Charles P. Evans, Narrator

New York State Military Museum
Interviewer [unknown]

Interviewed on [unknown] at [unknown]

INT: Would you please state your full name and date and place of birth.

CE: Charles P. Evans, I was born in San Antonio, Texas, February 3, 1918.

INT: Did you attend school there?

CE: No, I moved to Victorville, California, I went to Pasadena Junior College.

INT: When did you go into the service?

CE: I went into the service a short time before Pearl Harbor.

INT: Why did you pick the Air Force?

CE: I was mainly interested in flying airplanes. I worked for Vultee Aircraft which was one of the pioneer manufacturers of airplanes, in Downey, California. I went to work for them in ’37 and worked for Vultee for four years.

INT: What did you do there?

CE: I was the assistant person in charge of the templates department when I left. We laid out all the different parts of the airplane, made templates for every part of the airplane.

INT: You had had some college training? Did that prepare you for that job?

CE: Yes, in my two years at Pasadena Junior College I took aeronautical subjects.

INT: Did you do any flying at all?

CE: A little bit. My first flight I think I was 12 years old in Victorville, California. I was always attracted to flying and I got my first license in about 1941.

INT: What kinds of airplanes did you fly?

CE: I started out in a Taylor Cub and gradually worked up to a PT-13. That was a training plane that the Air Force used at that time.

INT: Did you have your pilot’s license before you went into the service?

CE: I had a civilian pilot’s license in ’41.

INT: That must have helped you out a great deal, going into the military, going to flight school, you had a leg up on everybody.

CE: It wasn't anything, nobody asked me if I had any flying. They treated everyone the same, as if they didn't know anything at all about aviation and airplanes.

INT: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

CE: I enlisted. I don't know if they called it "enlisted" – we started out with the idea that we were going to become an officer. It was called the Army Air Corps at that time and later became the Air Force. You went to Primary Cadet and then Basic Flying in a Stearman aircraft.

INT: Was that the old PT-17?

CE: It was in that category, yes.

INT: How long did it take you to solo?

CE: Everyone took about the same period of time to solo, maybe ten hours or so. We had a very good training program. Again, as you went on up the ladder, you weren't given any credit for flying but it reinforced the ideas about flying and I suppose made it a little more comfortable.

INT: After your basic training with the Stearman, what type of aircraft did you move on to?

CE: AT-6.

INT: That was a pretty big airplane.

CE: It was a single-engine airplane, a heavy airplane. It was preparing you to go into P-38s and P-51s.

INT: Initially did you want to be a fighter pilot or a bomber pilot?

CE: Everybody wanted to be a fighter pilot. I was never trained as a fighter pilot; all my time was in heavy bombardment. Everybody wanted to be fighter pilots. I never did fly a fighter plane.

INT: So you went from the AT-6 to bombers?

CE: Yes. Actually when I checked out on the AT-6 and I got my commission, I instructed for almost three years in Merced, California. Vultee had BT-13s which was an aircraft that I had helped work on when I worked there. I worked four years at Vultee Aircraft and I felt very much at home to start my flying in that airplane. I flew it for two years or more and then I got into B-24s and combat in 1944.

INT: Were you commissioned a second lieutenant?

CE: That's correct.

INT: You went for your B-24 training.

CE: I went to Albuquerque, New Mexico for B-24 training. There were several different bases but Albuquerque was one of the primary places. It [the training] was broken up and eventually came together as a 10-man crew. They trained together in bombing, in formation flying, and things oriented more to military activity.

INT: At that point were you a pilot in command or were you a co-pilot?

CE: I was never a co-pilot, I started right out as first pilot. I started out as a second lieutenant.

INT: Did you like the B-24?

CE: Yes, you had to like it. It wasn't the raciest airplane but it was very substantial, could stand a lot of abuse. I've seen them with the rudders blown off, a section of the wing knocked off the airplane, and still made it home. Of course, a good many of them didn't make it home. It was nothing spectacular but it was a dependable airplane. It was a good bomber, carried a good bomb load, carried a lot of fuel so you could go on long missions and you'd carry a thousand pound bomb, sometimes 500, sometimes 100 pound bombs. Very versatile payload and that's what it was designed to do. It was made for endurance also so you could go for a mission of 500 miles or so. Enough fuel to go there and come back which was desirable.

INT: When did you go overseas?

CE: In May of '44, about the middle of the war. I flew all during 1944.

INT: What route did you take overseas?

CE: We ferried an airplane over. We got a brand new airplane in Tulsa, Oklahoma and one place we stopped en route and we stayed overnight was in Reykjavik, Iceland. As I recall the flight was broken up into two major legs. You flew up to Reykjavik, stayed overnight and then flew on to Scotland.

INT: Did you fly a single airplane or was there a formation?

CW: Single airplane. The whole crew was there, we had our own navigator who used celestial navigation to get across since the radio facilities didn't completely cover the entire route.

INT: Do you recall approximately how long it took to get over to Scotland?

CE: A good part of two day's flying, I'd say about twelve hours or so.

INT: You landed in Scotland. What happened next?

CE: It was just a holding place. You were together with your 10-man crew and you were just waiting for an assignment. They would assign you an airplane and a base. We flew our entire combat series with the same crew and if the airplane held up, with the same airplane. [laughs] A good many of the combat tours were about six months. I was there longer than that because I did instructing and training again.

INT: What unit did you end up with?

CE: 409th Squadron of the 93d Bomb Group of the 20th Combat Wing of the Eighth Air Force, ETO European Theater of Operations.

INT: What was your first mission like?

CE: The first mission was the before D-Day and it was the easiest mission I ever had. It wasn't very long, basically across the Pas de Calais, we could see the landing vessels carrying all the troops down below us.

INT: Was that a bombing mission, your first one?

CE: It was. We dropped bombs in the immediate area of the landing. Landfall hadn't been secured yet, trying to soften it up and establish a place to pitch camp in the German Third Reich location.

INT: Do you recall how many airplanes went on that mission?

CE: Some of our missions had as many as 1,000 airplanes. On D-Day I would say we put up about 500, we were the second division which was all B-24s and there was another division that was B-17s. Similar number of airplanes, mission, types. We always flew our own specified route and the 17s flew theirs.

INT: Did your airplane have a name?

CE: No. If it did I don't recall it. A good many of the airplanes they found a name for them. We kept the same airplane throughout the time we flew there and it got shot up and patched and put back on the line again.

INT: Were any of your crewmen injured?

CE: Losses were quite heavy, at least 50%, maybe more. We were flying the same places as everybody else and we had very little losses. In our crew only the tail gunner was hit. He had a piece of flak in his chest and he was bleeding internally and our engineer, who was sort of the doctor, gave him a morphine syrette. He was in pain and he was bleeding. He violated the regulations and gave him two morphine syrettes which was supposed to be enough to kill you. The tail gunner's name was Stackle[?] and two shots put him just on the verge of being alive but it slowed down the internal bleeding and saved his life.

Our engineer was a good doctor. [laughs] He adjusted to it fine, it took a while but he survived. He was the only one. The closest I came was when I was on a flight to Lieges, Belgium and we were on a long bomb run and all of a sudden I felt a cold wind on my left ear. I couldn't look to see what it was because we were on the bomb run, intent on reporting altitude, speed, and direction. What had happened was a piece of flak had broken through the window about twelve inches away from my left ear and that's all the damage it did to the airplane. As a result of that I was able to line up bulletproof glass so every airplane in our squadron felt that wouldn't happen again.

INT: Was that one of your worst missions?

CE: Lieges, Belgium, not by far, it was just another mission. It was quite a long bomb run as I recall. Sometimes it was five miles, sometimes ten. There were always 88mm guns firing at you and sometimes they're more accurate than others but you were between 20,000 and 30,000 feet elevation which was about the limit of the 88mm guns. The flak was preset to explode at a given altitude and they were hoping it would be right at your altitude. All they had to do was miss by a couple of hundred feet and a miss is as good as a mile. On the bomb runs you'd see clouds of this black sooty smoke from these shells exploding with a dull red center in each explosion. All you could do is look at them, you couldn't avoid them. Luckily they had more misses than they had hits.

INT: Were you ever attacked by German fighter planes?

CE: I would say that most of our losses were to ME-109s or Focke-Wulf 190s. They brought down more of our airplanes than the 88mm guns that were firing at us from the ground. At certain periods in the war they shot a lot of our airplanes down. I think something I read that it was close to 1,000 B-24s shot down in one day. We flew our whole tour and the 409th Squadron didn't lose but about half a dozen airplanes during the time.

INT: Was your crew credited with shooting down any German fighters at all?

CE: No. Our crewmen trained to fire the 50 caliber machine gun and we didn't fire one shot in the whole tour whether you want call that luck, providence, whatever the reason. They were trying to shoot us down but they didn't get around to it. We saw fighters one time and that particular mission was one of the longest ones, it's the Polle, which is up in northwestern Germany.

INT: What kind of mission was that? What were you bombing?

CE: It was bombing an oil refinery I believe. We had a SNAFU, lack of communication on our departure so we were out of position. We blamed all this on the lead crew, the lead navigator. We were fifteen minutes behind where we should be and of the 500 airplanes in the Eighth Air Force, we only had eight airplanes on the longest mission I was ever on. Normally you would have several hundred airplanes at least. In this case we were alone. I asked do you see any fighters? Yes, there are some down below us. I said well they're

coming up to take a shot at us and we went on for a few minutes and I said where are those fighters now? Are they coming up? No, they're not. We concluded that they had been shooting at the other 500 or so airplanes which is where we should have been. So they're all out of ammunition and out of fuel and they didn't have enough fuel and ammunition to come up and shoot at us at all. We had a glimpse of them and they went down and landed. Whether that's providence or good luck, whatever you want to call it. [laughs]

INT: How many missions did you fly?

CE: I flew thirty missions. It was based on losses and losses were at least 50% and the number of missions flown varied in different periods of the war. I was in the middle of it, thirty missions which was standard at that point.

INT: What was life like for you between missions when you were on the ground? Was it hard to unwind?

CE: No, you couldn't possibly expect anything better under the circumstances. The location, they'd taken over a town called Hardwick. I guess they had taken over a whole township and built an airfield there and our accommodations. We were taken care of. The food wasn't always [breaks off] instead of fresh eggs you got dried eggs, powdered eggs. [laughs] All through the service, you felt that you were privileged to be there. If you had a day off and you wanted to go flying, you could check out an airplane. You couldn't do that in England but in the States you could go fuel up an airplane and go stay overnight, they'd furnish your accommodations. You couldn't have done better if you were a millionaire.

INT: How were you treated by the English people?

CE: We didn't meet too many but the ones that we did meet were wonderful. I met the Coleman family, they manufactured Coleman mustard, and they had an estate and everybody would stay overnight with them. We had no complaints except if you got killed then you wondered if this was worth it. [laughs]

INT: After your last mission you must have been really relieved.

CE: I guess you could say that [laughs]. What they did—I didn't bring a picture—the procedure was to throw a guy in the pool and it wasn't very warm water. He'd take off most of his clothes and they'd throw him in this pond. Going home the war was still active and the Pacific was active so after a break you'd probably find yourself in the Pacific someplace.

INT: When did you go back to the States?

CE: I didn't go back until about May of '45. I think the war was over while I was on the boat coming home. Spring of '45.

INT: Let me ask you about your bombing missions. Did you do mostly day bombing or night bombing?

CE: One hundred per cent day bombing and the British did 100% night bombing.

INT: What do you think was most effective?

CE: I think ours was because it was visual. You had to load the target in and then look at. The Norden bombsight was a visual instrument, you looked at it like you were looking through some binoculars. It had a timing device that measured your speed of the ground and anticipated, like shooting a duck, you don't aim at the duck, you aim up ahead of it. That's the way you do dropping bombs with the Norden bombsight.

INT: You went back home, it was May, the war in Europe was over. What was it like when you got home? Was there a lot of celebration?

CE: No. [laughs] We had good accommodations, we were sent to Santa Monica, California.

INT: Did you get to go home at all?

CE: No, not right away. You had the opportunity to stay in the service if you wanted to. I was invited to stay in the service but I said thank you but no thank you. [laughs]

INT: Were there rumors you were going to the Pacific?

CE: They weren't rumors, you knew the war was still going on in the Pacific so there was no other place to go. Some people had some assignment in the States. My very best buddy was sent to the Pacific and was bombing Japan in a B-29 and he was killed in that. The war didn't last too many weeks longer.

INT: No, it ended in August with the dropping of the atomic bomb. Did you come back with your crew? Did everybody finish about the same time?

CE: No, I stayed there and did instructing for three, four, five months after we finished our thirty missions.

INT: Whereabouts were you when the war with Japan ended?

CE: I think I was released, it was very near, within weeks of when the war ended, it was assumed it was about to end, so I was in Santa Monica, California.

INT: Did you want to stay in the service or were you anxious to get out?

CE: No, I had the opportunity to. I had the aeronautical experience before I started flying even and my training led in that direction but I thought the military was very interesting while you're in combat and had a definite duty, but I couldn't see a peacetime … you didn't have a definite mission like you do in combat. You knew what you had to do. I

passed up an opportunity to move up in the service. When I finished my tour of duty the colonel brought me in, I was a captain, I made captain for flying lead crew of a good many missions. If I had stayed and flown in a P-47 and just moved up the ladder, they would have given me a majority. It went through my head for just a matter of seconds and I said I've enjoyed what I've done so far but I don't think I want to be shot at any more or words to that effect. [laughs] He didn't push it, he was very pleasant. I don't know if it's well known about the military, but they had that attitude, it made you feel like you're one of the family. They were very generous about, say you flew an airplane, you were getting some training, you could justify it that way.

INT: You mentioned in our phone conversation that Jimmy Stewart was taking training the same time you were?

CE: He was a month or two ahead of me. He was at Mather Field, Sacramento, I saw him there. He and I must have graduated the training within a month of each other.

INT: Did you ever fly with him?

CE: No. He came to England and he flew [breaks off]

INT: He was a B-17 pilot, wasn't he?

CE: I think he was in 24s. I couldn't say positively but he was in the same bomb group that I was in, the 93d. I was told that Clark Gable had been there also and he was a gunner.

INT: He was a major and he was the gunner, right? That's what I've heard. [laughs]

CE: You got to have majors, everywhere we turned.

INT: Did you ever meet any other celebrities at all?

CE: Not that I can recall.

INT: Any USO shows overseas?

CE: Yes, some wonderful shows, they had them in the hangar. Who was the band leader who was killed or lost on a mission?

INT: Glenn Miller?

CE: There shouldn't have been any combat involved, he was just getting a ride from France to England and they never accounted for the airplane he was in and I never did hear any ideas at all, just completely wiped out of sight. I don't know what it was. There's more than one way to die.

INT: Once you were discharged, did you make use of the GI Bill to buy a house or go to school?

CE: I only used it for one thing. I wanted to get on with the airlines and at the time I could have used some more pilot training. You had to pass a civilian instrument flight test and formally go through a training period which I didn't have so I got that training and charged it up to my Bill. I should have used it to go to college but I used it to get flight training and I did get on with an airline, what I wanted to do.

INT: What airline did you fly for?

CE: American.

INT: How many years did you have with American?

CE: Thirty-five.

INT: What type of aircraft did you fly with American?

CE: I flew all except two or three. I started out in the DC-3; flew the DC-6; DC-7; Convair CV-240; the Lockheed Electra; the Boeing-727, two engines and the tail; the 707, the first big four engine airplane which was the most marginal airplane ever put in service. It was just the beginning of the jet age and they didn't have enough power. Sometimes it barely got off the ground. They kept that from the public. [laughs] I knew a crew that took off and there was snow and ice on the ground and just before they broke ground, they hit a piece of ice and it banged up into the wing, they could hear it and it just waddled off the ground. They improved the engines on that airplane and they improved the rudder system. They didn't have adequate rudder, if you lost an outboard engine it was adios [laughs] because you didn't have enough extra power from the other three to keep going. There were quite a few airplanes lost in that early period—when would that have been—around '46, along in there. I flew the 707, I got there a few months later, they improved it, it had more power and a boosted rudder; then the DC-10; I didn't fly the biggest of the Boeing aircraft, the 747.

INT: How many hours have you logged?

CE: Too many to count. [laughs] I couldn't be honest with you, I don't know how many.

INT: But thousands?

CE: Many times around the world. I enjoyed every bit of it.

INT: What was your favorite place in the world?

CE: I can tell you my least favorite: Karachi. When I retired from American in '78, I got a job with PIA, Pakistani International Airlines, and we flew old second-hand 707s which was an adventure because they were underpowered. This was in '78. I flew for PIA for part of one year, I was over sixty so I couldn't fly in the United States but I could fly over there. That's when I stopped commercial flying, after PIA.

INT: Did you do any civilian flying, like a small private plane?

CE: Cessna-172. I found somebody that was interested in flying and fishing and we'd rent a Cessna for about $35 an hour, now it's $135. We were flying out of Glens Falls, Adirondacks. I haven't flown for ten years or more now.

INT: Did you stay in contact with any of the people you were in the service with, any of your crew members?

CE: Not to any great degree. My crew members were scattered all around the country. We always sent Christmas cards and various things.

INT: How many are still left after all these years?

CE: You tell me – I'm not sure. I was a little bit older than the rest of them so there should be a few. There was never more than one at any given place, Minnesota.

INT: Did you ever attend any unit reunions at all?

CE: I joined the VFW here but I haven't been very active. So no I haven't.

INT: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life? I think you've pretty much covered that.

CE: That was my life. I can remember being interested in airplanes when I was four years old. [laughs] My dad was in the Navy in Hampton Roads, Virginia near Norfolk, and I'd see an airplane in the sky there and I was interested in it. There was an airplane cable ride down at the beach, I remember I enjoyed that. I did what I wanted to do, I very lucky and besides all that I survived. That's the amazing part. I don't like to speculate how come it was me because all my best friends have been killed, Tommy Wilkinson, the first two instructors I had in the service were both killed in the European Theater, flying either 24s or 17s.

INT: You had mentioned Tex Rankin—did you ever fly with him?

CE: No, I never even saw him. Everybody knew who he was but he didn't spend much time around that particular place. I think he had other business connections.

INT: How did you end up in Saratoga?

CE: My daughter lived here for quite a few years. All our family is scattered. I have two great-grandchildren here, they live just the other side of McGregor Lakes Golf Course. My daughter lives over in Saratoga Lake.

INT: Your wife is still living?

CE: Yes, she's in good health.

INT: What's your wife's name?

CE: Elsie Evans. She's from Huntington Park, California.

INT: How many years have you been married?

CE: Sixty or something. [laughs] We got married in '44.

INT: Did you meet her in the service?

CE: No, I met her in Downey, California through a family member.

INT: You were in the service then when you got married.

CE: Oh yes, I'd been in the service. I was based in Merced, California for about three years.

INT: What was it like for your wife, you being overseas? Did you get letters and packages very often?

CE: We wrote letters, that's about all we could do. We both adjusted to it pretty well. It was pretty obvious what you had to do. We never considered it a terrible hardship or anything.

INT: I have a few minutes left on the tape. Is there anything else you'd like to cover? Any other incidents or memories of your time in service come to mind?

CE: I already mentioned that my dad had a career as a Navy enlisted man. He retired in '35 or '37. He was called back into service. He was active in the Navy for two or three years during the war. Of course we kept in touch.

INT: Did you get called up at all for Korea?

CE: How come you ask that? [laughs]

INT: Just curious because that happens.

CE: I was called. I don't know if it was an invitation or a command or what. I was invited to come back and fly in Korea and by that time I was flying with American Airlines. I wrote a letter saying that I was occupied flying airplanes and that I'd already put in four years of service and that I'd rather not be called back again and that was the last word I ever heard. They didn't say yes or no, they just stopped writing.

INT: Do you want to hold up a couple of those photographs? I'd like to get a shot of that one with your crew.

[CE holds up a photo of his crew and another of planes flying in formation.]

INT: Can you hold it right up against your chest, I can zoom right in on it. You're right there in the center, right between two numbers. Looks like the number one. That other shot is formation flying?

INT: Do you want to tell us about this photograph? [Hands CE a photo of a plane flying over a snowy mountainous terrain.]

CE: That's the Wasatch Mountains in Idaho.

INT: It's a training flight?

CE: Yes, there was a base in Boise. This picture is in the vicinity of Sun Valley, Idaho in the Wasatch Mountains in an old B-24 that's no longer a combat airplane because it has no guns on it.

INT: Thank you so much for your interview.

CE: I enjoyed reminiscing.