Joseph P. Roberge
Veteran

Michael Russert and Wayne Clarke
NYS Military Museum
Interviewers:

Interviewed at
Hampton Inn, Commack, New York
On February 26th, 2003

Q: This is an interview with Joseph Roberge at the Hampton Inn, Commack, New York, February 26th, 2003. It's approximately 8:45AM. The interviewers are Michael Russert and Wayne Clarke. Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth please?
JPR: Joseph Philip Roberge. I was born on the 1st of September, 1924 in Greenfield, Massachusetts.

Q: What was your educational background prior to military service?
JPR: I was a high school senior when the war started. We graduated in the class of 1942 and the war started December 7th. We were as poor as church mice so there was no way I was going to college. I always wanted to study meteorology. I figured I could study that in the Air Force and fly at the same time.

As soon as I turned eighteen which would have been in September of '42, the Air Force wouldn't take seventeen-year-old people at that time, The Loyal Order of the Elks used to process all of our papers, type everything up and provide transportation if necessary. We had to go to Springfield, Massachusetts for all of the physical exams and what-not. Then you returned home, and you were told yes or no. I was sworn in on the 17th of September, 1942.

In those days, in the cadet program you had to wait until the classes were ready. So, you were, in a sense, in the Air Force. You couldn't be drafted. You went back home and waited until you were called. I got my call on the 7th of March 1943. I entered the active service at Springfield, Massachusetts. We were transported to Camp Devens, put on a troop train and then we went to Nashville, Tennessee.

Q: Can I stop you for one second.
JPR: Yes.

Q: Could I go back just for one question. Do you recall where you were and your reaction to the news on Pearl Harbor?
JPR: Oh yes indeed. My dad, who never went to the movies, it was unbelievable. This was a Bing Crosby movie which he liked. There we were in the Garden Theater in Greenfield, Massachusetts watching Bing Crosby's movie. Obviously, they stopped the movie and explained everything and then the movie continued. As I said, I don't think my dad went to the movies three times that I can remember. It was one of those times.

Q: What was your reaction to that?
JPR: Of course, we were surprised. We knew nothing in the sense other than what we had seen on the news reels concerning the German movement in Europe, but you saw very, very little of the Japanese. Very, very little. All you knew is that they were ripping up abandoned railroad tracks and selling the steel to the Japanese. I remember that because we had trolley cars all over New England and those tracks were disappearing very rapidly.

We really had no idea what the Japanese had in mind. We knew much more about the German movement than we did about the Japanese.

Q: So, you arrived in Nashville.
JPR: Nashville, Tennessee which was the classification center. There were three classification centers, one in California, one in San Antonio and one in Nashville, Tennessee. You went through all of the physical exams, psychological exams and every exam you can think of and you were classified.

I was very interested in math constantly and meteorology, so I chose to become a navigator. After classification, we went through pre-flight at Selman Field, Monroe, Louisiana. We were the second class the Air Force instructed to go through gunnery school – that is navigators and bombardiers. We went to Panama City, Florida, Tyndall Air Force Base for gunnery school, six weeks, then back to Selman for eighteen weeks of advanced navigation. We graduated on the 23rd of December, Class 43-17. We had our ten day leave plus transportation.

I love cold weather which you people know. All these people, I want to go to Texas, I want to go to Florida. I looked for the most northern spot I could find which was Rapid City, South Dakota. My name was first on the list. No one else wanted to go to Rapid City. Of course, I had no idea what the assignment was or anything like that. All I know is that I wanted something in real cold weather.

After our leave, we reported to Rapid City on the 6th of January, 1944. Low and behold, the 398th Bomb Group was being formed. We were very fortunate and didn't realize it at the time, we were the last complete group of B17s to leave the states. Everything thereafter was a replacement.

We trained there, and the weather was so bad that we had to spend a week in Ardmore, Oklahoma. We had to spend a week in Pyote, Texas and then eventually our group was ready to go. That's a seventy-five-ship group in those days. You have four squadrons of eighteen a piece. Then you have three lead ships which have a little more facilities than the regular aircraft – seventy-five all together

We went down to, after we finished, which would have been two days after Easter, 1944. We flew down to Nebraska which was a staging area. Even though we had brand new aircraft, the aircraft had to be examined stem to stern, engines checked so on and so forth. Then you had a week of physical exams, psychological exams, briefings and so on and so forth.

Then we flew individually. Our flight went to Bangor, Maine, Dow Field. I've got to tell you a little something in humor. Dow Field and was an Air Transport Command and I'm sure you people have heard something about the Air Transport Command. They always had the best of everything. There was a song about "Mothers take your star out of your window; your son is in the ATC."

We're in the officers' club that night and, obviously, that song came on. The next morning, here to fore, henceforth as of now there will be no more transit officers allowed in the officer's club. That was almost a riot act that night. We knew we were going to combat and obviously no one in the Air Transport Command ever went into combat.

We spent the night there and then went to Gander Lake, Newfoundland. Gander Lake was amazing. This would be in April now about the 22nd or 23rd. They had a runway the (unclear) was so deep they had to split it into two parts. We spent two nights there ready for the weather. Then we went individually across. That was a wonderful experience for a nineteen-year-old navigator. We flew to an air base in Northern Ireland, Nutts Corner, which is southeast of Belfast.

Something else you'll laugh at. We had general briefings in Gander Lake the night before we left. They warned us repeatedly, do not land in the Irish Free State. I don't care if you've got four emergency appendectomies, you lose all four engines. Don't land there because you'll be interned there for the rest of the war, according to the Geneva Conference, Sweden, Switzerland, Monaco, Portugal, Ireland, you're interned.

Our obvious question, how are we going to tell the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State? None of us had ever been there before. The briefing officer said you'll tell when you get there. We looked at one another. Did you hear what the man said? So, five more questions, how do we tell? This time, he cracks a little grin. You will tell when you get there. The question was asked about six times and by this time, he's laughing up a storm.

So, we walk out of there figuring these guys are crazy. Then we go to individual navigation briefings, the same routine again, how are we going to tell when we get there. To make a long story short, we're bringing over a new group. We had, I think, about twelve people on board. We had the flight engineer, a captain, we had another administrative officer. There were only three of us awake that night. The radio officer, Red Doran, who lives here on the island was monitoring everything. The first pilot kept looking at everything, oil pressure, oil temperature, pressure and of course, I was navigating.

After the stars faded out and the cloud cover came in, I had to use my last (unclear). We came in, I understand the Irish call it "Donegal Bay". I called in "Donegal". I was told it was an incorrect pronunciation. We came in and then I started to laugh. Roy heard me laughing. He said, "What are you laughing at?" I said, "Roy, remember ten hours back. Look down." Believe this or not, I don't know if they were papier-mâché or plywood, but

these arrows were painted bright white. They were fifty feet long and a hundred feet apart from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to the Irish Sea pointing into Northern Ireland. You couldn't have missed it, and did they show up against the green background! I mean fifty feet long and a hundred feet apart like this.

We spent the night there. We hadn't eaten now in about fourteen hours all together. They had taken this RAF officer out of WWI and put him in charge of this base. They took us to the officer's dining. I don't know what the food was, but I couldn't touch it. I had bread and water. The next morning, whatever they had the night before it was fried, I couldn't touch that again. I was ready to surrender to the Germans! All I wanted was some food.

We flew across the Irish Sea, landed at Station 131 and we had American food so I ready to go. We then proceeded for about two weeks of briefings by the RAF primarily as to how to escape from German Prisoner of War camps. I don't know if you heard all of the stories but some of them are just amazing.

The one story I heard that you all know well, you can be part of a work party. When you come into the German Prisoner of War camp, your name is put at the bottom of the list. As your name comes to the top of the list, everybody's going to help you to escape.

These two men came in at the same time and asked the commanding officer, the American officer if they could go out together and they said yes. They went on a paint detail, painting all the parking lines whatever lines you need in a German prisoner of war camp. There's a guard with them and he's talking to the other guards and what not.

At lunch time or whatever they call it, they were within about five or ten meters from the main gate. The two men at lunch told the commanding officer we're going out this afternoon. They picked up their brushes and painted right down out the main gate down the highway, tossed them in the brush and took off. The British swore up and down that every story they told us was gospel truth. When you think about it, the guard can't have been watching them right down the line.

Then we had a couple of practice missions and then we were ready to fly and on the 7th of May our first mission, I'll never forget the briefing officer "Gentleman, your mission for today is Berlin." This is only about the sixth or seventh time the Americans had been there.

So, we started flying on the 7th of May. We were fortunate in many, many ways. In those days, the 8th Air Force was made up of three divisions, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd. The 1st had triangles on the aircraft on the aircraft on the tail section. The 2nd had circles and the 3rd had squares. Each division had five wings. Each wing had three groups.

We came into the 1st wing of the 1st division. It had only two groups, so we made up the rest of the 1st wing. Now, we're got a full complement of the 8th Air Force. We started flying our missions and putting up one third of a wing a day.

Each group, the 91st was our leader, the 381st at Bassingbourn, at Ridgewell, I'm sorry, and each one of us put up eighteen aircraft a day. We did that for a month. We had learned to fly together and I'll telling you, we flew so close I could tell you what you were doing in your aircraft. You could tell me what I was doing in mine. When I look at some of these films of the 8th Air Force these formations are horrible. We flew so close together.

After a month, the 91st and the 381st had been shot to pieces and the Air Force decided the 398th was going to put up a wing a day. Everybody was restricted to the base. We put up fifty-four aircraft per day instead of eighteen. We did that for a month. This gave the 91st and the 381st a chance to recoup, train their crews and so on and so forth. We were, meanwhile back at the ranch, shot to pieces.

We went through the most amazing spell and I can remember this like it was yesterday. It was Monday the 19th of June. We had a combat mission. We flew a combat on Tuesday. We flew on Wednesday. We were off on Thursday. We flew on Friday. We flew on Saturday. We flew on Sunday.

On Monday morning the bombardier yelled at me, he says, "You didn't say anything. I yelled a second time and you didn't say anything" He came over and grabbed me. I was standing up sound asleep. You know birds can do it. I said, "What happened?". He said, "The mission's been cancelled". I grabbed my gear, jumped on the first General Motors truck, went back, checked in all of my equipment, went to the BOQ. I had an upper bunk.

My first pilot was below me. I looked at my watch. It was six thirty in the morning, Monday and I fell fast asleep. I woke up. It was nine thirty. I felt awfully rested. I went around. The other ten were still sleeping. Finally, when the fifth fellow woke up, we found out it was Tuesday. When the eleventh man woke up at three thirty in the afternoon, the eleven of us got together. I had the shortest nap, twenty-seven hours. The longest one was thirty-three hours.

Why would human beings sleep twenty-seven, twenty-eight? What did we do Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday? We had averaged a total of eighteen hours sleep for the preceding eight days. When you come out from high altitude, the temperature is fantastic, the change. Our average temperature was -40. You come down, it's around 15. That's fifty-seven degrees. You're walking into an oven. You can't get over the loss of oxygen. We've been flying with one hundred per cent. You're down to twenty-one per cent. The body rebels against that. You've got the adrenalin. You can't eat. You can't sleep. You're so loge. We went through, as I said, six missions in seven days.

Q: Can I ask you a question if I can stop you for a moment. Did you keep the same crew on all of your missions?
JPR: Yes, indeed except, I'll have to fill you in. I was a high school graduate and navigators and bombardiers without any college experience whatsoever were flight

officers upon graduation. For a pilot, they made them a 2nd Lieutenant. So, I had to be promoted. I had to take a physical exam.

So, my crew flew that day. My crew which was the first crew in the squadron to finish thirty-two missions. I was standing there with my head down. I remember our commanding officer, the second one, the first one was shot down within right on the side of us.

Captain Peterson says, "Joe, why aren't you happy?" I said, "I've got one more mission to fly." He said, "Want to fly with me?" I said, "Wonderful." I flew with the lead crew just once. They had an average of five missions. I had thirty-one. It was a rather unique experience. We bombed a camouflaged synthetic oil plant. No anti-aircraft fire. You couldn't have it there.

It was funny. Remember, you have two navigators, two bombardiers, two radio operators, three pilots on a lead ship. We were leading the 8th Air Force that day. We crossed the Dutch coast and, I don't know, about ten kilometers down somebody's firing and 88mm and the radio operator panicked. I said, "Listen, let him shoot all day. If he's going to shoot down there, that's his business." We went in. No anti-aircraft fire. No fighters, came out, that was my thirty-second. I flew thirty-one with my original crew and one with a lead crew.

Q: Did you keep the same plane most of the time?
JPR: No. About half way through, we had our flak leave. Have you heard the term flak leave before? The flight officer, sorry, the flight surgeon, who died just a couple years ago, he wasn't a psychologist. He was a MD, but he had to act as a psychologist. He thought when you are ready to go wild, you had your flak leave. At the end of our flak leave, we had another aircraft. They gave the original aircraft that we flew over to another crew. We picked up another and then flew that one.

Q: Did you name your plane at all?
JPR: It was chosen in Rapid City. No one named it. I wasn't even engaged at the time. Her name was Dottie Darling, so I put "Dottie D." on the side of the aircraft. Alright, nothing else was done. When we came on the second aircraft, nothing. So, I put the "Dottie D." on the one side and her mother had given her name (unclear) on the other side. My son, who was killed in active duty in the Air Force, would always say that mom had two aircraft named after her not just one. It had "Dottie D." on one side and (unclear) on the other.

I have to tell you something funny. In Rapid City, South Dakota, it was decreed that everyone should be familiar with every gun position. Wonderful. So, we're flying a couple hundred meters above the ground. They had targets set up. I went from one to the next and I'm back to the waist. I didn't connect my intercom. I'm sighting up on the target just as the pilot was going to dip the aircraft, so the top turret could fire. Old Daniel Boone, four slugs went through the wing tip. Alright, just enough so that the aircraft brand new had to go back to Wichita, Kansas to have a wing tip put on. When I

was at the physical exam, they painted a wing tip on the side of the aircraft. No other aircraft in the 8th Air Force had a wingtip (unclear) They had a wing tip painted. They never told me who did it. I've got a pretty good idea.

The flight that I missed, unbelievable, they lost two engines at the target, an engine across the channel and landed almost dead stick. The aircraft was so badly scrapped, they gave us another aircraft. Of course, I didn't know that at the time. We had two aircraft I might say. The first one which we brought over and that was badly damaged and the second one.

Q: Did you ever decorate your jacket?
JPR: No. When I got back to the states, my flight jacket I had to put the 8th figure on the back.

Q: Do you still have your flight jacket?
JPR: No. No. I had to turn that in.

Q: You did.
JPR: Yes.

Q: You were telling us on the way up about your D-Day experience.
JPR: Yes. We flew that morning. You see, we were the -- if you can visualize East Anglia which is a very small part of a very small island. The 8th Air Force was scattered, and we were the 398th Bomb Group, Station 131. We were in the far southwest corner. There were no four-engine aircraft south or west of us. Everything was north and east. We were the last aircraft to fly because we were the closest to D-Day, to the beachhead.

We dropped out bombs at 6:56 and a half over Courseulles where the Canadians landed. No aircraft behind us. Now the troops at the beach at 7:00 and we got there at 6:56 and a half. There was no anti-aircraft fire that day or anything like that. There were no German fighters.

I'll never forget it as long as I live. You could have walked from England to France if "x" marks the spot where there was a ship. I've never seen so many boats in my life. Never in my life. It was a solid mass of boats going across. I often wondered, whatever the naval title is, the man was who arranged or the people or staff who arranged where the boats are going to be at a particular time.

I had a friend of mine who was a year behind me in high school who was in the Navy. He was on an LST and the second wave went up to the Pas de Calais to fool the Germans again. The water was so rough. We were so glad we were flying over the rough water. Those guys in the second wave were sicker that dogs because of the action of the water.

We had watched the fortifications being built. I'll tell you we were so glad we were flying that day rather than down there in those boats landing. We could see the concrete. You could see everything being built. Of course, Rommel, who I think was brilliant, he didn't have the concrete that he needed. If he'd of had the concrete, and had he been there –

that was his wife's birthday – that's amazing. The good lord was looking after us that day. There was no one in charge at the beach.

You remember Hitler would not allow the panzer divisions to move. Every bridge has been cut from the mouth of the Seine down to Paris. They would have had a hard time bringing the Panzers across first of all. There was one Panzer division on maneuvers south of the beachhead, but no one could give them permission to move. We were very, very fortunate.

Q: You mentioned in a mission that you lost your electrical system.
JPR: Yes. We, that was the sixth mission in the seventh day. We went over the D-Day beachhead at about seven thousand feet. You could hit a B-17 with a rock. We joked about it if the Canadians and the Americans and British had realized it that every German gun pointed upward they could have ended the war right then and there. Anti-aircraft fire was terrific.

We knew we'd been hit. Now take a piece of galvanized metal and hit it with a 2x4. That's the shrapnel from the aluminum. The aluminum stops nothing…nothing. We knew we'd been hit. I didn't pay attention. There was only one thermometer in the aircraft. It was up in the nose, so the bombardier could decide on setting his bomb site.

The temperature got down to -48. That day we had electric flying suits. This was the 2nd generation suit. The Eisenhower jacket and the pair of pants. The jacket plugged into the pants. You had about two meters of cord and you could roast, toast, par boil, whatever you wanted. I had the thing on full blast. There was nothing. I called the rest of the ship and said, "Anybody get any heat." Nothing. The anti-aircraft fire had shot out the circuits.

Q: Did anybody get frostbite at all?
JPR: Well, no. We had two pairs of gloves. I like cold weather, so you may not believe this. I couldn't wear gloves. I used to go up with bare hands. I had to write constantly. You couldn't write with gloves on. Nobody that I knew of on our aircraft got frostbite. You could take the bit heavy gloves off and you had a nice silk pair underneath whatever it was in those days. It was like silk and that could protect you to some extent. I couldn't write with those on, so I used to go bare handed. Nobody in the aircraft that day, no.

Q: Did you wear your flak jacket?
JPR: Over the target area. Yes. We didn't always have it. It was amazing. Not all of our aircraft were flying by this time. That is, we weren't putting up fifty-four a day. So, people would go through and raid the ships and take the flak suits out and bring them into their ships. They had them piled over the floor. Newspapers, magazines, anything you know what I mean. But, that day we did have flak suits.

We had a chest pack. There were seat packs, back packs and chest packs. The bombardier had a seat pack. I had a chest pack. The radio operator had a chest pack. Waist gunners had chest packs. You couldn't wear the chest pack with the big flak suit. Of course, you had a red ribbon over here if you pull, the flak suit fell off.

I wasn't going to play flying leaf. I didn't want to bail out. I swear that aircraft had to have been on fire before I'd gone out. I had that parachute right there. I knew right where it was. I could put it on. This is long before IBM. I think it I'd have said, "Open.", it would have opened. I mean I wouldn't have had to pull it. It handled so well (unclear). I want' going to take a flying leaf. No way. I was going to get out of the aircraft somehow. I don't know how. Parachuting is not my experience.

My son when he went to Notre Dame ROTC. They decided they wanted to do a little parachuting. I said, 'Wonderful" I told P.J., "You go right ahead." I didn't want any part of that.

Incidentally, I've got to fill you back in and talk about an 8th Air Force background. My dad was in the Signal Corps in World War I which became the Air Force. My dad was in pilot training. Twenty of the twenty-four were killed. No parachutes or anything like that. The Signal Corps took the four of them and said you guys better chose something else. My dad became a cook. Alright.

My father in law was a civilian glider pilot instructor in the Air Force. You ought to hear the stories he can tell. Unbelievable. At night, the wind would shift. Here, two gliders coming in on the same landing pattern. You don't pull up and go around. My brother-in-law spent five years in the Air Force, '52 to '57. One of my sons-in-law spent seven years in the Air Force from about '64 through '71. One of my cousin's first cousin, a daughter, a major, a nurse was in charge of one of the tent hospitals in the Middle East some time ago. My second wife, her husband was in the Air Force. My son, ROTC at Notre Dame, an instructor pilot and was in leading training with the Air Force for F-15 when he was killed in a training accident. So, we have a lot of Air Force, I'll tell you, in the family.

Q: What were the majority of your missions? What were some of your targets?
JPR: We went to Berlin twice. We went to Hamburg twice. We went to Bordeaux twice. We went to Toulouse. We went to Leipzig. We went to Hanover which is where that synthetic oil plant on the last one was. We went to Paris, the Orly airport. We went after the railroad marshalling yards at Paris on the southeast side of the city. We went to two cities on the Rhine River, Mannheim and Ludwigshafen going after the railroad marshalling yards. We went to…went after a bridge in the middle of France. We went twice for the "buzz bomb" targets due to Winston Churchill. What a waste that was, a complete waste. The D-Day mission.

The longest mission at the time in the history of the Air Force, we went to Posen, Poland. Our crew chief was a southerner from either Kentucky or Tennessee with a drawl. I wished I could imitate him. He's always tell us you guys are going to have good engines.

We were awfully short of mechanics. You didn't even have two mechanics per aircraft. You had a crew chief, then you'd have fellows that would rotate among the aircraft, electronic or hydraulic or whatever their specialty was.

We were warned repeatedly in the briefing don't waste any fuel. My first pilot was tail-end Charlie many times. I didn't realize until after a period of time, "tail-end Charlie" is a damn good pilot. He's got to gage his fuel. You see, the first pilot is on automatic. Each one, you could see how this is going to build up. The "tail-end Charlies" are darn good pilots who can judge back and forth to stay in formation. So, we were warned repeatedly.

We took off and we formed, and we took the Great American Highway which is the 54th parallel of north latitude because it misses many German cities. We made the "v" around Berlin, went into Poland and it was an aircraft manufacturing plant, a long, long building with a huge railroad marshalling yards beside it for what not.

Our bombardier was off with his drift. We took off with the railroad yards. They were probably loaded with parts anyway. The plant had been hit before we got there. Then they shipped us out to the Baltic Sea. We went into a little glide the minute we dropped our bombs. Instead of throttling at 150 indicating which we did, 145 then went into a little glide. When we hit the Baltic Sea, we throttled back to 140 and went into a little steeper glide.

Now you can see how we're saving fuel. We went over the Jutland Peninsula at about seven thousand feet and got shot to pieces. We were one of five aircraft which could go back to our base without having to land at an RAF base and refuel. I never waited for the tankers to come in. We landed, and I don't care how badly damaged the aircraft was, the tankers would fill up the tanks.

He pumped, and he pumped, and he said, "Where did you guys go?" He put in 2730 gallons. We took off with 2780. We made it with 50 gallons of fuel which meant probably all four gages were on zero. That was a long mission. We were in the air eleven hours. There's no air to air refueling. After that, I understand there was a mission longer than that. I don't know if it was in time or in distance. Teaching physics all of my life, I've always told my students, here's a vector problem. We took off from station 131. We land at station 131. What's the vector sum? Zero, but what is the actual linear distance. You follow me? Eleven hours in 1944 in a B-17. We told our crew chief you're right, we have darn good engines. He kept telling us that.

Q: Did you have a bomb site on your plane?
JPR: Yes. Indeed. Always. Constantly. We always had a bomb site. Hal Reeves, our bombardier who lived in Palo Alto, California died a couple of years ago. An amazing story, you probably heard people tell how the mind snaps.

The second time we went to Hamburg, now, the bombardier is up in the nose of the aircraft. The anti-aircraft fire is right there. I'm looking around making sure I know where we are and so forth. All of the sudden I heard 50-caliber machine guns. I'm looking around for the fighters and couldn't find a thing. His mind had snapped. He pointed both guns down and he fired every round of ammunition before I could catch him. He has no recollection of it. No recollection whatsoever. He says what did I do? In other words (makes gesture with his hands).

In the Nissen hut beside us, this is hard to believe, this fellow had coal black hair. We were on the same mission. The following morning, he was pure white. I've talked to medical experts. That's happened before. Pure white. Sometimes things like that, I'll never forget Hal. I'm looking all over for a fighter. I didn't see a fighter in sight. I'm wondering where the machine gun, what's the firing all about.

For example, I've seen these Nissen hut where the fellow with the coal black hair. It was a Sunday afternoon we weren't flying. All of the sudden we heard shots. We didn't know what it was. A fellow had taken out his 45. His mind went on him. He wanted to see the sun. He was shooting holes through the roof of the Nissen hut. They had to cart him away. The mind when it goes like that…this is why the Air Force after a series of missions you were sent home or sent to some other assignment for a period of time.

I forgot to tell you this. The minute we got in England, the tour went from 25 to 30 and half way through in went from 30 to 35. They prorated our missions so all our records we're down for thirty-five missions. We actually flew thirty-two. Then they round off so later on they almost killed him. They kept telling us we made a mistake, you should have only flown thirty-one. Can you imagine someone telling you that? Our records are thirty-five, but we flew thirty-two.

Q: When you went back to the states, what did you do then?
JPR: Well, before we left the states, you had to apply for some assignment. I decided I wanted to go through pilot training. I still have the letter at home from Colonel Hunter who incidentally was killed in January of '45, I recommend this officer for pilot training.

So, you had your terminal…. what was that leave called, not terminal leave. When you came back from overseas, you were given thirty days and it wasn't called terminal leave. What was it called? It was a certain term for it then you went to another assignment.

I was assigned to Atlantic City, New Jersey where you went through a whole series of exams. I mean psychological, physical, and mental. Oh, what a series. The Air Force used that as a rest station. The Ritz-Carlton for officers and the next door for enlisted men. They had Convention Hall which the Air Force had taken over. You've never seen so many psychologists or MD's in your life in that building and you went from room to room to room.

They took a week. They took two weeks. It could have been done in a week, but they gave you an extra week. In the last office, I remember there it was a Lt. Colonel psychologist who had two stamps. He had all your records – "Fit for Combat", "Unfit for Combat". Mine was "Fit for Combat". Then I had to wait for an assignment for pilot training, so I was sent to MacDill Field, Tampa, Florida as an instructor. These were replacement crews going overseas. They had a couple of bombardiers, a couple of navigators and first pilots.

We flew half of October, November, December and two weeks in January then I got my assignment for pilot training. I was sent to San Antonio which was…there were three

classification centers: California, San Antonio and Nashville. It was called SAACC in those days, "San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center.

We were there. We had to go through classification all over again. All the physical exams, psychological exams, the whole thing. Then we went through pre-flight then our assignment for Carlstrom Field, Arcadia, Florida, a civilian base, for primary flying school. Then we went to Gunter Field in Alabama for basic flying school. Then we went to Selma, Alabama, Craig Field for advanced pilot training but the war ended when I was at advanced pilot training and, of course, they suspended all training. Then, we were on our way home.

Q: What was your reaction to the death of President Roosevelt?
JPR: Well, I was flying that day. I'll never forget my instructor pilot wanted me to go up and do some stalls. I was alone, so I was flying solo. There was a flare that would fired from the air base. We were six or seven kilometers away in a little field. I saw the flare. I immediately came down. The instructor said, "What are you doing down here?" I said, "The flare" which he couldn't see from the ground. We were shocked no question whatsoever.

Obviously, we didn't know all of what was going on in Washington at that time, but we knew he had done an amazing piece of work up until that particular point. We were poor as church mice in New England when he came in in 1932. We could see improvements.

Q: What kind of aircraft did you fly in primary school?
JPR: In primary, we had a PT-13 which was a bi-plane, seven instruments, open cockpit. No radio. No flaps. That's the way you learn how to fly.

Q: Was it a Stearman?
JPR: No. The Stearman was the PT-17. There were two. Actually, Stearman had both but one had one engine, one had another engine. So, they called then a "13" or a "17". They were both made by Stearman. "13" and "17" were the two numbers. My son, on leave from Notre Dame, we went to Air Force Museum. He rounded the corner and stopped and said, "You learned to fly in that thing!" (laughs). He was shocked.

Then, we were the second class to go from PT-13 to AT6's for basic. You went from a 220 horsepower to a 650 horse with radio, flaps, retractable landing gear and that was a ball, I'll tell you. We were the second class to do that. In Craig Field, halfway through pilot training, basic flying school, I'm sorry, an edict came out of the Air Force. If you intended to finish pilot training, you had to sign up for a second tour of combat. Well, I was only twenty at the time. I never told my family, never told my fiancée so I signed up. We lost half our class. There was nothing was held against you. If you left, you were given some other assignment.

We then continued in basic, then went to advanced. At that point, they were looking for pilots for the P51-J for Iwo Jima for the pre-invasion bombardment of Japan. I'm not being modest, but you had to be a good pilot and be under 5'10" and under 150 pounds.

I got through basic flying school like a hot knife through butter. So, I was assigned to P51-J's. We missed Iwo Jima by no more than twelve weeks.

Instead of your transition school being ten weeks- five weeks and five weeks- we were going to have transition and gunnery in five weeks and we were going to be flown to Iwo Jima. Not going over by boat. That's how desperate they were. We didn't know about the invasion of Japan obviously.

Q: What was your reaction to the dropping of the Atomic bombs?
JPR: Of course, we didn't know anything about it. No one knew anything about it. We were just amazed at the magnitude of the destruction compared to our little bombs. It was…

Q: Did you think it was necessary?
JPR: Oh yes. Definitely. No question whatsoever. I had so many of my friends on their way to the invasion of Japan. In my first wedding, my best man who had survived three landings, he was a Marine I guess you would call it a radio unit whatever you call it. I didn't realize this. The Marines didn't use radios. It was all wire. He had a wire team. Three invasions, the wire team was almost destroyed. He went back to the states to get a new wire team. Iwo Jima was his last one. He was on his way to Japan.

The retired Navy man beside of me was on destroyer escorts going in. The Japanese would have never surrendered without. Have you just recently in the Discovery Channels and what not discovered all the aircraft that they found that the Japanese had hidden away? All of the bamboo spears and whatnot. That minimum of a million casualties I don't think was exaggerated at all.

I get a kick out of all of these people who have no idea of the military. We should have dropped the atom bomb out in the sea, so the Japanese could have seen it. Could you see the Japanese laughing? They can't even hit an island. That would have been ridiculous from the word go.

Q: Did you ever when you left the service did you use the GI Bill?
JPR: Yes indeed. As I said, we were as poor as church mice. It's the only way I would have gone to the University of Massachusetts. I wouldn't have gone any other way.

Q: How about the 52-20 club?
JPR: No. I never took advantage of that. I didn't believe in that. I was going to college so that was that.

Q: Did you join any veteran's organizations or…
JPR: No. I stayed in the reserve for a number of years until my wife decided you that survived so you're come out of the reserves. I retired from the reserves about 1953 I guess, '54 something like that.

Q: Were you called for Korea.
JPR: Yes. That's amazing. I got my notice about the first or second week of January of '51. You are assigned to Mitchell Field. Wonderful. Be prepared. Make family

reservations, the whole thing. We had two girls at the time. My mother and father were going to take my wife and the two children. I explained I was teaching. I explained to the Superintendent of schools, the whole works then waited and waited and waited.

I don't know if you heard the story or not. Nothing was computerized in those days. It was all done by alphabet all down the line. When they got enough navigators and bombardiers and pilots, they stopped. Roberge way down at the bottom of the list. A friend of mine, Louis Cluff, who flew combat in Italy, Cluff, he was called back. We waited and waited but never got called.

Q: Did you belong to the 8th Air Force Association?
JPR: Yes. Indeed, just as soon as the word came out. I wasn't a charter member because I wasn't aware of it until about the second year, I guess. One of our local newspapers had a little clipping about the 8th Air Force Association.

I joined the 398th Bomb Group Historical Association as soon as that was formed. I think I'm a charter member of that. We get four bulletins a year from each organization. It's fantastic. I don't know if you have heard all of these numbers. Bear with me on this. This came out about four years ago. The 8th Air Force went through all of the Department of Defense records. A fraction under two hundred thousand men flew at least one combat mission in the 8th Air Force, a hundred and ninety-nine thousand something like that. Twenty-six thousand were killed. Twenty-eight thousand were prisoners of war. Nine thousand wounded.

We lost more men than the Navy did in all of World War II. We lost more men than the Marines did. We put more prisoners of war in German Prisoner of War camps that all of the rest of the services put together. People aren't aware of that.

We lost 6,600 four engine aircraft not counting twins or single, just four engine aircraft. The thing is when you left Gander Lake or Goose Bay, Labrador until you got back, you were considered 8th Air Force. A lot of them were lost going over. You probably heard about the German radio station in Bergen, Norway?

Q: No.
JPR: Well, the (unclear) established a radio station in Reykjavik, Iceland. Very strong signal. So, navigating, obviously you've got a line bearing. That's all you've got. The Germans put a station in Bergen, Norway. Bergen's not at the highest point in Norway but its high enough. The signal had exactly the same frequency but about three times the power. An awful lot of aircraft, you follow me, ran out of fuel going toward Norway.

Red Doran, our radio operator, when he picked up the first signal, I said, "Red, wait awhile and watch the other." and sure enough you could see the German signal. Here's Reykjavik and all of the sudden his radio compass needle was pointing towards Norway. So, altogether, 6600 aircraft.

Has anyone told you about experiences forming in the morning? The weather in England is bad, as you know. In formation flying, you take off…let me use this as the

runway (points to table). The leader is always on the left, number 2 on the right, number 3 and 4 and so forth and so forth.

The leader goes down. Thirty seconds later then thirty seconds later. The first leader makes a left turn, the other fellow makes a right turn. I went down the runway thirty-two time and twenty-one times I couldn't see the end of the runway. You climb through five, ten or fifteen thousand feet of clouds.

Mind you East Anglia is a very small part of a very small island. There's a thousand or twelve hundred four engine aircraft doing the same thing at the same time. The crashes in the morning were unbelievable. There's a war bride living in our community who was a member of the Junior Gray Ladies. The Red Cross in England was called the "Gray Ladies". These women were magnificent. They brought coffee and donuts to the air base before the missions and after. Where they got the food, I don't know. They would bring us a box of hard rock candy. They had a junior organization. The body parts were falling so often that they wouldn't let the Junior Gray Ladies come to the air base.

When we broke through in the morning, we were thrilled to pieces we broke through without hitting anybody. You went down to a radio "buncher", made a turn and climbed back up. Mind you, all the other aircraft are doing the same thing at the same time in the same weather.

Just to show you how bad forming was, we had formed, and we were on our way to Munich. I forgot to tell you we went there four times. That's it. We'd been there three times and we were shot to pieces every time. It was a Daimler Benz engine factory that made engines for every German demand. You have heard this before. We did not drop our bombs until we could see our target. You went to a secondary target or a tertiary target or you dropped them in the Channel. We went there three times and couldn't see the target.

We formed. We're over the North Sea and we smell gasoline. I took a little walk around bottle which is fifteen minutes worth of oxygen. I hadn't gone as far as you are, and I saw the gasoline coming down the side of the aircraft the co-pilot's primer pump. Here's the junction box with all of the electrical circuits. I went back and called Roy and said, "Roy, I've found it." He said, "Do you think you can stop it? How much are we losing?" So, I made an estimate I said, "If we have first aid kits, I can soak up the gasoline, open up the hatch, drop them out."

We voted to go on to Munich. We had all the right in the world to go back but we had formed, you follow me, we had already broken through. So, I soaked up all the gasoline, opened up the hatch and dropped it out. I don't know if the Germans thought about some fantastic weapon in 1944 (laughs). Again, it wasn't pouring out at a tremendous rate, but it was leaking. We soaked up all the gasoline and I looked out occasionally to make sure I knew where we were then back to the gasoline. But that shows you how forming in the morning, that's a unique experience. That's where so many aircraft were lost in the morning just forming or aircraft lost on take-off.

We dedicated our 398th Bomb Group this beautiful church window in a little church on the south side of our air base. A B-17 took off. No one will ever know what happened. The pilot realized he was going to hit the church, made a sharp left turn, went in. Everyone was killed. A tremendous crater from the bombs and what not. The original rector was alive when we had the dedication. I wasn't there. He dedicated this window. He went right to the scene of the accident at that particular time. Many aircraft on take-off something would happen. 6,600 hundred four engine aircraft all together.

Q: Do you keep in contact with some of your crew members?
JPR: Well, yes. The radio operator lives here on the island. I heard from the radio operator. The first pilot died. The bombardier died. We've lost track of some of the others. The co-pilot is still alive, but I lost his address. He's moved. We get a lot of information through these four bulletins a year that we get from the 398th Bomb Group. Boy, they are informative.'

Allen Ostrom, who lives out in the state of Washington, does a beautiful job and he calls up everyone he can get his phone, hands on and any stories you've got. He'll put them in. Of course, the 8th Air Force Historical Association, you have four bulletins a year. They're not as informative, obviously, as out 398th Bomb Group. There's always a lead story about a particular mission or something like that.

When Colonel Hunter, our commanding officer, was killed there was one survivor of that aircraft. They were shot down over a city in Germany. The most amazing story, they landed, the air craft crashed in the playground of a Catholic school, an elementary school. Several nuns went in and pulled out the sole survivor and the other thirteen or fourteen that were killed. Colonel Hunter's wife or widow and his two daughters went back to Germany about five years ago on a 398th Bomb Group tour. Two of the nuns were still alive believe it or not. They were able to meet the nuns who tried to pull Colonel Hunter out and pulled the one survivor out. The one survivor went with them on the tour. Colonel Hunter was killed.

We lost two squadron commanders. Major Killen was shot down on the side of us on our second trip to Berlin, but they eventually became prisoners of war. Captain Petersen was shot down and Colonel Hunter was killed, a West Pointer from way back when.

Q: How do you think your service changed or affected your life?
JPR: Well, looking at it from not a very good perspective, I would never have been able to go to college, number one. I enjoyed the military and am a great believer in compulsory military training. It would be a great thing in this day and age, especially in this day and age.

I just retired from teaching college level physics the last twenty years and, boy, we need discipline. We need discipline. It (unclear), the good lord saw me through it. An amazing experience. I enjoyed every bit of it.

Q: OK. Thank you very much for your interview.