I rushed up after a long delay. I was assigned to two different planes, one with my pilot and one with another crew, Captain Gay I believe it was. I had to train the newly arrived radar operators. They knew more than I did. They'd had a year's training in the states. They were all officers.

When we landed, we found that my pilot's plane, which I was assigned to as well, his plane crashed and all aboard there had been killed. I think there was twenty-eight people on that plane, joy riders and so on. He was killed in July. In August, we had the atom bombs dropped.

Q: What was your reaction to that?

RDO: Kind of cold. We didn't know what it was all about. When the bomb was delivered to our island, I can't remember the name of the ship it was brought on. You many know the story about that ship.

Q: Yes, I can't remember the name.

RDO: Indianapolis was it?

Q: I think it was.

RDO: When that ship came - we'd seen ships coming in before - that one delivered the atom bomb. We had no idea about it. The rumors started that a secret weapon was on the island. I don't know how the rumors started but most of us didn't pay any attention to it.

In August, the two bombs were dropped. I guess it was almost forty-five years later I was reading a book saying that our missions just prior to the dropping of the bombs were decoys. We had a mission to Japan. On our way back, the Enola Gay was going to Japan.

The same with the Bock's Car. On our way back from Japan, the Bock's Car was delivering their bomb on Nagasaki. In September, they sent us home.

Q: Do you have any other things that you want to relate about some of your earlier missions or your missions at all.

RDO: We had one to Singapore. We were very, very tired. The whole crew was very tired because we had been kept very busy with one mission after another when we were in India. We went off on this one mission to Singapore. The pilot said to the copilot or vice versa "I've got to take a snooze. Put it on automatic pilot". He reached over to put it on automatic pilot and, as he did it, he fell asleep.

We went in a very slow circle for I don't know how long. It was a question of should we abort this mission and go home and face ridicule. Everybody was sleeping on the plane except the navigator and he was in the Astrodome watching for a break in the overcast, so he could take a fix on the stars.

Finally, there was a break and he looked up and the stars were not where they were supposed to be. Immediately, he corrected our flight. We went on to Singapore and joined up with another crew bombing. We returned, we landed with just about fumes in the plane. That was seventeen hours and forty-five minutes of flying.

The next mission which was just a few days later, it was three hours shorter. They didn't usually give us enough fuel to waste three hours of flying time. Due to our very bright engineer, he was able to save fuel.

Q: How long did it take round trip to Japan to India?

RDO: Fourteen hours.

Q: From India to Japan and back. You flew round trips.

RDO: I don't recall the number of hours. Our crew only had one flight from China to Japan. Are you talking about from India to China?

Q: I didn't know if you were...I thought you were based in India.

RDO: We were based in India. We were also based in China.

Q: Then you made your bombing runs from China?

RDO: Both China and India. We'd either bomb Singapore or Bangkok those areas from India.

Q: I didn't know if you were going into Japan.

RDO: If we went to China, we had one bombing run into Japan and others to Nanking, Manchuria and so on in that part of the world.

Q: So, it wasn't until you moved to Tinian that you started to bomb the Japanese?

RDO: (unclear)

Q: I know that, but I meant the Japanese homeland.

RDO: I don't know if you knew about one of the raids into Singapore. One of our crews, I don't know which one it was, but they dropped a bomb right down the funnel of a ship

which was in the dry dock in Singapore. Rumor has it that the English government sued us for repair of that dry dock because we blew it to pieces.

Then I went on another mission to Singapore a few days later with a crew that was without a radar operator. I was assigned to it. I was told its going to be a "milk run". Do you know what a "milk run" is?

Q: I would like you to explain it for others.

RDO: A "milk run" don't worry about it, there's no danger whatsoever. So, we went on this recon mission that had no danger whatsoever. My duty was to take radar pictures over Singapore to see what was going on there.

They issued me a 35mm camera to take pictures with. I had never in my life seen a 35mm camera. I had no idea how to operate it and they said press a button. That was my training on a 35mm. So, I went on the mission and took pictures galore. I have no idea if they ever came out or not.

We were attacked by a hoard of Japanese fighters. They shot us up pretty badly, knocked out all communications on the plane, gave us a few scrapes nothing serious. I don't know if they called it shot down or shot up. We had to land at a place called Cox's Bazar which is the border of India and Burma.

It was an English base. Our plane was repaired and fueled up. The next day, we flew back to our base in India, but no one had ever communicated the fact that we were alive. My crew were rather shocked to see me walk in.

Q: Could you relate how you think the war changed or affected your life? Your service?

RDO: I actually only thought about that very, very recently. I think maybe I get cold.

Q: In what way? What do you mean?

RDO: There had been many, many deaths around me and, for some reason, they don't affect me emotionally. The last one, my most emotional since the war, was my father. That got me. My mother's death didn't. I don't know why except she had suffered, and I was glad to see her die. She was suffering. This wasn't lack of love or feeling. I just don't know. It just doesn't hit me emotionally.

Q: You received the Distinguished Flying Cross. What was that for?

RDO: There was one. Actually, there should have been a couple but not to me especially but to other members of the crew. We went to Japan. About the time we hit Iwo Jima on the way to Japan, we had a lot of engine trouble. Again, should we just land at Iwo Jima and abort the mission? Should we try to get back to our base on Tinian? It was decided to go on.

We bombed Japan with one engine that was completely out. By the time we got back to our base, we were flying on two engines. By the time we landed, one was just about ready to quit. We landed actually with one engine. They thought that was a gutsy thing to do. I believe that's what it was for.

But, as you know, they give out medals quite often based on the number of missions you complete. As I said, there was medals that should have been given out for other things, two were mentioned in that writeup I had.

The right gunner, the bombardier and the engineer had to go into our bomb bay doors. There's two bomb bays – two doors in each bomb bay. On one mission, the doors just opened up and stayed open which caused a lot of drag on the plane.

These three people went into the bomb bay doors after we descended. We were just off the island of Japan and open to attack by planes. We were all alone because we were falling behind our squadron. We went down to a lower altitude. The three of them went into the bomb bay doors without parachutes, without oxygen.

The tallest was the right gunner – Jim Sewell. They took turns sitting on his ankles as he lowered himself down into this open bomb bay door and hooked a cable to the bottom of the door then go around to the other side and hoist it up and lock it in place. He had to do that four times I believe at a height of 17,000 feet. You get yourself killed at 50 feet. I read that other people doing the same thing got the Silver Star, other medals. He was never put in for anything at all and he deserved it.

Q: What was your unit? What unit did you fly with?

RDO: I was with the 58th Bomb Wing.

Q: Did you use the GI Bill after the war?

RDO: Oh yes. I went to Manhattan College. Completed that. Went into industry but my big desire always had been to study chiropractic. I was an accountant and financial analyst and even back then I saw hanky-panky games with accounting. I didn't like it and unfortunately made my feelings known on a couple of occasions saying things like if it was that complicated, it has to be wrong. Playing games is going to catch up with you. I got out of it. My wife, also a wonderful woman. Did I mention I got married?

Q: That was the next question. When did you get married?

RDO: That's a tough question. 1957 I believe it was. She kills me because I can never remember. It was after college anyway. I got married and was fed up with industry and decided to study chiropractic and talked about it at least. My wife said more or less do something or get off the pot. So, she signed me up. She signed me up for chiropractic college. I was still in industry. We had one child. She's going to kill me. I think it was 1954 we got married. Let's put it this way, next year it's going to be fifty years. You can (unclear).

We had one child. By the time I was finished with school, we had four and one on the way. That kind of killed my chiropractic career for quite a while because with that number of children you can't be that independent so just take off. It took many years later I finally opened up my office, so I went into practice. Still practicing.

Q: Have you joined any veteran's groups at all or been active in any veteran's groups?

RDO: I joined the China-Burma-India veteran's organization. That was the first one I

joined. Actually, the first one I joined was the VFW. I stayed in that a year. I joined that right after I came out of the service. I joined the China-Burma-India veterans because I kept on getting letters asking me to join a local "Basha". I had no idea in the world what a "Basha" was. So, for \$10 to join, I joined to find out exactly what a "Basha" was. A "Basha" was the barracks we lived in in India. My group called them "barracks". The old timers called them "Basha's". I joined that.

I joined the American Legion. I joined the VFW again. I joined the 58th Bomb Wing Association. I joined the 20th Air Force Association. You name it, I belonged to it.

Q: Are you active in them? Have you gone to any reunions? Have you had any reunions?

RDO: I went to one reunion, the 50th anniversary of the B-29 which was in Seattle which was unbelievable. They treated us like royalty there an excellent reunion. I formed my own reunion. I found my crew after many, many years. I just made a concerted effort to try to find them. I found them all. I found that one was dead, and one was dying. We had a reunion. All but two of the remaining ones showed up at the reunion. That was in Chicago back twelve years ago I guess it was. We made a pact that at least every two years we were going to have another reunion.

Q: Have you?

RDO: No.

Q: I could tell. Thank you very much for your interview.

RDO: Thank you for having it.