

**Robert Leroy Henbest
Veteran**

**Mike Russert & Wayne Clarke
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Hammondsport, New York
November 30th, 2006**

Q: This is a home interview in Hammondsport, New York. It is the 30th of November 2006 approximately 1:00pm. Interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clarke. Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth please?

RH: Robert L. Henbest. August 25th, 1923, Elmira, New York.

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

RH: High school.

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

RH: Yes. I'd just seen a movie with friends. We came out and we heard about it and I had a brother at Pearl Harbor.

Q: Oh, you did.

RH: He was in the Marine Corps. He said that when the planes came over, they all thought the Navy had screwed up again and were dropping bombs and not realizing where they were. Then they saw the red circle and they knew they were Japanese, so they were all running all over the place trying to get guns and shoot at the Japanese.

A friend of mine sent me a series of.... someone had found a Brownie in an old place where people put their clothes – lockers. They developed the film. They came up with bunch of pictures taken on December 7th. This fellow put them all together and sent me a copy. I have it on my computer.

Q: That's interesting. Did you enlist or were you drafted?

RH: I enlisted.

Q: Why did you decide to enlist?

RH: When the war was going on in Europe, I decided that sooner or later I would be called. The first thing I thought of was I don't know how to drill so I joined Company L which was the New York State Army thing.

Q: National Guard?

RH: National Guard. I went down there a couple nights a month and I learned how to drill.

Q: When did you join them? Do you recall?

RH: That was back in nineteen...after Pearl Harbor, '41 sometime because then in '42 I figured that I had to decide what I wanted to do. My brother wanted me to join the Marines because he said you'll be terrific working in an office because I graduated from high school with honors in business administration, but I didn't want the Marine Corps because even though you're working in an office out plowing through someplace.

So, I figured the Air Force. I didn't want the Navy because I suffered motion sickness. I thought on a ship, bouncing around, no. Over at Southside High School, somebody had put up, maybe the Air Corps, the Army Air Corps, huge posters – pilot, navigator, bombardier, flight purser – and it listed their duties. When I saw that, I picked navigator. Then I went to the post office when they were having their tests for cadets. The test concentrated on so many college things, math, and all I'd taken was arithmetic. My father said we can't send you to college so take all the business courses that you can take and that's what I did.

I was the last one to leave the room because I was going to be embarrassed to have the guy say you didn't fill out any of these pages. I took it up to him and he said you passed, and he sent me through the room. Others had been sent out the other door to go home. Apparently, he saw something so I went into the other room and couldn't believe it. I had my physical and I was told to go home, and I would be notified when I was going to be called up.

What they did, I went to Atlantic City for basic training. From Atlantic City, at Atlantic City I guess that's when they discovered that my office training was going to be of value to them because they kept mentioning it. From Atlantic City, I went to Williamsport to what was called then the Williamsport Junior Dickinson College. It's now Lycoming. There, we were supposed to receive two years of college in eight months. I thought I'd had it. The first day I went to the math class the lady said well you've all had two years of college, so we'll start with such and such. I went up to her and told her. She said well you'll just have to try to fit in. That was the week I figured any day I'd be told to go down the road to the infantry.

A week later she wasn't there anymore and this young man, I forgot his name, I told him, and he was fantastic. He said don't worry about it. I'll come to your room after dinner time and I'll teach you and he did. He came every night and no problem. Then I had another problem. We had to put in ten hours of learning how to fly an airplane. They had Piper Cubs. I guess the young man who was to be my instructor didn't care for the job. He did everything to make me sick. He bounced all over. I ended up washing the Piper Cub ten times after each flight. I had various interviews with various officers, but they never wanted to kick me out. They kept me.

From there I went down to the site center which was in....down south someplace. A friend of mine told me that he had, down there we had all these psychological things. You had to hold your finger out in a little circle and not move it and so forth. By the way, he washed out. They probably wanted him to because he has psychiatric training. They wanted him there. He came to me and said I'm going to tell you a secret. Don't tell anybody that I told you because you're not supposed to know. He said for all five Air Force positions, pilot, navigator, bombardier, flight purser and gunner, you scored five. It was zero to five. Five being the highest. That made my day because I didn't want to be a pilot.

At that point, they were insisting I was going to be a fighter pilot. I thought I'll kill myself. I decided to use that information and get what I wanted. I still thought I wanted to be a navigator. It worked. I went to Maxwell Field and took cadet training. From there, they sent me down to a place near Arcadia, Florida to an air school there. I learned to fly a Steerman. I even soloed. I had a terrific instructor. The next step was the basic training where you would learn flaps and raising your landing gear and so on. The next one after that was P-51 and so forth.

I decided I would wash myself out and, of course, you wouldn't believe the time I had trying to wash myself out because my instructor would take me up and I would do everything perfect. Then I would come down and land and he'd motion for one of the military pilots to take me up for a check ride. I would hear him say, "He's ready. Take him up." And then I would screw up. I didn't want to pass. I knew I was safe because I knew I could get one of these other jobs.

Meanwhile, a young man came in, one of these short, husky, cocky types. I can still see him in my mind. He came in from the 8th Air Force. He finished his missions as a bombardier. He told us about being a bombardier. He told me the story completely. I made up my mind that's what I was going to be. Really the bombardier had the best job in the flying.

When they sent for me to come to this building where they tell you to go down to the road to the entrance way. They told me to come in and said well and then they told me I scored five and everything and they said what do you want to do, what do you want to be? I said I want to be a bombardier. So, from there, I went to Midland, Texas and became a bombardier. Being a bombardier was exactly what I should be. When I think about it now, yes that's exactly what I should be.

Q: Why?

RH: I was a calm, steady fellow. Nothing rattled me. Flak hitting the plane sounded like somebody throwing stones on a tin roof. A plane blew up on one of my missions. My left-wing plane blew up. I just looked out and felt sorry for the guys, I knew them all, but I continued synchronizing to the target. I was meant to be a bombardier.

When we went to...well, you know. I graduated from bombardier school. On graduation day a B24 landed and the co-pilot was from Elmira. I'd gone to school with him Frank (unclear). He showed me all through the plane. I thought yes this exactly what I want. Then they assigned me to B17s. I didn't want to be in a B17 – too cramped and hard for the bombardier to get at the bombs and so forth. So, I managed to stay with the B24s. I had to go to Casper, Wyoming to join a crew. That's where they put the crew together in Casper. I remember I was the last one to arrive of the ten guys in the room. The nine of them were saying I wonder what kind of a jerk we're getting for a bombardier. Can he hit anything? That was their concern because that's what you were going to do, blow things up. Urban renewal for the Nazis.

We had to go out, make a night flight because I had to drop...they had to try me in different things to make sure I could do it. The target was out in a field someplace with a light in the center. I synchronized on the light. I killed the light. That made me a hero of my crew. Boy, he hit that light. You know, they've never forgotten it. Three of them came to my home a couple of years ago. That was the first thing that popped up with to tell the family that was there. They knew they had a good bombardier. He knocked the light out of the target.

Then they sent us down to Topeka, Kansas. We picked up a brand new B24-L which was a beautiful plane. The bombardier had big bubbles on the side, but I didn't have any windows except in the front on the other plane. The navigator had big bent windows.

We flew that to Italy. We couldn't land at Gioia, Italy because they had so much rain the field was all muddy. They sent us on to Castelluccio further up. Mussolini had built a chain of air fields and then the Americans came in and enlarged it. We landed there. They had us sleep temporarily with some fellows in a tent and the next morning a jeep came roaring up and this Colonel came in and said is there a bombardier on this crew? I said yes sir, I'm it. He said great, you're now assigned to me. That's how we got into the 451st Bomb Group.

Q: Was it your whole crew or just you?

RH: The whole crew. The plane and the crew. He probably wanted to see if I could bomb. They finished a mission and always put pictures up in the squadron headquarters to show how the bombardier did on that mission. I came in with the other three officers. I guess I had a lot to say about the pictures. The bombs were everywhere. The targets were here. The bombs were all over everywhere. I made comments about it and they heard me. I was on the next mission and the next mission was...they had me lead it. We were to blow up a big munitions complex that the Germans had. We destroyed it completely.

They sent me up the next day and I destroyed the target. They sent me up the next day and I destroyed the target. After that, the Colonel really loved me because his group bomb score was the lowest in all the groups and the score came right up.

Q: Let me ask you something. Was there any particular reason why the other fellows were missing the target until you came along?

RH: I couldn't believe what I saw, crew members loading their bombardier on a truck getting off the plane because he couldn't get on the truck himself because he was drunk.

Q: Wow.

RH: A number of bombardiers had been killed being in the front of the plane, the nose turret. I guess those fellows just were scared. I know on one crew that I had to fly with when I became lead bombardier that I seldom flew with the crew I trained with. They were always putting me with a lead crew. This navigator was 6'2". I don't know how much he weighed. We had flak suits on. As we got to the target and I was synchronizing down he came from his navigator perch right on top of me. I couldn't move. He was scared to death. I told him I have to work the bomb site. Get off me. He managed to give me some room to work and the mission was a success. That's the way so many fellows were. He was using my body and my flak suit plus his flak suit and he had his head covered.

Q: When was your first mission? Do you remember the date on it or anything? You kept a log?

RH: No, this is my diary. I should have brought the log.

Q: (unclear)

RH: A friend mine said oh they won't want that stuff. They just want to know how you felt.

Q: We do but it would be interesting to see that. So, you kept a diary also then? When you were going to drop the bombs how did you arm them?

RH: On the way up, I would go back in the bomb bay.

Q: Did you take your chute off when you went back there? Did you leave your chute on when you went back there or take it off? Do you remember?

RH: Sometimes on. Sometimes off.

Q: OK

RH: But I had to pull the pins out of the fuses. I carefully put the pins in my pocket because if we aborted the mission, I had to put the pins back in or we couldn't land with loaded bombs.

Q: Did the bombs have a pin at each end or just at the fuse end? Someone mentioned didn't they had a pin at the propeller end and also. Did they have two pins?

RH: Two fuses. It depended on the bombs because we had fragmentation clusters. They didn't but they big bombs did.

Q: How many missions did you fly?

RH: Twenty-two. No, twenty-three.

Q: What were the majority of your targets? Do you remember?

RH: We bombed the Linz – in Austria – the Linz marshalling yards a great many times. In fact, I have a picture at home showing the marshalling yards, huge, and it's just a lot of pots where the bombs blew up. The Germans finally gave up trying to recover. It was the main thing coming up from Italy. We bombed munitions factories.

Q: Were you ever on runs to Ploesti?

RH: That had just ended when I got there. In fact, the first day when we woke up in our new system the planes came back. In many of the planes, the guys were bailing out because they couldn't land the plane safely. They would fill out forms to be awarded some sort of insignia showing that they had bailed out. I thought well I will be getting one of those.

Q: It was a caterpillar wasn't it?

RH: Yes. We almost did bail out over...it was in Austria. We had gone on mission. This was probably toward the middle of our missions. We were coming back from the mission. One of the bombardier's jobs to give him something to do besides drop bombs, he was in charge of the six-man crew, the enlisted men.

When we were coming back, the pilot called me and said you'd better get the crew together because we're running out of gas. We're going to have to bale out. Klagenfurt was the place. Klagenfurt, Austria. I didn't think it was a good idea because the people in Klagenfurt were killing bombardiers. I never wore any insignia or anything so they wouldn't know. They were killing them over in Yugoslavia and in Northern Italy because family members have been killed.

Anyway, I opened the bomb bay doors. I figured the bombardier has to set an example, so I sat down on the cat walk. My parachute was ready, the chest pack that we use. I checked the enlisted men. They were all lined up and the navigator and everybody else. It was just the pilot, the co-pilot and the flight engineer up on the deck. He slowed the plane down. He dropped the plane down in altitude. It was already for us to drop out. The flight engineer happened to turn his head and look at some gage. He yelled to the pilots and to me "stop, we've got a whole wing full of gas!" The flight engineer had goofed. He had failed to flip the switch. I was that close to dropping out.

Q: Did your plane every receive much damage?

RH: Oh yes. One day the colonel came to me and said brass is coming up from Bari Hill. That's where 15th headquarters was – Bari, Italy. They want to see how you would do "skip" bombing. They came up and the Colonel decided to fly the plane for them. They

were in a B24 and we were in a B24. I was the bombardier to do the demonstration. We were going over down by the Adriatic.

We were just about ready for me to take over the plane. You see the bombardier steers the plane with the bomb site. All of the sudden there was this loud bang. I shot over the bomb site and my head was wedged in that little space. They had an awful time getting me out. The Colonel had slid his plane into ours. It bent our wing down. Instead of our wing being like this (motions with his hands) it was like this and he took off half of our tail. You know we had the two. He had problems but turned around and went back to the base.

My pilot was the squadron commander. He was an excellent pilot. He had lost a lot of control so what he did for a long time is he kept trying slide the plane around because we were headed to Yugoslavia. He managed to turn it around and head back towards the base. We landed. No problem. He had half a tail and bent wings.

Q: Were they able to repair a plane like that?

RH: Oh yes. They repaired it.

Q: I forgot to mention when you first arrived over there you said you had a B24-L. Did you get to name it?

RH: Yes. My pilot. The first pilot Roger Cessna, Roger' uncle, is the Cessna who built Cessna aircraft. He had a friend Milton Caniff who drew *Terry and the Pirate*. He had Milton come to our plane and sketch Roger's dog and Roger called his dog Topper. It was a black, one of these little black dogs. So, that was painted on both sides of the plane.

Q: The plane was called "Topper"?

RH: Yes. "Topper" Everyone had to have something on their plane. Some were interesting. That was nice that he did that. Roger's uncle was proud of what we were doing so he did that because we were getting a brand new plane. We flew over in that plane and when the war was over, the group commander Colonel (unclear) came to me and said Bob, you never went to Egypt, you never went to a couple of other places. You did go to Rome and you met the Pope but you always wanted to do your missions. So, he said I'm giving you your plane that you came over in to go home in. So. We flew home in it.

I had been told that actually they wanted to get me home as fast as they could to put me on B29s and put me in the Pacific. The Pacific war was winding down fast. I figured it would be over. I contended that I smelled gas in the plane. I didn't smell gas in the plane but I convinced Roger Cessna that we should make short trips so we flew all the way down to Africa, over to Ascension Island. We were supposed to go to Liberia and go straight over but we went all the way down Africa, over to Ascension, to Brazil. We went

from one place in Brazil to another. Eventually we got to some island in the Caribbean then we came out to South Carolina.

Q: Did you get to stop in Egypt?

RH: No, we didn't go that way. It was too far to the west. You'd never be there again. We had a good time.

Q: You had mentioned the Tuskegee Airmen. Did you ever have them escort you at all?

RH: Oh yes. They weren't there at first. When they did, they'd come up from their base which was in Northern Italy. We would wave to them. We would wave to crews flying in B17s because our plane was faster. We'd go right by a B17.

Q: Did you ever encounter German jets?

RH: Yes, and we wondered what the devil it was because all of the sudden "shoo". They never shot at us, but I think they were just testing. Some planes said they shot at them. They could shoot a B24 down very easily. Its about 240 miles. We were fortunate that Hitler didn't like the jet. That's why they didn't make too many. He was more for the V1 rocket.

When we flew over, we had an interesting trip. We went into the Casbah. One guy had quite an interesting time there.

Q: What happened?

RH: I shouldn't have brought that up.

Q: Now you have to continue. You did.

RH: I was told to tell the enlisted men that you are not permitted to go to the Casbah. Well, JD, JD Miller came to me and said I've got to see a Casbah woman. I said, JD you'll be arrested. He said, I've got to do it. I said alright go ahead. He left but he came back soon. He looked terrible. I said, "What happened?" He said I met this nice-looking young lady and she took me to her room some place in the Casbah and (looks to family members in the interview). You shouldn't be here. He said we stripped and just as I was about to get on top of her, they had dim lights and I saw all these sores on her body and, he said, I threw up all over her. I got up, put my clothes on a raced back here. I said I'm glad that happened.

We had some interesting times. There was one mission that came up. We were loading up to go on the mission. A couple of the enlisted men came to me and they said we've got a problem. I said, "What's that?" We've all got diarrhea. Then I found out that the co-pilot had diarrhea. The only ones that didn't was myself, the pilot and co-pilot.

So, I said to the enlisted men ok go to the mess hall, hurry up because we've got to get off, and come back with these big cooking metal things. I said be sure to get the lid. Also,

get a couple rolls of toilet paper and put it on the rear of the catwalk. That's where it was. All the way up. Back and forth they went.

Then when we were coming back, they called me up. They called me various names. We were a very close crew. Some crews weren't that close. They'd call me and say "Hey bombardier" or "Hey Leroy" – my middle name – which I didn't tell you. They'd say, "Hey LeRoy" or something else or "Hen Shit". They called me up and said it's full. What do we do now? I said alright. We were approaching Klagenfurt again. I told the pilot drop down in altitude and I said we've got to get rid of the container. I opened the bomb bay doors and told the guys and get it so we're going to bomb Klagenfurt with it. When the time is right, I told them ok kick it out. It went out and the lid came off. I don't know what the people down below thought. We got rid of it. There were amusing things that happened.

I was glad I was born with calm demeanor. Nothing seemed to disturb me. When there is a lot of flak, the navigator sat up above me. He would tell me you're going to get your head blown off because I'd take my helmet off and be looking out the window. I wanted to see all the flak and what was going on. I probably had half a brain but you know it didn't bother me.

Then sometimes flak would hit our plane. One piece came right through just in front of me, came right through. I always looked for it. I wanted to take it home as a souvenir. I never found it. I don't know where it went. Maybe it went all the way through the plane.

Q: When you reached back to the states what did you do? Were you discharged at that point?

RH: When we got back to the states, they gave us a thirty-day leave. I was given orders to go to Chatham Air Force Base down south. I think it was in the Carolinas.

When I got there, there were B29s all over the place. They told me we're giving you three jobs because the war ended. I was to be assistant base adjutant. I would be head of the officer's club and I was to be a bombardier instructor on B29s. They gave me a jeep, so I decided to split my day up in thirds. So, I did.

The fellow who was the club officer before I got there took me around and showed me. We had Germans in the cooking area. I had purchased insignia for the hat that I found someplace. It looked like gold. When I walked through the mess hall with these Germans working, they were all looking at it. I think they thought I was someone special somehow because everyone else had a different uniform. It was interesting doing that. I built a swimming pool. Because we had slot machines, my predecessor said when you don't hear any noise coming from that room take the key unlock the back and take a handful of coins and go around and start all of the slot machines and it worked. It was just like moths to a flame. The guys would just pour into the place. We made a lot of money and built a swimming pool.

Q: How did you compare the B29 to the B24? I know you never flew in combat.

RH: The B29, my first couple of flights were very exciting because the “29” is all glass nose. The bombardier sits right behind the glass. The 29, of course, is bigger. When we roared down the runway to take off, I thought my god I was in the air by myself because the he pilots were up here (motions with hands behind him) and the others were back in the plane. When we landed that was a thrill. We come roaring down to land and you’re right there. The first one. It was interesting.

Q: Did you have a story about a new pilot missing a target because of wrong coordinates?

RH: Yes.

Q: You want to tell us about that?

RH: Poor Lieutenant Smith. Anyway, it was our mission to Rovereto, Italy. Rovereto at that time was a stopover from Italy to get into Germany. They had a marshalling yard there. The Germans were fleeing Italy as fast as they could get out of there. They’d already killed Mussolini. With the war ending and they didn’t know what was going to happen. They were fleeing and they asked me to lead a mission to take out the marshalling yard. That was fine. I could do that. I said who’s the pilot. They said Lieutenant Smith. I said no, I won’t fly with him.

The Colonel himself came even down to talk me into it. He said the war’s ending and he wants to be the first pilot in the plane instead of the co-pilot. Give him the opportunity Bob. I said no. No because we won’t have a good mission. He’s too excitable. I had to give in. We went up on the mission. We turned on the IP – the Initial Plane – and started the bomb run. Rovereto is in the mountains in a little space there. The town has this huge marshalling area next to it. I decided I’d better see if everything’s going to be alright right at the beginning. We turned. I asked the pilot for level. He (unclear) my gyros in my bombsite. I quickly capped them and I’m sure I cursed him. I told him you dumped my gyros. Now keep the plane level.

We went on further and I saw the target. I synchronized on it. Everything was ready. The bomb bays were open and so forth. I asked him for another level. He was so different. I was concerned but I couldn’t abort. It was too late. I told him. I kept telling him and he screamed at me. I knew he had flipped. So, what do you do? I tried to compensate for what he was doing. The bombs went out. When I saw the bombs drop, I knew it was a failed mission. I watched to see where they hit. They didn’t hit the target. They hit the town.

That bothered me for all these years until the Star Gazette, I think it was veteran’s day issue, they came to the house. The paper wanted to interview me. He wanted me to tell about a mission that I didn’t like. I told him about it.

The strangest thing happened. A man and his wife came to the house and said we have to tell you something. We lived in Rovereto during the war. They're Italian. We were there when your bombs dropped and since you told us when you did it in the paper, we knew what happened. They said the only person killed was a Gestapo guy which wouldn't bother anybody. But you didn't get any civilians. You did damage some of it. Some of your bombs hit. I have their name and address at home. I thanked them.

They were so excited about it. Their son joined the Air Force here. They moved from Italy here. They wanted him to come and visit with me sometime when he's home on leave. It strange how it works out. Here I fretted about killing lots of people and only one I killed was the Gestapo guy.

Q: You received the Distinguished Flying Cross. That wasn't for that bombing mission you told us with the bucket was it?

RH: No. On that mission we were trying out using radar. I flew in a plane that was stretched. The deck was longer, and they could have a radar equipment there. They had taken me over to another group that had a model radar system so I could see how it worked. I came back thinking oh god we'll never win the war.

I went up on this mission. I was the bombardier. The radar man was back there. Of course, he was doing his thing. It was cloudy. You couldn't see anything. We were going this way (motions with hands). For something to do I set the bomb site all up as I was going to do the bombing rather than just sit there. As we came along, I happened to look out to the left. There was an open space and there was the target. I called to the radar guy and said you're way off target. It's on our left. Turn off your equipment I am taking over the plane. So, I did, and I swerved the plane over. I had just enough time to synchronize on it. By luck I wiped it out. When the Colonel heard that he promptly put me in for a DFC. That's how I got that.

I got five Air Medals. Each group did things differently. Some if you flew five missions you got an Air Medal. If you destroyed five targets, you got an Air Medal. My Colonel preferred to have things get done so if I had five successful missions, I'd get another Air Medal. So, that's how I got my five Air Medals.

Q: You stayed in the Reserves?

RH: When I went to Fort Dix to be mustered out, I couldn't see giving it up. I had all this training and things were still going on in the world, so I signed up for the Reserves. I ended up being the CO of the Reserve unit in the Southern Tier. Elmira was headquarters. I had four small groups across the Southern Tier.

I also had an M-day assignment. During the Cold War I received information that they wanted me to have an M-Day assignment at Offutt Air Force base which was SAC Headquarters. They never called me up. The Cold War didn't get hot.

Q: How do you think your time in the service had an effect or changed your life?

RH: I think it had big effect.

Q: In what ways?

RH: Being a very “in charge” type person because I had these six men that depended on me to see that things got done and so forth. I think it had a big effect on me...not to be very serious about things. I think. Even now. (unclear) with my computer.

Q: OK. Thank you very much for your interview. Very quickly do you want to have him hold up that photo? This one? That one there or you can hold it and I can zoom in on it. When was this taken? On your retirement?

RH: The top picture appeared in Stars and Stripes. I was the bombardier. The whole article was criticizing the ground crew for not hanging the bombs properly.

Q: Can you turn it a little. I'm getting some glare. OK that's good. And the bottom picture is your retirement?

RH: The bottom picture is me in Mess Dress and was taken at the Warplane Museum in Elmira. That was when General (unclear) came. They asked me to escort him around.

Q: OK. You told a story about literally crapping on Germany!