

**Bron Jenssen
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke
the New York State Military Museum
Interviewer**

**Interviewed on
November 5, 2010
Westmere, NY**

Q: For the record, would you please state your full name, the date and your place of birth.

BJ: Jens Bron Jenssen, I am 87 years old, and I was born on Sept 23, 1923 in New York City. My mother, father and older sister were born in Norway. My two older brothers and I were born in the United States. They came to the United States in 1902.

Q: Did you attend school in New York City?

BJ: I went to the high school for music and art that was set up by Mayor La Guardia. He set up many kinds of schools. To get into the specialty schools, a student first had to be recommended by his teacher and then be tested to be admitted. I studied mostly fine arts. My mother was a painter who had paintings in the Brooklyn Museum as well as in a museum in Oslo, Norway. She befriended Norwegians in a variety of the arts in New York City and frequently had them for dinner so I was surrounded with artists from the time I was young. My two brothers went to the School of Mechanics.

Q: Was your father living at the time?

BJ: Yes. When my parents arrived at Ellis Island, he was asked by an interrogator where he came from and what he had studied in school. My father told the interrogator that he was an electrical engineer from Norway. The man questioned my father's nationality because he spoke English so well. Though my father's father was Norwegian, his mother was English so the children spoke both English and Norwegian. After a pause, the immigration officer asked my father if he was interested in working with Thomas Edison to electrify Manhattan Island. My father took the job of wiring the streets of Manhattan from 55th Street northward. After a week of working with his crew, inspectors arrived and asked to see the electric poles he had installed. Since the streets north of 55th had not been paved, he had installed all of the wiring underground. The inspectors were confounded and left but came back a week later and told him to continue. Then all of the poles south of 55th Street were taken down and the wires all buried underground. Because of my father, Manhattan has no electrical poles. Edison liked him so much that he put him on his crew for special assignments.

Q: What kind of work did you do during high school?

BJ: On weekends, I worked in an animation studio where my older sister worked on projects for Popeye and Betty Boop. I helped her with her projects. After high school, I

went to work in a studio for NBC and CBS on 46th Street. It was during the Depression and FDR had just become President.

Q: Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

BJ: I was in New Haven, Connecticut, living in an apartment. A wealthy man who liked my art work had invited me to visit the art department at Yale University. I brought a portfolio of work and they accepted me. Shortly after that, Pearl Harbor was hit and soon after I was drafted into the Army, I was sent to Yaphank, Long Island. Joe Lewis, the boxer, was in my group. We received our uniforms which were a mix of WWI and WWII uniforms. At four o'clock the next morning, we were loudly awakened, lined up, and given KP duty. The soldier in alphabetical order before me, announced he had to take an aviation test so he was sent back to the barracks. I was smart and followed his lead. We went back to bed while the rest did kitchen duty. At eight o'clock, the other draftee awakened me to take the aviation test which I had no intention of taking. He explained that I would be in deep trouble if I didn't take the test so I went with him and took it. He failed, I passed. I was sent to Tennessee and took a multitude of tests and had specialized interviews which targeted me to be a fighter pilot. My natural ability with math, my quick reactions when something needed to be done were needed to be a pilot. We flew Stearmans, bi-planes from 1934 with 220 horsepower, and two open cockpits, I was the third one to solo out of the ninety-two airmen.

I was doing well until my older brother who had been drafted before me called one morning. He was being trained in tanks and his best friend who had been sent to Africa two weeks before had just been killed in a tank. It was an old tank, no match for the German tanks. That got me thinking about this old 1934 Stearman airplane I was expected to fly into war. It got me very disturbed so when I went to the air field, I told my superior that I didn't feel like flying that day because of the news that was disturbing me. I was sent back to the barracks but was called into headquarters the next morning to discover I was out of the program. They sent me to St. Louis where I was trained in navigation, engineering, and anything that involved maintaining an airplane in flight. I was then sent to a location where crews were assembled to train and work together on B-17s. That was in end of 1943. We practiced by flying back and forth from Maine to Florida, bombing German submarines up and down that perimeter. Then we were assigned to fly from Florida to South America back and forth in a B-24 for a number of months. We landed in Cuba when Batista was in power. It was beautiful. Even the airport that Batista built for himself was beautiful with palm trees all around. One day, another B-24 landed and Eleanor Roosevelt stepped out. She came over and introduced herself to each of us, requesting us to each list a favor she could do for us. I asked her to write a letter to my mother who was a Roosevelt fan. My mother received a two page letter from Mrs. Roosevelt, praising the work our crew was doing. Years later our family moved to South Egremont, Massachusetts, where there is a music festival each summer at Tanglewood in Berkshire County. Mrs. Roosevelt came to support the festival so I brought my mother there. We arrived early and had the opportunity to meet with Mrs. Roosevelt. She remembered meeting me at Batista Field and writing the letter to my mother. I was a wonderful opportunity to chat with her.

Q: Eventually you went overseas?

BJ: My crew was sent to Westover Field in Massachusetts and then sent overseas. We flew to Florida and hit a hurricane on our next leg to the Caribbean. The hurricane blew water right into the airplane where two pieces of aluminum were screwed together. The heavy rain had hit the Caribbean island too so our big clunky bomber got stuck in the mud upon landing. One wheel, two engines and the wing had to be pulled up by a crane. An engineer came to inspect the plane before we could fly again. After he gave us the green light to fly again, I reminded him that Army regulations required the inspector of a heavy bomber to take a short test flight with us. He resisted. We took our old B-24 to Belem, Brazil, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. When we flew over the Brazilian jungle, I took photos which I later enlarged. It was clear in the enlarged photos that the jungle dwellers had never seen an airplane before because they were blowing something at our plane through tubes.

We flew over the Atlantic Ocean to Africa. When we were about two-thirds of the way over the ocean, the pilot and co-pilot called me. The plane had about eight or ten tanks of fuel which needed to be transferred to the four engines so we took care of that. Then, we landed in French West Africa on their metal runway made of pieces of metal all hooked together. It made a terrible screaming sound when we landed. We found a revetment, turned the corner to get off the runway and there we ran out of gas. That was good timing! We stayed in hot humid Marrakesh, Morocco for a couple of days. The native men in Morocco were over seven feet tall so the French gave them military uniforms and hired them as guards. One night I left the tent to go to the bathroom and was frightened by a very large guard who barked loudly at me, asking what I was doing. I warned my crew members so they wouldn't be startled. He sounded like a trumpet, seven and a half feet tall staring down at you. [both laughing]
From there we flew to Casablanca. The German's were not too far from there so we had some missions there. Then we went to Italy where we used large areas of farmland to build landing strips, trying not to disturb the land more than necessary. We lay down material that we could remove when we were done. There were four squadrons of airplanes at each landing strip.

Q: What unit were you assigned to?

BJ: We were in the 758th bomb group, 459th bomb squadron, and the 15th Air Force. This was June of 1944. We were in the British Sector along the Adriatic coast of Italy and it was a good place to fly out of.

Q: What kind of missions were you flying?

BJ: We flew bombing missions to many locations: as far north as Poland and as far east as the Russian front.

Q: What was your position on the airplane?

BJ: Because of where I grew up near Greenwich Village, I was exposed to many artists and photographers with the latest equipment. The Graflex # 1 and #2 cameras had come out. I bought a #1 from a camera man in my apartment building who taught me how to use it, how to set up a dark room, and me how to develop the film. So when the Bomb Group asked if any crew members knew about cameras, I wrote down

everything I knew. Because I knew more about cameras than any other crew member, I was assigned the cameraman position. Eastman Kodak had come out with very sophisticated motion picture cameras which could photograph at 40 degrees below zero, at 34,000 feet altitude. The plane had three sets of cameras.

Q: Did you turn the camera on and off or just run the camera the whole time? How much film was in each camera?

BJ: The film ran for a long time. When the plane landed, men would come onto the plane to take the film, process it that night and then interrogate me about what I had filmed and how I had filmed it. They needed to find out about bomb patterns and other things.

Q: What rank were you?

BJ: I was a staff sergeant at the time I became a cameraman. Because that was my only job and there were no levels in that position, my rank remained staff sergeant during the entire war.

Q: Did you have to go out with each mission?

BJ: Yes. The bomber that I was on had a hole cut out in the base behind the bomb section. In the hole, we installed the big camera on four springs. When the bombs were released, we filmed the target and the bomb pattern. After the entire bomb group finished bombing an area, our plane had to circle around the bombed area to photograph everything so we knew what kind of hits we had on the targets. They were able to take the films and know precisely what we had hit and what the bomb group may have missed.

Q: Did you fly the same airplane all of the time?

BJ: Our plane was deputy lead: they put us right next to the lead plane.

Q: Was there nose art on the plane?

BJ: When our crew received the airplane we were going overseas with, we stopped in southern Miami where an art crew painted the front of each ship.

Q: Did you wear a leather flight jacket?

BJ: No, the leather jackets were for low level flying. We wore electric suits, electric stockings and electric gloves with one body temperature setting. Every time we landed, we turned in our suits for examination. If we lost a glove or shoe or suit, we were in bad shape in forty degrees below zero with the bomb bay doors open and no heat or insulation in the airplanes. They had to keep the suits in good condition. I lost a glove once and just pulled my sleeve down over my hand.

Q: Was your ship ever under attack?

BJ: Yes, on almost every mission we were fired on. As a cameraman, another thing I had to film was the air war as the German aircraft were coming in at us. I also filmed troop concentrations, gun placements, and traffic on the Danube. On six of our crew's flights we were shot up so badly that we couldn't reach the target. We had to turn

around and go home, flying as low to the ground as possible until we reached the Adriatic.

Q: Did you ever have an escort like the Tuskegee Airmen?

BJ: The Tuskegee Airmen were stationed in the Mediterranean and they flew with us. Our co-pilot's family were German immigrants living in the German section of upper Manhattan. He knew German. He would set our intercom to hear the German fighter pilots. The Germans would yell out when they saw the Tuskegee Airmen escorts.

Q: Is it true that the Tuskegee Airmen never lost a plane they were escorting?

BJ: No! We lost so many planes. Of our four squadrons, the 46th Squadron was shot down completely three times. Every ship in that squadron was shot down three different times. Our squadron lost three out of our ten ships in one mission. There were only three of our original planes that made it through until we went home.

Q: Did you go home before the war was over?

BJ: I was in Europe for seventy-two days and had fifty-one missions in those seventy-two days. We had 6 aborts so in total we had fifty-seven flights in those seventy-two days. We were in Italy during the summer and were only stopped by rain once when we hit a terrible thunderstorm over the Alps.

Q: Did you always fly with the same crew and did your entire crew go home together?

BJ: We always flew together. We lost a couple of bombardiers and a waist gunner but the rest of us all came back.

Q: When did you return to the states?

BJ: I had mentioned we arrived in May/June of 1944 and on September 22nd we finished our missions. They flew us down to southern Italy where we shipped home on the Queen of Bermuda, a four-masted cruise ship converted into a troop ship that was so fast we didn't need an escort. We went from southern Italy through the Mediterranean Sea, and across the Atlantic to a shipyard in Maryland.

Q: When you got back, did you all stay together during your leave time or were you sent to different places?

BJ: They sent us to Atlantic City, a resort on the New Jersey coast. One of the hotels in Atlantic City was used for returning soldiers from New England, New Jersey and New York. There was a bar, restaurant and rooms for us. We ordered whatever food we wanted. We could do whatever we wanted in town. I ran out of money and was told to go to a room on the first floor to get an advance on my pay. They gave me \$200.00 but when I checked my paperwork, I realized that had never taken it out of my pay. So, a week later, I requested another advance. Again, the paperwork showed no money deducted from my paycheck. We enjoyed the Atlantic City hotel for about six weeks. I had gotten my brothers car from home and liked driving down near the boardwalk. One day I got out of the car and was walking down the boardwalk when my car keys fell through the boardwalk cracks and dropped many yards to the sand below. I noted a flag that was near where the keys dropped, walked a distance to find a stairway down to the

sand and walked on the beach back towards that flag. There was so much stuff piled under the boardwalk but when I walk under where I guessed the keys might be, there they were. I picked them up, kissed them, and pocketed them! [laughing] It was a lovely vacation. I met gals and had dates.

Then they shipped us to Laredo, Texas, on the Rio Grande, right across the Mexican border from Nuevo Laredo. We could just walk across to Mexico. The stores there were full of many things made of silver, things we couldn't find in the United States at very reasonable prices. I bought silk stockings for my mother and sister. They later told me that they wore those stockings for weeks and weeks without a run in them.

Q: Was there an airfield in Laredo?

BJ: Yes, we were training young soldiers to go overseas. I showed them how to man machine guns. There were fighter planes that came in and made passes at us and we fired blanks at the planes to practice.

Q: Did you do that until the war ended?

BJ: We didn't do much after. That was the later part of 1944 [sic: 1945]. I was home about three weeks after the war was over in Europe in 1945. *Around 1:37*

Q: How did you feel when you heard that President Roosevelt had died?

BJ: Oh that was terrible. He died in Atlanta on one of his trips there to the warm springs.

Q: Was there any talk about you boys being shipped to the Pacific after the war in Europe was over?

BJ: Yes, They were shipping soldiers from Europe to the Pacific Islands before they completed their tour in Europe.

Q: Were you still in the service when the atomic bombs were dropped in Japan?

BJ: I was still in the service. But they discharged us a few weeks after in August.

Q: Did you make use of the GI bill?

BJ: Yes, I went back to studying at The Arts Students League on 57th Street. I had gone there before the war when I was working in New York City. I had asked my boss for a raise. Though he said "NO," he did something better: he sent me to the Arts Students League for night classes. I would work thirty-five hours for him and walk from 40th Street to 57th Street. One night I stopped in the Waldorf Astoria for a drink and discovered that they served hot food for free if you ordered a cocktail. After that, I went there every night and brought my sketch pad. There, I became acquaintances with men who asked me to do their portraits or caricatures. After the war, I had a studio in New York City for thirty years.

Mr. Janssen proceeded to show the interviewer a stack of his lovely sketches of animals and of flower arrangements.

BJ: I want to show you a framed personal letter that came to me on April 6, 2015 from Admiral Mullen of the US Navy. It was praise for “flying some of the most difficult missions of World War II such as Operation Dragoon, the Allied invasion of southern France.” The letter thanked me and my comrades who “helped to liberate a continent” and “inspired hope for generations to come” in “one of our nation’s most important calls to action.”