

Charles B. Eames.
Veteran

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Interviewers

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Latham Head, MA

Today is December 18, 2001. We're interviewing Mr. Charles B. Eames at Latham Headquarters. Michael Aikey, interviewer. Wayne Clark, videographer.

Q: Mr. Eames, where were you born?

CE: I was born in Oneida, New York.

Q: You grew up in Oneida?

CE: I grew up near Oneida on a dairy farm, 200-acre dairy farm, attended Oneida schools.

Q: Did you graduate from high school in Oneida?

CE: Graduated from Oneida High School.

Q: What year did you graduate?

CE: I graduated in 1938.

Q: What was it like in Oneida in 1938?

CE: It was very pleasant. I have no bad memories of Oneida. Saturday night was always a big night and people came to town to shop. A nice small community.

Q: Now, after you graduated, what did you do? Work on the farm?

CE: I attended Hamilton College for four years. I was working on the farm in the summertime of course. And, yes, Hamilton College in Clinton, New York.

Q: That's where my mother is from.

CE: Good, that's another nice little town.

Q: Were you attending college when World War II broke out?

CE: Yes.

Q: Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was on-

CE: Actually, I was home for a weekend and seeing a movie—an afternoon movie at the Calot Theater in Oneida—and the movie was Gene Autry in Sierra Sue. I learned when I got home from the movie that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

Q: Do you remember what your feelings were at that point?

CE: My feelings at that time were... I really didn't have an early impact of what it was

all about. I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. I knew it was not good news, but I didn't realize how dramatic that was until I got back to Hamilton College that evening and of course everyone was in an uproar about it.

Q: Were you able to finish your schooling?

CE: Yes, I finished my senior year at Hamilton and enlisted in the Aviation Cadets soon thereafter.

Q: Why'd you pick the Aviation Cadets?

CE: I was interested in the Air Corps largely because I had taken, at the time, what was called the CPT [Civilian Pilot Training] program. I learned to fly a Piper Cub first, and then in the second phase of that program I had flown the WACO F7 biplane, which was a lot of fun. It seemed entirely natural for me to want to go into the Air Force.

Q: Now, these programs were at Hamilton?

CE: The program was conducted out of the old Marcy airport near Utica. Not far from Hamilton, maybe a 10-mile drive.

Q: What was that program like? You got some flying time?

CE: I got some flying time, did some soloing, and got my private pilot's license. Very enjoyable. In the second program—with the WACO F7—we got into combat maneuvers. Chandelles, Immelmann turns, slow rolls, snap rolls, spins, and all that. The whole acrobatics program.

Q: Were the instructors World War I aviators?

CE: I believe my instructor in the WACO F7 program was a World War I aviator.

Q: How did those planes handle?

CE: As I recall, and as I compare it with how some of the later planes handled that I worked with, they handled very easily. I don't recall having any difficulty with it.

Q: After you graduated from these programs, where did you go?

CE: I finished the second CPT program while a senior at Hamilton, I believe I finished it the first term of my senior year. I enlisted in the aviation cadet program in July of 1942 at Syracuse, New York. I was not called into active service until January 6th of '43.

Q: What was that program supposed to be doing? What would that train you to do? The cadet program.

CE: The cadet program trained us—that is me and thousands and thousands of others—to be either a pilot or a navigator or a bombardier. And I went in originally into the pilot training program. I may be getting a little bit ahead of the story here, but I became a bombardier in the upshot.

Q: Was it a pretty good training program?

CE: As nearly as I could judge, I would say yes. It was a rough program. I did very well during the primary part of the training program at Stamford, Texas, where we flew a Fairchild. I had no problem there. Then I got into a basic training program in Enid, Oklahoma and the BT-15—we called it the “Vultee Vibrator”—was a transition that I wasn't successful in making. It was a bigger airplane and I never felt comfortable with it. So, I didn't get very far into that program when the powers that be decided that I would do better in the bombardier training program than in the pilot training program.

Q: Where did you go for the bombardier training?

CE: For the bombardier training program, I eventually wound up at Deming, New Mexico. But before that—after having been in the pilot training program through the primary phase at Stamford, Texas and the basic phase to the extent that I did get through in Enid, Oklahoma—I went to San Antonio, Texas for the summer of 1943 and awaited redeployment. From there, we were sent to gunnery school in Kingman, Arizona. This was the fall of 1943. After gunnery school—about a nine-week program—we were sent to Deming, New Mexico for bombardier training.

Q: Did you enjoy gunnery training?

CE: Very much, that was fun.

Q: For the bombardier program, was the training pretty good?

CE: To the extent that I could judge, I would say the training was excellent. Beginning with working with—what we call the “bomb trainers”—simulated bombing on the ground and then a lot of practice bombing in the air both day and night. That was a good program.

Q: What was it like on the night flights?

CE: Well, it's a little hard to get used to. Other than that, I didn't have any problem.

Q: Any experiences stand on your mind during training?

CE: The one thing that stands out in my mind is that the very first bomb I dropped was the best one that I ever dropped. [Laughter] I think, by more luck than skill, I hit a bullseye. My instructor, who was riding with me, was- I don't think he knew whether to smile or fade away, but he was taken aback. That stands out in my mind.

Q: That would have been a good time to retire, in terms of training.

CE: [Both laughing] I was ahead of the game.

Q: Once you got out of this program, where were you assigned?

CE: I was assigned to Salt Lake City for just a few days for reassignment. And then from there to combat crew training in Ardmore, Oklahoma, where we were introduced to the B-17, met the other members of our crew, and did combat training.

Q: What was your initial impression of the B-17?

CE: By the standard of any airplane I've had anything to do with, it was huge. It seems strange now, but it was our frontline heavy bomber at the time. I've always, from day one, had great affection for the B-17. It brought me home.

Q: What was it like meeting the rest of the crew? Pretty good group of guys, generally?

CE: Yes. I think there was, unhappily, some friction—some clash of personalities between the pilot and co-pilot. It didn't make it a perfect crew by any means but on the whole we got along well.

Q: You started training together?

CE: We trained for nine weeks at Ardmore, yes.

Q: Did you have pretty good confidence in the pilot and copilot?

CE: No more than fair, I would say.

Q: After your nine weeks training together, where did you go?

CE: We were transferred to Kearney, Nebraska for a week or so. From there, we received our overseas assignment to the 8th Air Force in England. From Kearney, we went by troop train to New York City, and from New York City we were flown [by C-54] into our air force base [in England].

Q: What was your impression of England?

CE: At the time, it was a pretty drab place. I had a very favorable impression of the English countryside as you could see it from the air. Very much like a big garden, you know.

Q: Where were you stationed initially?

CE: Initially, we were just outside London at Hampstead Heath. But that was only for a few days and then we were transferred to our permanent base at Kimbolton, which is a little town near Bedford. I'm not sure whether to call it in the Midlands or in East Anglia—kind of in between the two.

Q: And that's where you got your plane?

CE: Yes.

Q: Now, you were assigned to the 8th Air Force?

CE: 379th group, 525th s**Q:** uadron.

Q: And you did a few training missions prior to your first combat mission?

CE: Yes, I believe we got to the base in early or middle June of that year and didn't go on combat operations until the 12th of July.

Q: So, you shook the plane down and got-

CE: Well, we did some practice bombing missions.

Q: As a bombardier in flight, what are your duties?

CE: Chiefly, to see that the bombsite is set up and ready to go when you reach what we call "the initial point" where the pilot says it's all yours. From that point to the target, the airplane is flown through the working of the bombsite.

Q: Every B-17 didn't have a bombsite though, did they?

CE: That is true. Now, I don't know how many of them did *not* carry bombsites.

Q: But yours did?

CE: Mine always did, even though I may not have been using a bombsite myself. The bombardier who had prime responsibility for the operation of the bombsite was the bombardier in the lead airplane. This would have been the airplane leading either the 12 plane squadrons, 12 to 15 planes quadron, or the 36 to 40 plane group.

Q: Tell us about your first combat mission.

CE: First combat mission was to Munich; it was quite a long flight. We were awakened at a quarter of one that morning. The sergeant said "breakfast at one fifteen, briefing at two" or something like that. I don't know what time we took off, probably five o'clock or thereabouts. It was a mission I remember because we had encountered heavy flak over the target.

Q: What was that like?

CE: I don't know how to describe it other than suddenly being aware that there's a black puff just outside my window with a red center in it. Then I hear something rattling against the plane—the pieces of flak bursting against the plane. And...

Q: Unnerving?

CE: A little bit unnerving. I didn't realize how heavy the flack had been until I- This is my first mission, so I wasn't sure whether this is normal or a little heavier than normal. But the fellows back at the base after the mission said it was unusually heavy flak. So, I got a good baptism.

Q: And that was your first mission?

CE: Yes.

Q: Was it a successful mission?

CE: As far as I know. This is something we never—I won't say never—but more often than not didn't know how successful the mission was.

Q: I guess any mission you get back is a fairly successful one.

CE: Yes, you can say if you walk away from it, it was successful.

Q: So that was your first mission.

CE: Many of the missions, we couldn't see the target. So, the lead bombardier would be using pathfinder equipment and radar equipment to enable him to bomb through the cloud cover. That's why I say it's hard to say what was successful.

Q: Right. Were you supported by fighters in these missions?

CE: Yes. By the time I joined the 8th Air Force in June of '44, we had long-range P-51s—the Mustangs—and they could accompany us all the way to the target. So, we almost always had fighter escort.

Q: Did the bombardier have any gunnery responsibility?

CE: Yes. The bombardier in the B-17 G, where they had installed the chin turrets, had 250 caliber machine guns for the bombardier to operate. The bombardier is responsible for that.

Q: And you got to operate them?

CE: Yes. Not very often. In my 30 missions, I would say we didn't have more than five serious encounters with fighters. I got to do some shooting with the guns, but not a great deal.

Q: Your particular plane, was it named? Did it have any nose art?

CE: The first airplane we had, my navigator had lettered on it “alive in '45,” which is a hope as much as anything else. But contrary to what you often see in the movies, we didn't get particularly attached to one airplane. We'd be assigned to another airplane sometimes, depending on the ground crews and whether they had their plane ready to go. And after eleven missions with my original crew, I was stood down for training as a lead bombardier. After my first eleven missions, I flew with a random assortment of airplanes. Whoever was flying the lead of the squadron with a group is the one I flew with.

Q: So you ended up a lead bombardier?

CE: Yes.

Q: That's quite a bit of responsibility.

CE: Yes. As we were saying earlier, he's the one who really uses the bombsite. The others hit the toggle switch when his bombs drop.

Q: Now, is this the Norden bombsite?

CE: It was the Norden bombsite.

Q: Any special precautions? Security precautions?

CE: I don't really think so, not as far as I can remember. By that time, so many B-17s had gone down, the Germans knew all about the Norden bombsight, I'm sure.

Q: Was there extra pressure being the lead bombardier?

CE: Yes. Because everything was on you, really. That was the whole point of the whole mission. Yes, I felt the responsibility.

Q: You flew with a variety of crew?

CE: Yes.

Q: Any mission, out of the 30 missions, stand out? Other than the first one?

CE: I remember things about several that stand out a little more than others. I remember the attacks of the German fighters, more vividly, maybe, than some others. I still see those ME-109s flying wing to wing and coming right at us, and I'm saying to myself "gee they're blowing smoke rings." You know? Their cannons were firing, and I could see the smoke rings come out.

Q: They came in as a pair?

CE: They came in wingtip to wingtip. But they had different maneuvers that I'm not familiar with. I remember the ME-109s coming in wing to wing and I remember the FW-190 shooting through our formation so close I could see the German pilot's face. They're vivid memories.

Q: Did you see any 262 jets?

CE: On one of my very last missions, I saw one in the distance.

Q: That must have been impressive.

CE: It was, for me, unprecedented. The only time I ever saw one.

Q: Right. So, you did 30 missions total?

CE: 30 missions, yes. The standard at the time was 35, but since I'd flown lead on 19 missions, they let me go after 30.

Q: How does it feel when you start getting up to mission 28, mission 29, and you know that there is going to be an end to this one way or another?

CE: Well, I don't know except to say it was a mixture of hope and dread.

Q: Did you know that the 30th was going to be your last mission?

CE: Yes.

Q: Were you apprehensive [during] that whole mission?

CE: It was a short mission, not what we called a "deep penetration." It was just to the Ruhr Valley, Gelsenkirchen as I recall. I was apprehensive, but not as apprehensive as if I'd had to go as far as Berlin or Munich or someplace like that.

Q: So, once the bombs dropped and you're turning to go home-

CE: and waiting to see the white cliffs of Dover!

Q: Did they have a special meeting that trip?

CE: They did, yes.

Q: What happened after your 30th mission?

CE: I probably waited a few days to be moved to Swansea, Wales and came home on a ship, the Santa Rosa. I was on the Santa Rosa at Christmastime in 1944 [at the] time of the Battle of the Bulge, which was big news. I'd arrived back in Boston Harbor just before New Years of 1945.

Q: What was it like coming into Boston Harbor?

CE: Cold, cold.

Q: I'm sure you were happy to see it.

CE: Yes, they gave us a steak dinner and it was great. It was great to be home again.

Q: Was there a parade?

CE: No, no.

Q: But you got your steak dinner.

CE: Yes. Then we were transferred to Camp Atterbury, Indiana for a few days and sent home on leave for ten days or thereabouts.

Q: It was your first time home in quite a while?

CE: I had been home briefly, a little less than a year before. I graduated from bombardier school in February of '44 and I was home for a few days at that time. And then, of course, sent to Ardmore, and combat and so on, and got home within a year. I had it a lot easier than some of the guys.

Q: But tougher than others.

CE: Hmm, that's the way it goes.

Q: Where were you discharged?

CE: I was discharged, ultimately, from Fort Dix, New Jersey. But before that there was a vacation redeployment assignment to Miami Beach for a few days, and then I was assigned to Midland, Texas for bombardier instruction school, and from there to Childress, Texas for redeployment. From Childress, Texas I was mustered out to Fort Jackson.

Q: What did you do when you got home?

CE: I planned my future. I got home in October of '45. I applied to graduate school at Syracuse University and started my master's program there in January of '46.

Q: You took advantage of the GI bill?

CE: Yes.

Q: And after you graduated, what did you do?

CE: I applied for a position on the faculty at Utica College and was lucky. There was a big need for faculty at that time because of the GI bill and all the GIs coming back to school. I started as an interim one term teacher at Utica College. But after one term, became a permanent member of the faculty. I was there for almost 20 years.

Q: Wow. What subject?

CE: Political Science.

Q: How would you summarize your military experience?

CE: I suppose it's kind of a cliché. I'm awfully glad I had it, but I'd just as so not repeat it.

Q: That's a pretty common-

CE: Yes, that's right.

Q: But that's okay!

CE: From all I've heard, [I had] a better experience than some of my colleagues had. I always thought highly of most of the officers I had. Very highly of some of them. I remember some of them with both admiration and affection.

Q: So, for the most part they were a good group of guys?

CE: Yes, outstanding.

Q: Any other experiences you can remember that you'd like to relate? Anything particularly funny? Humorous?

CE: I'm afraid I'm a-blank on that.

Q: That's okay. Well, we'd like to thank you very much.

CE: Oh, you're welcome.

Q: Yes, well that wasn't too bad!

CE: Not at all, sorry I didn't have anything more dramatic to pass along to you.

Q: No, that's all right that- Your experience is basically one which a lot of people had.

CE: Sure, we survived.

Q: You survived. You did your job. You had a job, you did it. Often, it wasn't dramatic.

CE: That's right. Well, there were dramatic moments along the way of course.

Q: For sure. Those 530 missions, particularly as lead bombardier. You're right out there.

CE: One thing I remember vividly is trying to- one of our bombs had hung up and hadn't dropped when it should have. There I was over the North Sea trying to-[Performs a kicking motion towards the ground] Kick! Kick!-Kick it out.

Q: [Both laughing] Kick it down? I'm sure that was a-

CE: I guess I had a portable oxygen on and somehow it had come loose. As I remember, I was on the verge of passing out and kicking at that bomb! Well, luckily the bomb dropped before I passed out.