

**THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR
(ADMIRAL NIMITZ MUSEUM)**

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

Colonel John R. Burks

Pauls Valley, Oklahoma

June 27, 2006

26th Bomb Squadron of the 11th Bomb Group, 7th Air Force

Ball Turret Gunner, B-24

40 Missions

Air Medal with Seven Oak Leaf Clusters

Distinguished Flying Cross

Four Battle Stars

My name is Richard Misenhimer and today is June 27, 2006. I am interviewing Colonel John R. Burks by telephone. His address is P. O. Box 911, Pauls Valley, Oklahoma 73075. His telephone number is area code 405-238-2787. This interview is in support of the National Museum of Pacific War, Center for Pacific War Studies, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer

Colonel Burks I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II and after that. Now the first thing I would like to do is get an alternate address. We find that maybe in a couple of years we go back to contact someone and he has moved or something. Is there someone we might be able to contact in case we don't reach you?

Colonel Burks

My son lives next door.

Mr. Misenhimer

Okay and what's his name and address?

Colonel Burks

His name is John Burks and he is at P. O. Box 686 here in Pauls Valley, 73075. His telephone number is 405-238-5551.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now the next thing I need to do is read you this agreement with the Nimitz Museum to make sure it is okay with you. When I do these in person I give it to the person to read and sign but since this is by phone let me read this to you. "Agreement read." Is that okay with you?

Colonel Burks

That's okay with me.

Mr. Misenhimer

Let me start off by asking you what is your birth date?

Colonel Burks

January 27, 1923.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where were you born?

Colonel Burks

Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Colonel Burks

I have one sister.

Mr. Misenhimer

What were you mother and father's first names?

Colonel Burks

My mother's first name was Dulce and my father's first name was Royden.

Mr. Misenhimer

You grew up during the Depression. How did the Depression affect you and your family?

Colonel Burks

Pretty much the center of the field. It was a tough time; it was tough for just about everybody except the most well-to do.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your father's occupation?

Colonel Burks

He was an oil broker.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was he able to keep employed during most of the Depression?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

As an oil broker?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you go to high school?

Colonel Burks

I went to high school in Wynnewood, Oklahoma.

Mr. Misenhimer

What year did you graduate there?

Colonel Burks

1940.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you do after you graduated?

Colonel Burks

Basically started college and joined the Army.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you join the Army?

Colonel Burks

October, 1942.

Mr. Misenhimer

So you went to college from high school graduation until October, 1942?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

December 7, 1941 when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, do you recall hearing about that?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Do you remember where you were?

Colonel Burks

Yes I was in downtown Wynnewood.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your reaction?

Colonel Burks

I really didn't know where Oahu was. I wasn't sure where the Philippines were.

Geography was not my particular talent in high school.

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes, most of us did not know where that was.

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did you feel this would affect you?

Colonel Burks

At that age I was ready to go to Canada and join the Canadian Air Force; typical 17 to 18 year old reaction.

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes, you were 18 years old and turned 19 in January right after that.

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where were you going to college?

Colonel Burks

I was pre-med at Oklahoma University.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now you joined in October of 1942. How did you choose the Army?

Colonel Burks

Originally I tried to become a Marine. I drove from Oklahoma to California to join the Marines and found that their quotas had been filled as a result of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then you came back and joined the Army?

Colonel Burks

No. I stayed in California and ultimately joined the Army Air Corps in October of 1942 in Los Angeles.

Mr. Misenhimer

You picked the Air Corps. You mentioned that you had wanted to go to Canada to fly, so you had been thinking about the Air Corps all the time, right?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Where did you actually join at?

Colonel Burks

Los Angeles, Hill Street Station; 6th and Hill.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long were you there?

Colonel Burks

In Los Angeles?

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes sir.

Colonel Burks

The program I originally signed up for was originally a glider pilot program. I wasn't called to participate in that program until January, 1943. That was in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you do in the time from October of 1942 until January of 1943?

Colonel Burks

I came back to Wynnewood.

Mr. Misenhimer

So you weren't on active duty at that point then?

Colonel Burks

No.

Mr. Misenhimer

You went on active duty then in January of 1943.

Colonel Burks

Correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then you went to glider pilot school at that point?

Colonel Burks

At that point the glider pilot training program ceased to exist and I became a candidate for liaison pilot training.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you do that then?

Colonel Burks

Boulder City.

Mr. Misenhimer

Had you had basic training anywhere along the way?

Colonel Burks

No.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you ever take basic training?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where was that and when?

Colonel Burks

Fort Sill, Oklahoma, August, 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer

So then from January of 1943 until August were you in pilot training?

Colonel Burks

From January to April of 1943 I was in pilot training. At the completion of that part of my career I was supposed to go to Fort Sill to get into advanced liaison pilot training. That program also ceased to exist and I was offered an opportunity to either leave the service subject to the draft or volunteer for immediate recall to active duty or apply for aviation cadets.

Mr. Misenhimer

Which did you choose to do?

Colonel Burks

Immediate recall to active duty.

Mr. Misenhimer

You didn't apply for aviation cadets?

Colonel Burks

I applied but I didn't pass the eyesight requirement.

Mr. Misenhimer

In your liaison pilot training, what all did you do in that?

Colonel Burks

Mostly using just light aircraft, J-3 cubs, Aeroncas; civilian type aircraft.

Mr. Misenhimer

So you did get some pilot training then?

Colonel Burks

Yes. I did finish that program as it existed at the time.

Mr. Misenhimer

So you had, did they call them pilot's license in those days, or what did they call them?

Colonel Burks

It was just a student pilot's license. I subsequently, again while waiting for call to active duty, went ahead and got my private pilot's license.

Mr. Misenhimer

You got that on your own; not as part of the service?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you get that and where?

Colonel Burks

Ardmore, Oklahoma in basically the summer months of 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were you actually on active duty at that point?

Colonel Burks

No.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did like flying those small planes?

Colonel Burks

It's still in the blood.

Mr. Misenhimer

So then what happened?

Colonel Burks

I was called back to active duty after my group response to Fort Sill in August of 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer

Is that when you took basic training?

Colonel Burks

No that was normal entry on active duty testing. I was then sent to Sheppard Field Texas for basic training.

Mr. Misenhimer

What all did your basic training consist of?

Colonel Burks

Just about a twelve week session from September until November and then I was sent to

gunnery school at Laredo, Texas.

Mr. Misenhimer

This basic training, was that basically infantry training?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

A lot of marching and you had the rifle training and all of that?

Colonel Burks

Yes and guard, KP, parades.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have the obstacle course where you crawl under the live ammunition?

Colonel Burks

Not at that time

Mr. Misenhimer

Then when did you arrive in Laredo?

Colonel Burks

In November of 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer

That was for gunnery school?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me about that.

Colonel Burks

It was fairly advanced technical training. We had machinery back then that more or less was the same type of machinery that we use today with filmed exercises with you as the gunner in a turret being pursued by enemy aircraft. They had some machines that were hooked up to coordinate your actions with the attacking aircraft. When you got a hit you got a sound in your headset that said you were firing correctly. When you fired incorrectly you got no sound at all, just background noise.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you do any actual firing of guns?

Colonel Burks

Yes a considerable amount including live firing in AT-6's at towed sleeves.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now in the AT-6 you sat in the back with a gun or how did you do that?

Colonel Burks

That was in the back cockpit with a 30 caliber machine gun.

Mr. Misenhimer

I've had people tell me that they also did skeet shooting. Did you do any skeet shooting?

Colonel Burks

A great deal.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me about that.

Colonel Burks

Probably a minimum to qualify overall in gunnery school and in actual flight training,

probably in excess of 500 rounds. We did this from the back of trucks, on a course that was almost like a regular roadway but it was laid out as a circular with clay pigeon stations set up. You would see a clay pigeon fly out and you would fire at it from your position in the back of the truck.

Mr. Misenhimer

Of course you didn't know when they were going to come up?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you do pretty well on that?

Colonel Burks

I was average. I wasn't any better or any worse than anybody else.

Mr. Misenhimer

Other than the AT-6 did you have any other aerial gunnery?

Colonel Burks

Only in subsequent training at March Field, California.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long were you there at Laredo?

Colonel Burks

Laredo was a six week course.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then you left there for California, or what did you do when you got done there?

Colonel Burks

When I finished I was on leave for a few days and then jumped on a train for Hammer Field, California. I was there to be processed and subsequently sent after a few days to March Field to be assigned to a combat group for training in B-24's.

Mr. Misenhimer

At March Field you were actually assigned to a crew at that point?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

This was a B-24, right?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was that the first time that you had been up on a B-24?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your position then on that plane?

Colonel Burks

Initially I was waist gunner and then subsequently because of my fitting into the ball turret I ended up going into combat as a ball turret gunner.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long did your training there at March Field last?

Colonel Burks

February through until about the first of April.

Mr. Misenhimer

About two months then?

Colonel Burks

Correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

You all were together as a crew at that point; is that correct?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me about your training there.

Colonel Burks

It was excellent. The chief pilot probably had had no more than 200 hours, maybe 225; the co-pilot probably less than that. The navigator and bombardier had just finished their course in their particular specialties. The engineer had come out of engineer school and was the senior crewman of the enlisted personnel. The rest of us were just basically middle-westerners and southern-westerners who had limited time in the service.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your rank at that point?

Colonel Burks

I started out as a PFC as a result of having graduated from gunnery school and was promoted to Corporal at March Field and before we deployed to a combat zone I was

promoted to Sergeant.

Mr. Misenhimer

In your training there at March Field did you all do cross country flights also?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long were some of these?

Colonel Burks

They probably didn't exceed five or six hours at that time.

Mr. Misenhimer

Anything in particular that you recall from your time there?

Colonel Burks

Just the newness of the experience and the camaraderie of new friends as crewmates. We were a very close knit group almost from the beginning and remained that way through the combat phase and return from the completion of our missions.

Mr. Misenhimer

In any of your training up to that point had there been any planes lost, or people lost?

Colonel Burks

Quite a few.

Mr. Misenhimer

From accidents?

Colonel Burks

When I say quite a few, I alleged at one point, not accurately, that we probably lost more

crews in training than we lost in combat.

Mr. Misenhimer

What do you think was the cause of the losses in training?

Colonel Burks

The absence of experience in the aircraft was part of the primary reason. The pilot and the co-pilot limit of total time. The navigator and bombardier were less involved in losses but they made mistakes of their own.

Mr. Misenhimer

What were some types of things that happened? What kind of crashes or what?

Colonel Burks

We had instances in altitude flying of frostbite. The pilot almost lost some digits off of his feet because of frostbite because we were at altitude too long under extreme circumstances.

Mr. Misenhimer

This was on your crew?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did he lose any digits on his feet?

Colonel Burks

No, he survived but it was pretty close.

Mr. Misenhimer

But he managed to stay then with your plane?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Anything else up to this point?

Colonel Burks

There is a lot of fog out in that part of the world at that time of the year. We were on a night mission one night and couldn't get back to the runway because of the fog. We were about out of gas so we had to do something. We didn't have enough gas to get to Palm Springs. We alerted March Field that we just had to do the best we could to get back on the ground at March. They said, "If you see a break in the fog at any point and can see the runway, bring it on down." We landed probably at least a third of the way down the runway. The pilot and co-pilot were both on brakes to keep us from running off the end of the runway.

Mr. Misenhimer

So you got down okay then?

Colonel Burks

Yes, we made it.

Mr. Misenhimer

Anything else?

Colonel Burks

Not of any significance. Every day was a new learning experience. You asked earlier about the shotgun training; we had a requirement to qualify to go overseas to fire over 300 rounds out of a turret using shotguns mounted in a turret. We hadn't fulfilled that

requirement so we spent all of one day, a day or two before our departure firing that 300 rounds out of the turret.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now this turret was on the ground, right?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

How much aerial gunnery did you get to practice there?

Colonel Burks

Very little. We did mostly bombing practice training. I say bombing, the pilotry of course was primary but we bombed at altitude at Muroc Dry Lake which is now Edwards Air Force Base.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you get any aerial gunnery training at all?

Colonel Burks

Not that I recall.

Mr. Misenhimer

So then you got ready to overseas, right?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you leave to go overseas?

Colonel Burks

April of 1944 from Hamilton Field. We flew into Hickam Field, Hawaii in April, 1944.

That was a ten hour mission, if you want to call it a mission, our first overseas flight and one of our early long distance flights.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have to put in special fuel tanks to make that long of a flight.

Colonel Burks

Not that I recall.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were you by yourself or were there other planes with you at that point?

Colonel Burks

We were by ourselves.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were you assigned to a unit then?

Colonel Burks

We were assigned to a training unit at Wheeler, Field. We were just part of a training squadron doing what they called square search missions out of Wheeler, Field. Searchlight missions over Hawaii. We flew distance missions to nearby islands; Christmas Island to the south, probably about a 500 mile flight and back. We stayed in that configuration until we were moved to Kohuka Air Field on Oahu. We flew what we considered advanced combat training out of Kohuka for probably four to six weeks. We ended up on Kwajalein in September, 1944 and subsequently we flew five missions off of Kwajalein. I guess Truk and Wake Island were both targets. Subsequently we moved to

Guam in October of 1944 to continue a series of 35 missions against the Bonin Islands, Iwo Jima, Chichi Jima, Haha Jima and Marcus Island; one mission against Yap. There were actually 17 missions against Iwo Jima in preparation for the Marine landing and support missions once they were on shore.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did your plane have a name?

Colonel Burks

Lucky Dog.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you fly the same plane most of the time?

Colonel Burks

Actually, no. It was a brand new B-24M and as such it was equipped with Loran capability. When we first got in the combat zone we were given the oldest aircraft in the squadron for probably the first ten or fifteen missions. We flew in a different airplane just about every time we went up. All B-24's of course but an older model.

Mr. Misenhimer

Which one of those was *Lucky Dog*? The one that you took over?

Colonel Burks

We took over *Lucky Dog* and as we became the senior crew we were elevated to that aircraft in probably the last ten missions that we flew.

Mr. Misenhimer

But by then it was no longer a new plane?

Colonel Burks

No.

Mr. Misenhimer

Most of your flights were out of Guam is that right?

Colonel Burks

Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Let me back up. When you got to Pearl Harbor, was there still much of the damage there or did they have it pretty well cleaned up?

Colonel Burks

It was well policed up by the time we got there.

Mr. Misenhimer

I guess the *Arizona* was still there?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

And maybe a couple of the others, I'm not sure what all was still there.

Colonel Burks

Of course the *Arizona* was sunk.

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes, it's still there, right. The *Utah*; was it still there or had they taken it out?

Colonel Burks

I think they had taken out the *Oklahoma* and all the surviving ones had been towed out.

Mr. Misenhimer

The *Utah* I think was a target ship and they might have left it there; I'm not sure. What was your first mission in combat?

Colonel Burks

The first mission was against Truk in September of 1944.

Mr. Misenhimer

Out of Kwajalein to Truk?

Colonel Burks

There is an interesting aside to that. When we were sent into combat we were told that we would fly twenty five missions to be eligible to return home. We flew five and they raised the mission requirement to thirty. We flew another five and they upped the mission requirement to thirty five. When we had flown the fifteenth mission they upped the mission requirement to forty. (laugh) So we ended up having flown forty missions before we were eligible to come home.

Mr. Misenhimer

What unit were you assigned to at that point?

Colonel Burks

The 26th Bomb Squadron of the 11th Bomb Group, 7th Air Force

Mr. Misenhimer

Your first five missions, one was to Truk; where were some of the other missions to?

Colonel Burks

Four were to Truk and one was to Wake Island.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was Truk pretty well defended at that point?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Enemy aircraft or antiaircraft or both?

Colonel Burks

Both but the enemy aircraft for the most part would make one pass at us and then just sit out on the outer range of our 50 caliber machine guns and just relay information to the ground on our altitude and speed.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you get the chance to shoot at many enemy aircraft?

Colonel Burks

Not so much so at that time. I did fire at him but like I say most of the time they were out of range and most of the time in that sense our firing at them just kept them out of range.

Mr. Misenhimer

And of course they didn't have a gun that would reach you.

Colonel Burks

No.

Mr. Misenhimer

Anything in particular from those first five missions?

Colonel Burks

We lost a crewman. Not we, the 7th Air Force lost a bombardier whose bombs had gotten

hung up in the bomb bay. He went to kick the bombs out and that walkway is very narrow, probably not more than 8 or 9 inches wide. When he kicked at the bombs he just catapulted himself right out of the airplane.

Mr. Misenhimer

And of course he didn't have a chute on either I guess, huh?

Colonel Burks

No, but it wouldn't have done him any good. He would have gone into Truk harbor.

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes, he was probably better off not having a chute.

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was your plane hit on any of those five missions?

Colonel Burks

Yes. No serious damage; flak fragments would usually show up in the empennage of the aircraft and sometimes in the wing or the fuselage, but nothing to cripple the airplane.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me what it was like to be in the belly turret of a B-24.

Colonel Burks

It would be very frightening today but at age 20-21 it was just uncomfortable because I was pretty well confined and flat on my back and away from the rest of the crew. I was in an isolated situation there. The other crewmen were able to have eye contact and speak to one another; well I was on intercom.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where during the flight did you go into the turret?

Colonel Burks

Usually about 15 minutes out from what we called the IP, the initial point.

Mr. Misenhimer

I understand that the turret on the B-24 was easier to get into and out of than on the B-17; is that right?

Colonel Burks

It was easier to get into because you got into it in the waist section of the aircraft. The other crewmen, the waist gunners primarily, could lower you into your position; where on the B-17 it was fixed in the combat position.

Mr. Misenhimer

Right, but on the B-24 it would come up into the plane?

Colonel Burks

That's right.

Mr. Misenhimer

And then be lowered back into combat position?

Colonel Burks

That's right.

Mr. Misenhimer

I had heard that it was easier that way or something.

Colonel Burks

Sometimes it was difficult to get it back into the airplane. That was disconcerting because

you couldn't land with the turret down. You could land but it would wipe the turret out.

Mr. Misenhimer

Even though that was a tricycle gear?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

The turret would drag the ground even with the tricycle.

Colonel Burks

That's right.

Mr. Misenhimer

It definitely would on the B-17 I know but I thought maybe on the B-24 with the tricycle it wouldn't. That's not a good place to be.

Colonel Burks

When the turret is down it was in the same situation that the B-17 was.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you fly all of your missions as the ball turret gunner?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

On Kwajalein what did you live in there?

Colonel Burks

Tents.

Mr. Misenhimer

How was the food there?

Colonel Burks

We were on K-rations when we first got to Guam for 30 days. We had a Naval B-24 unit right next door to us. They had ice machines. They had all the good food that you could eat in the world and the Army was sitting there eating K-rations.

Mr. Misenhimer

They wouldn't share with you, huh?

Colonel Burks

There was a whole different attitude in World War II about relationships between the Army and the Navy and Air Force.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you live in on Guam?

Colonel Burks

On Guam we lived in six-man tents.

Mr. Misenhimer

What were some of your other missions?

Colonel Burks

Marcus Island. It is a little triangle space out in the Western Pacific. Every time we went there, we probably flew there about four or five times, they had a very well advanced and trained anti-aircraft crew on Marcus. It was so small and our target route in and departure so apparent because of its relatively minuscule size that we got shot up pretty good every time we went to Marcus.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have any casualties on your plane at all?

Colonel Burks

Yes and I was one of them. It wasn't a Purple Heart type wound. I was told by the pilot as we were approaching the target; I wasn't in the turret at the time but he said, "See if you can spot ground fire coming up from Iwo Jima so that we can anticipate it." It would be about 30 seconds later before it got to us. The B-24 had on each side of the waist a deflector that you put out if you were going to try to observe downward from the interior of the ship. I put up the deflector and just as I did the first burst of flak hit us and blew that deflector off; tore my oxygen mask off and opened up a razor cut on my chin. I looked down and blood was coming down on my flight suit. I was really thinking about that Pearl Heart. (laugh) By the time five minutes had passed you couldn't even tell that I had been hit so I didn't fake that one.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was that the only time that you were hit?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

What were some other places that you went to?

Colonel Burks

Haha Jima which is just immediately north of Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima which is where George H. W. Bush was shot down.

Mr. Misenhimer

Luckily he was rescued.

Colonel Burks

Yes he was. Those were always tough targets. They're small; they know where you are coming from, they know where you are going; they know what your altitude is. So we didn't get hit as often as we did get hit but it didn't put us in any mortal danger.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you lose many planes on these raids?

Colonel Burks

We lost our fair share, mostly from the initiation of their fighter pilots taking their airplanes and diving into the top turret of attacking aircraft. That way there was one Japanese pilot and ten U.S. Army Air Force crewman.

Mr. Misenhimer

Kamikaze attacks that way.

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you all have fighter escort?

Colonel Burks

Negative.

Mr. Misenhimer

At no time, huh?

Colonel Burks

At no time.

Mr. Misenhimer

Were there fighter planes around where you were?

Colonel Burks

Yes, Naval Corsairs.

Mr. Misenhimer

What were some other things that happened?

Colonel Burks

On our initial mission I went down to jump in the ball turret and test fire my guns as we were en route to the target and the hatch on my turret came open. Fortunately the guns were facing the rear of the aircraft and I was able to reach back and grab the turret door which was aluminum and give it a flip and also at the same time rotate the turret so the slipstream and everything would coordinate to the point that it would bring the turret back in place. I locked that sucker down real tight the next time because if I hadn't of got that turret door back in place they couldn't have raised the turret back in the airplane.

Mr. Misenhimer

I'll bet that was quite a horrible feeling.

Colonel Burks

Well it was a little unnerving because I couldn't get into the turret with a parachute and we go back to what we said earlier. A parachute doesn't do you much good on an overseas mission.

Mr. Misenhimer

What altitude did you all bomb at mostly?

Colonel Burks

18,500 feet mostly.

Mr. Misenhimer

What is the outside temperature at that altitude?

Colonel Burks

Minus 35 degrees.

Mr. Misenhimer

On the B-17 for the waist gunners did they have Plexiglas around them or something?

Colonel Burks

Not the ordinary. The early models of the B-17 had that but they weren't in the combat phase to the best of my knowledge.

Mr. Misenhimer

And they didn't have them on the B-24 either?

Colonel Burks

No.

Mr. Misenhimer

What were some other things that happened?

Colonel Burks

We removed the turret from the tail gun position in the B-24 to give us greater range and just put a twin mounted 50 caliber back there but not in a turret configuration. The gunner stood back behind the twin 50's firing from the rear.

Mr. Misenhimer

So there was still a gunner back there that could fire?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

That reduced quite a bit of weight, is that correct?

Colonel Burks

Yes, that turret was pretty weighty.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was the range of a B-24?

Colonel Burks

Probably maximum range would be 2400 miles and in order to get a little edge on that we would often eliminate bomb loads and put a 400 gallon gas tank in the bomb bay.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you ever fly in a B-17?

Colonel Burks

No, I didn't.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you think of the B-24 as an airplane?

Colonel Burks

I hold it in great affection. The more we experienced combat the more confident we were with it. It was so ungainly on the ground but in the air it is a beautiful airplane.

Mr. Misenhimer

I've heard a lot of discussion between the B-17 and the B-24 from different people.

Colonel Burks

Most people don't know what they are talking about, nor do I know that much about the B-17 except to avoid it (laughing).

Mr. Misenhimer

What else?

Colonel Burks

That's pretty much it. We did have one thing that was mildly interesting. We had one crewman that just didn't fit in our crew. While we were in Hawaii in a completely uncoordinated act all of the enlisted crewman except the guy that we kicked off got up and walked over to his bunk and said, "Joe, you're not going to combat with us." Then we went over and told the pilot that he wasn't acceptable. He was from Brooklyn and his background didn't fit with the background that most of us had. His moral values weren't up to what we thought ours were and we were going into a situation that you have to depend on every other person on that crew to do their job to the best of their ability. We got another crewman assigned that worked wonderfully well and flew all forty missions with us, just on a moment's notice.

Mr. Misenhimer

What position was this?

Colonel Burks

This was the tail gunner position.

Mr. Misenhimer

You got rid of him before you went overseas?

Colonel Burks

Before we went into combat, while we were in Hawaii.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you come home?

Colonel Burks

In March of 1945. We were flying missions every other day from the 8th of December until mission completion in the middle of March, 1945.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you fly home, or how did you come home?

Colonel Burks

We flew home on a brand new DC-4 which was configured for airline use after the war.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did your whole crew come back together?

Colonel Burks

No, we came back separately. As it turns out I was the first one back. There is a little story to that. Before we went to Hamilton Field to fly to Oahu the crewmen together went out, all except for the tail gunner. *(tape side ended)*

Mr. Misenhimer

So you all went together and bought a Cocker Spaniel puppy?

Colonel Burks

Yes, the five crewmen that remained together went together and bought a small Cocker

Spaniel puppy and named him Gulliver. At one time we were going to name the ship *Gulliver's Gunboat* but we found out that we couldn't take the dog into Hawaii. We petted the puppy for a couple of days and then walked over to the WAC detachment at Hamilton Field and the commander of that WAC detachment was Miss Chicago 1940. We gave her the dog and asked her to keep it until the first of our crewman returned after completion of our mission to pick up the dog. I was the first crewman back at the completion of our mission. I went back into Hamilton Field and I went to the WAC detachment. Of course we had only been gone eight or nine months. I walked in and the WAC commander was there and she said, "Oh Sergeant Burks it is so good to see you back." I said, "I want to assign the dog back to you because there will be other crewman that might want to take the dog home and I know the dog belongs here."

Mr. Misenhimer

And that's how your plane got the name *Lucky Dog* then?

Colonel Burks

That's how it got the name. I stayed in contact with that WAC commander until I was later a Captain in the Army. She was a Captain at that time. She was a nice lady and had a wonderful home in Chicago and family and the dog lived another eight or nine years in that home.

Mr. Misenhimer

When you flew back where all did you stop?

Colonel Burks

Coming back we stopped at Johnson Island, and then back to Honolulu. We were in Honolulu for shipment back to the United States either by ship or plane. We were given a

choice, did we want to lounge on a ship for 10 to 12 days or whatever the time span was or wait for quicker transportation. So we came home separately in that sense. I got lucky and got on a flight back almost immediately which put me back to Hamilton probably days before those that went by ship or spent a few more days on Hawaii or whatever.

Mr. Misenhimer

Either time when you were on Hawaii, did you get a chance to go into Honolulu?

Colonel Burks

Yes. I had some friends, as I'm sure everybody did, that served in other services. I had a hometown buddy that was Sergeant Major of the hospital on Oahu and I had a couple sailor friends that were stationed on Hawaii. I got to visit with old friends when I was on rest leave or wherever.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then when you got back what did you do?

Colonel Burks

I went to Del Rio, Texas and became a crew chief on B-26's. I had absolutely no experience as a mechanic but you don't have to necessarily know how to build a watch to run a watch factory, so that's about the way it worked for me. We had the best record on the airbase at that time.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was this a training base?

Colonel Burks

Yes for B-26 flight training.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you fly in the B-26 at all?

Colonel Burks

Negative.

Mr. Misenhimer

How long were you there then?

Colonel Burks

From probably the middle of May until I became eligible for release from the Army in early September.

Mr. Misenhimer

You say released; you weren't discharged, is that right?

Colonel Burks

I was discharged at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas in early September and immediately joined the Army Air Force Reserves.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was the highest rank you got to in World War II?

Colonel Burks

Staff Sergeant.

Mr. Misenhimer

Let me go back and ask you a few questions. In April of 1945, President Roosevelt died.

Do you recall hearing about that?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

What reaction did people have to that?

Colonel Burks

I was on the bridle trail at Waikiki and I'm not much of a horseman but I was making a run with a bunch of other people doing the same thing. A Marine Sergeant came out of nowhere and bridled my horse and had tears running from his eyes. "What's wrong Sergeant?" He said, "Our President is dead." So I dismounted and I don't think I've been on a horse since. It was a very emotional moment. We had finished our missions in March but we were still on Oahu that day.

Mr. Misenhimer

He was the only President that most people had known.

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then May 8th Germany surrendered. Did you all have a celebration then?

Colonel Burks

The base commander at Del Rio confined us to the post, to the airfield because he didn't want any incidents going on in downtown Del Rio. My recollection is that I went to the NCO Club there on the airfield and listened to Doris Day records and drank a couple of beers. That was the celebration we had at that time.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then on August 6th they dropped the first atomic bomb; did you hear about that?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

What kind of reaction did people have to that?

Colonel Burks

It was pretty much a top secret deal in those days. We didn't even know what an atomic bomb was. We certainly didn't know that there would be a subsequent one a week or ten days later.

Mr. Misenhimer

Three days later.

Colonel Burks

Is that what it was; I've forgotten.

Mr. Misenhimer

Yes, August 6th and August 9th.

Colonel Burks

The unbelievable thing beyond that was that we were aware that General Le May had ordered the firebombing of Tokyo prior to the dropping of the atomic bombs. I think they suffered more casualties in that firebombing. People probably weren't intended to be.

Mr. Misenhimer

They did; they suffered a lot more casualties in the firebombs than they did from the atomic bombs.

Colonel Burks

I think so.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then when Japan surrendered on August 14th did you have a celebration then?

Colonel Burks

That was the one that I was referring to when we were confined to the post by the Colonel that commanded the Del Rio base.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you get home with any souvenirs?

Colonel Burks

I brought back a small Japanese sword. I think I probably swapped that for something. I recall the island commander on Guam when we arrived in October saying that we had secured Guam but there were 5,000 Japanese still involved in the jungles that had fled their units and were hiding out. He encouraged us to go in on our off duty time to see if we could round some of these people up. I strapped on a .45 and grabbed my carbine and enlisted a cook and a medic to go with me to go Japanese hunting. Our squadron encampment was just south of a 4th Marine training outfit. I marched up towards there and we got off the main road and got into the jungle area. We started to split up. The medic went one way, the cook went another and there was a trail where we decided to break up. I turned around and I saw this movement behind what looked like a cactus type plant. I'm looking for a mini-warrior, an ugly little cap with a star in the middle of it, and this apparition keeps standing and standing and standing with his hands up. It was a Japanese Imperial Marine. He had probably been an enlisted aide to a high ranking Japanese officer. The guy was 6'2" or 6'3: and I've got the carbine pointed at his chest. The poor guy hadn't eaten in probably a week. He definitely wanted to surrender. There

was a great deal of excitement with all of that. I really didn't know what to do with this guy because I was just kind of overwhelmed with his size, but it was so apparent that there was either sweat or tears running down his face. He was dusty and just barely able to walk. He took the initiative and he apparently knew the Marines were encamped just up the road a piece and he started marching back to the main road. He turned right to go turn himself into somebody that knew what the hell they were doing. (laugh) We walked up to the Marine entry gate and with his arms in the air he is close to 7' tall. The Marine guard said, "What do you want me to do with this?" I said, "Get hold of your intelligence officer and get him down here. He needs to be incarcerated or whatever you need to do with him." So anyway we enlisted men at the time started back to the squadron, hurrying, and a jeep came roaring up behind us. Apparently the medic had jumped up in the air and taken the cap off of this Japanese Imperial Marine and stuck it in his shirtfront. I didn't know it at the time. The Marines said, "This guy is willing to talk to us but he doesn't want to do any business with people who would steal his hat. So whoever has got it, give me the hat back." So the medic dug into his shirtfront and pulled out the cap and gave it to the Marine Lieutenant. He jumped back in his jeep and roared back to the Marine staging area. I thought that was kind of an interesting aside. I'm sure that the Japanese Imperial Marine probably survived the war because they came off Hokaida. Really all Japanese are a little different from different islands.

Mr. Misenhimer

I understand that the last Jap on Guam gave up in the 1970's sometime I think.

Colonel Burks

It might have been even later than that.

Mr. Misenhimer

I don't remember but it was quite late as I recall.

Colonel Burks

I just went back to Guam in March and went back to Iwo Jima and I was told during our time on Guam that a lot of the Japanese soldiers actually came out of the woods and created families and are still there on Guam.

Mr. Misenhimer

I've heard that too. I also heard that they would sneak into the camps at night and sometimes kill our people there.

Colonel Burks

I can vouch for this, they watched our movies. We would have outdoor movies on Guam in our squadron there and they would be up in trees and they would watch the movies with us. We didn't catch any that way but we were aware of their presence. I don't doubt that they might have well done that. Things that took place on Iwo Jima were horrifying in that regard. On Guam personally I didn't see any abuse of Japanese or the Japanese do anything but hide out and try to survive.

Mr. Misenhimer

I'm not sure how true this story is but I've heard that they would even get in the chow lines sometimes.

Colonel Burks

That's unlikely. The reason being that we were completely and essentially a non-integrated society. There were no blacks, very few Hispanics and it was a Caucasian world in my experience.

Mr. Misenhimer

Not the blacks but I think the Army had a fair number of Hispanics.

Colonel Burks

They probably did.

Mr. Misenhimer

I was talking about the Infantry not the Air Force. Did you ever get to Tinian or Saipan?

Colonel Burks

I got to both but I can't recall why. We didn't fly any missions off there. I don't know but we must have been ferrying something in there. We had B-29's on our airstrip. We were on North Field towards the end of the war and had B-29's that were not in revetments. We had revetments in B-24's but the B-29's were just sitting out on the grass.

Mr. Misenhimer

I think they started in January or February, somewhere along in there, flying the B-29's out of there, is that right?

Colonel Burks

That would be correct because initially we flew off what they called Harmon Field on Guam. When they finished North Field, which was built specifically for the B-29's, they moved us up there to fly our final missions.

Mr. Misenhimer

The B-29 was quite a plane wasn't it?

Colonel Burks

It was very much so. I didn't get to fly in one of them but it was a whole different airplane in those days. Incidentally one story that relates to the chow line. We were asked

by the Navy to help guard their aircraft on the airstrip so our squadron commander saw fit to let us go down and pull guard shifts protecting naval aircraft. No incidents occurred but as a reward we were supposed to be able to go eat in the Navy mess just off the airstrip. That worked for a while but after guard duty one night I got in line to go through the Navy chow line and some naval Lieutenant came up to me and jerked me out of line and said, "What are you doing in here." I said, "Getting ready for breakfast, sir." He said, "Not in this mess you aren't." He ordered me out. It was part of the strange relationship we had with the Navy. You can find that anywhere I've learned.

Mr. Misenhimer

So you all didn't get to eat there anymore, huh?

Colonel Burks

No that was pretty much it. We didn't do anymore guard duty there either. (laugh)

Mr. Misenhimer

They didn't have people to guard their planes, is that right?

Colonel Burks

I don't know why we were guarding their airplanes. They were old TBF's; the same type that George Bush flew.

Mr. Misenhimer

You were guarding them from what; the Japanese on the island?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

How about civilians; were there many civilians on there at Guam?

Colonel Burks

The laundry ladies were the only ones that we had contact with; those that came into our squadron area asking if we wanted laundry done. You could get a barracks bag done for a bar of soap back in those days until we spoiled them and they wanted other things.

Mr. Misenhimer

You mentioned the sword that you got home with; any other souvenirs?

Colonel Burks

Not really, no.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you ever see any USO shows anywhere?

Colonel Burks

I saw them on Kwajalein and Hawaii. Bob Hope in Hawaii and Bob Hope on Kwajalein and Betty Hutton on Kwajalein.

Mr. Misenhimer

How were those shows?

Colonel Burks

Well received needless to say; just a diversion and a touch of home to see a Caucasian lady. Betty Hutton was by far the most entertaining for me. Bob Hope was always well received.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have any experience with the Red Cross?

Colonel Burks

Not at that time.

Mr. Misenhimer

Could you get your mail when you were overseas there?

Colonel Burks

We got mail and V-mail fairly promptly; a week to ten days at the most. I don't know how they did it but that's my recollection. Mail from home was eight to ten days old.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you ever hear Tokyo Rose?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you think of her?

Colonel Burks

It was entertaining. She played our music and we would hear this, "Well Captain Jones it's nice that you are flying your airplane in our zone because we'll be shooting you and your crew down. We can tell from your tail markings that you belong to the 26th Bomb Squadron, the 11th Bomb Group, 7th Air Force." It wasn't propaganda as far as we were concerned, it was entertainment because then she would play "Waltzing Under the Apple Tree", popular songs of the day, "Don't Fence Me In."

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you think of the officers that you had over you?

Colonel Burks

I admired them. We had very limited contact with them other than the Navy Lieutenant (laugh) and the officer crewmen on our ship *Lucky Dog*. Air Force crews, at least our

crew was very well disciplined. I never called our Lieutenant anything other than Commander. He might have called me Burks but it was usually my position, you know Waist Gunner or Turret Gunner. One thing I did that nobody else did to my knowledge and that was because of the length of the missions and basically having nothing to do except for 30 minutes of the flight, I learned celestial navigation and became the only enlisted navigator in the bomb squadron and probably the Pacific. I was recommended for admittance into advanced navigation cadet training as soon as I got home by the bomb group navigator and the squadron navigator who checked me out on several missions that we flew after I learned celestial navigation to the point that I would be within one minute of arrival on a target, or one degree of the course to the target.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you take that course then?

Colonel Burks

No. When I got back there was no sign of the paperwork. It had to go through channels. What happened to it at 7th Air Force, I don't know. When I got back the war in Europe was over. I did volunteer to go back on the B-29's they called very heavy bombardment, while I was a Del Rio. I just decided that home was better. In fact when I got my points, a Major at Del Rio came up and said, "Sergeant, I can guarantee you will be a Master Sergeant within 30 days if you will just reenlist." "Major, I wouldn't reenlist right now for your job." (laugh) I didn't dislike any of my experiences in war as far as the service was concerned but I was ready to go home and see what a 22 year old veteran could get into that would be different.

Mr. Misenhimer

Take me through a typical day when you had to go on a mission. What time did you get up? What do you do? The briefings? Take me through the whole day.

Colonel Burks

The day usually started the evening before where we would load the bombs. Once the bombs were loaded and secured we would go back to the squadron area. We would arise at 6:00 to 6:30 in the morning, go to breakfast, go to a 7:00 briefing which gave us the designated target that we were to fly that day; our time of takeoff and arrival on target and return. Upon return immediately do the clean up of the aircraft; see to the securing of the weaponry; clean the weapons whether you had fired them or not, check them out. We did not reload ammunition at that time. That's why I say the evening before would be when we were alerted that we were going to fly a mission the next day, we would load ammunition and bombs and fuel for the next morning.

Mr. Misenhimer

Who actually loaded the bombs and ammunition on the plane?

Colonel Burks

The enlisted crewmen.

Mr. Misenhimer

The crewmen, not the ground crew?

Colonel Burks

No that was the responsibility of the crewmen. Some turrets in the B-24, the twin mounted 50 calibers; if you put the bolt switches in backwards the gun wouldn't charge. You couldn't charge the weapon. Little intricacies like that you had to be sure of. When

the weapons came out they had to be put back in the proper order or bolt switches would be reversed in the turret.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you take the machine guns out every day?

Colonel Burks

Every day that we flew a mission.

Mr. Misenhimer

I mean, but the machines guns were not left in the plane while it was sitting there?

Colonel Burks

No they were taken out, cleaned and then returned.

Mr. Misenhimer

Put back in the plane, okay.

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

On your briefings would it be the entire crew together or separate?

Colonel Burks

The entire crew together.

Mr. Misenhimer

It wasn't the pilots in one briefing and the enlisted men in another?

Colonel Burks

No, all crewman that were going to be flying that day were in the briefing to get word from the squadron operations officer usually.

Mr. Misenhimer

What would you consider your most frightening time during World War II?

Colonel Burks

That one mission that I told you about; the initial mission that I got down in the ball turret and the opening in the back came open at altitude over the ocean and the realization that nobody could help me. If I didn't get that thing back in position, nobody could do anything about it. Again, I say it with pride but I think we were a well enough trained crew under good training primarily from good, strong, well prepared enlisted instructors on our equipment, particularly in gunnery school. We could detail strip a 50 caliber machine gun blindfolded and put it back together in less than two minutes. Then as a crew we trained well together except for that one exception. So I knew I had a lot of people behind me and I had good training in the process.

Mr. Misenhimer

So then in September of 1945 you were released from the service and discharged and you said that you immediately joined the Reserves?

Colonel Burks

That's right.

Mr. Misenhimer

But you didn't actually go into the service?

Colonel Burks

I did three years later.

Mr. Misenhimer

But right then you didn't?

Colonel Burks

No I did not.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you do for those three years?

Colonel Burks

I was a businessman in my hometown. I sold appliances and did what most 22 to 25 year old men do that are unattached with no responsibility. I got my commercial pilot's license.

Mr. Misenhimer

Using the GI Bill right?

Colonel Burks

Right. (laugh)

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you go back to college?

Colonel Burks

I did but not at that time. Eventually I graduated from the University of Maryland at the age of 41, I think.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your degree in?

Colonel Burks

Military intelligence.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life when you got out?

Colonel Burks

None whatsoever.

Mr. Misenhimer

In World War II what medals and ribbons did you get?

Colonel Burks

I got the Good Conduct Medal, a mistake on the part of the Army (laugh). As a result of my combat experience I got the Air Medal with seven Oak Leaf Clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross and four Battle Stars for campaigns in the Pacific. The various places that we bombed were geographically identified and I ended up getting credit for four Battle Stars.

Mr. Misenhimer

Anything else?

Colonel Burks

Nothing that pops in my head right now.

Mr. Misenhimer

What did you get the DFC for?

Colonel Burks

Actually all of our crew got the Distinguished Flying Cross for; towards the end of our missions we were flying low level support missions for the Marines on Iwo Jima and so it was kind of a conglomeration of things that were identified with flying these low level missions in support of invasion forces.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me about the low level missions; how did that work?

Colonel Burks

I guess in the period when they were trying to secure Suribachi there were Japanese support troops operating from about mid-island on Iwo Jima; from about 2 ½ miles in to the middle of Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima being 5 miles long. We had to fly missions that involved nonstandard bombs. Normally we dropped 500 pound bombs. We were using fragmentary bombs and other antipersonnel type bombs that had to be probably dropped 3,500 to 5,000 feet. We were pretty close to the ground relatively when we flew those missions.

Mr. Misenhimer

How many of those did you fly?

Colonel Burks

I'm thinking probably three.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did the Japanese have antiaircraft at that point?

Colonel Burks

No the antiaircraft were useless at that point. Ground support elements were coming up on our backside and firing at us.

Mr. Misenhimer

How large a group of planes would make those missions?

Colonel Burks

No more than two or three at a time. Sometimes just a single plane.

Mr. Misenhimer

You were flying from Guam to do that, is that correct?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

It's quite a distance I believe from Guam to Iwo isn't it?

Colonel Burks

We are talking about 850 and 900 miles.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then when did you go back into the service?

Colonel Burks

In September of 1948.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did that come about?

Colonel Burks

I decided that I wanted to be an officer. I was in my last year of eligibility for practical purposes to apply for that training. So I signed up probably in July of 1948 and was recalled back to active duty in October of 1948.

Mr. Misenhimer

Back into the Air Force?

Colonel Burks

No but I was still in the Air Force Reserves. They had enlisted so many Reservists leaving the service in 1945 they were overwhelmed with requirements to release these people or reenlist them at the end of their tour. My tour would have ended in September of 1948. Interestingly after I was in Korea as a forward observer for Field Artillery, I got

a notice from the U. S. Air Force that I had been recalled to active duty to fly B-26's, as a B-26 gunner out of Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma. I was amazed. The explanatory letter on my Reservist status was that they could not release me from my obligation because I hadn't been released from my obligation because they hadn't had time to process the proper release documents. So I wrote the Air Force and told them I was otherwise engaged in Korea but wished them well. (laugh)

Mr. Misenhimer

So when you went back in you went into the regular Army then, right?

Colonel Burks

I actually went in as a Reserve officer.

Mr. Misenhimer

But I mean you were not in the Air Force any longer?

Colonel Burks

No. I went back in the Army as what they called an AUS, that's Army of the United States.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did the Air Force become a separate unit?

Colonel Burks

1947.

Mr. Misenhimer

So it was before this. That's what I was trying to remember. When did you get your commission?

Colonel Burks

In April of 1949.

Mr. Misenhimer

Did you have to go through OCS?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

A 90 day wonder or what?

Colonel Burks

No. I was a six month wonder. They extended the training to six months during that era.

Mr. Misenhimer

Where did you take that?

Colonel Burks

Fort Riley, Kansas.

Mr. Misenhimer

And you came out a Second Lieutenant?

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

In the Artillery at that point, or what?

Colonel Burks

Yes I was commissioned as a Field Artillery Officer and then went from there to Fort Sill for Field Artillery training.

Mr. Misenhimer

What kind of weapons did you have there?

Colonel Burks

The support Artillery, normally the 105 for direct support and the 155 for general support and then the 8 inch weapons for longer range and things like that.

Mr. Misenhimer

What was your job there?

Colonel Burks

Just as a student. I had the basic course and then advanced course Artillery and then communication courses and all of the support roles necessary for my unit.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then what happened from there?

Colonel Burks

I got a battlefield promotion to Captain in Korea and was subsequently commissioned as a regular Army officer.

Mr. Misenhimer

When did you go to Korea?

Colonel Burks

1951.

Mr. Misenhimer

What unit were you with over there?

Colonel Burks

555th Field Artillery.

Mr. Misenhimer

Was this attached to any particular division or anything?

Colonel Burks

The 24th Division primarily.

Mr. Misenhimer

The Korean War broke out June 25, 1950. Then you were sent over there in 1951?

Colonel Burks

That is correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

When had you joined the 555th Field Artillery?

Colonel Burks

I joined them in Korea. I went over just as an individual. I didn't go with a unit.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me about some of your experiences there in Korea.

Colonel Burks

When I went over I had just been promoted to First Lieutenant; a normal promotion. I got there in the middle of February which was not the best time to go. It was a very traumatic tour of duty. I spent a year and two winters there basically. Triple nickel as we were called, is a regimental combat team and we were always on point in Korea. We were consistently the most forward unit and I'm talking now about the 5th Regimental Combat Team, Infantry seemed to almost always be the point. The first to cross the 38th Parallel and so forth. So we were changing positions about every four or five days. I was the communication officer initially; observed as the forward observer for a couple of weeks

as a replacement and then brought back as the battery commander. I had a lot of completely unique experiences for a guy that hadn't been commissioned for more than a couple of years. It was a good tour from an experience point of view. Having been an enlisted man before I had a little more vision as to the needs of my troops I think than most of the people that went to West Point or had no enlisted experience. One of my unique experiences was that I had one of the first integrated units in Korea. They started putting black soldiers into all Caucasian units. I say all Caucasian; most of my troops were Hawaiian, basically Chinese, Japanese people from Hawaii. I learned a very valuable lesson there as far as I am concerned, and that was integration works well up to 10%. If you go beyond that, I don't care if you are talking about Greeks, Turks or what, when you try to integrate a unit, don't go beyond 10% of an integrated element because if you do it starts to polarize and you are right back where you started. I won't say that applies today, it's a little different world but it applied at that time. I could almost predict if I was getting overloaded with Caucasians or Blacks, particularly on the Black side, don't go beyond the 10%.

Mr. Misenhimer

So yours were mostly Asian?

Colonel Burks

They were Chinese primarily. We had a few pure Hawaiian and a couple Japanese but it was a pretty well integrated unit over all.

Mr. Misenhimer

What guns did you all have there?

Colonel Burks

105 Howitzers, direct support weapons.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then you say you got a regular Army commission, over there?

Colonel Burks

No I got it back at Fort Sill several years later.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then you went to Viet Nam also?

Colonel Burks

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me about that.

Colonel Burks

I was the garrison commander at Fort Carson in 1969 as a Lieutenant Colonel. I got orders to Viet Nam to be the Executive Officer of a Corps Artillery Unit in the 2nd Corps Tactical Zone in Viet Nam. I got promoted to Colonel. *(tape side ended)*

Mr. Misenhimer

Tell me again about Viet Nam.

Colonel Burks

They cancelled my orders as a Colonel although that was a Colonel spot in Viet Nam. I jumped on an airplane and went to Washington and went to what they called the Colonel Division that handled all of the Colonel assignments. They said, "Colonel we're sorry but General Westmoreland has a policy that unless you are a graduate of a senior service

school, as a Colonel you can't go to Viet Nam." I hadn't been to a Senior Service School like the Army War College. I said, "Well I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to the Secretary of Defense's office and see what he has to say about this policy because I'm checked out at Fort Carson and I don't want to be the I.G. of 5th Army and I don't want to be the garrison commander at some other post. I want to end my career in Viet Nam." So I said, "You can get me Secretary Laird's office in the Pentagon and get this thing straightened out." I went to see a friend of mine who happened to be the Exec to the Secretary of Defense who was another ex-boss of mine and told him the story. I said, "I would like to just sit here until Colonel's Division gets this straightened out with Mac V. General Westmoreland is the Chief of Staff of the Army. He's no longer in charge of Viet Nam, that's General Abrams. So I'll wait until they sort it out if you don't mind." He said, "No, just have a seat and read a magazine." About five minutes later the secretary to the Secretary of Defense, a very nice lady, came in and said, "Colonel Burks you have a phone call." So I picked up the phone, "This is Colonel Burks." They said, "Well sir you are now the Operations Team Chief in Mac V Headquarters in Viet Nam, General Townsend, Chief of Staff. General Abrams has approved your orders and you can plan on leaving here the 2nd of May to begin your current assignment." So I went over and started another war saying that I wanted a combat assignment and to make a long story short, the same friend that had been the principal aide to the Secretary of Defense was up with the Corps Artillery. He called me one day and said, "Would you come up here and be the Executive Officer to Corps Artillery in the 1st Corps Tactical Zone?" I said, "No. With all due respect that's a desk job, I want a combat assignment." He said, "John, I can't give you that." I said, "Well, you're getting close but I'm going to hold out until I get what I

want." Two weeks later my predecessor as Deputy Commander of the Corps Artillery was killed in a helicopter accident against Vietnamese Regulars in the area around Hue. My friend called me and said, "The job is open; John has been killed in a helicopter and I've gotten permission from General Zais to have you come up as his replacement if you want the job." I said, "If they'll release me from Mac V I'll be there tomorrow." Then General Townsend called me and said, "Do you want that job?" I said, "Yes sir." He said, "Well, pack your bag, you're on the way." So I got the best of all worlds as far as I was concerned.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now you were a full Bird at that point?

Colonel Burks

That's correct. That's why I wasn't allowed initially to go to Viet Nam because I had made full Colonel and hadn't been to a senior service school.

Mr. Misenhimer

So what did you do in Viet Nam then?

Colonel Burks

I was in a helicopter about four hours a day flying from one fire support base to another to check on the troops and see what their needs were; resupply ammunition from time to time. I had a four place helicopter. I had a pilot; I wasn't flying the thing. Anyhow I spent from December of 1969 to May of 1970 going from one fire support base to another checking on the troops.

Mr. Misenhimer

How was Viet Nam compared to Korea?

Colonel Burks

Much more civilized. As a Colonel I had a trailer and a telephone and all the amenities that go with senior rank. In Korea it was a different story.

Mr. Misenhimer

How about the combat between the two places? What did you think of that and how did they differ?

Colonel Burks

Ground combat remains pretty much the same. We were so shorthanded in Korea and so overwhelmed by numbers. We are talking about a total force structure on the enemy side of close to a million men and on the Army side probably no more than 100,000 so it was much more likely that you were going to get wounded in Korea than it was in Viet Nam. Viet Nam they used essentially guerilla tactics. There were certain combat areas that we tried to bypass in order to achieve protection of major cities like Da Nang, Hue and avoid guerilla type areas that existed in the valleys, the A Shao Valley north. So most of the danger points came from guerilla type activity in the southern tactical zones.

Mr. Misenhimer

Korea was more of a traditional type of war between the two sides whereas Viet Nam as you say was a guerilla type war.

Colonel Burks

That's correct.

Mr. Misenhimer

What medals and ribbons did you get from Korean and Viet Nam?

Colonel Burks

I got four additional Battle Stars in Korea; four different major campaigns. In Viet Nam I got the Legion of Merit, four more Air Medals, Joint Services Commendation Medal, the Army Commendation Medal and four more Battle Stars.

Mr. Misenhimer

How did you get the Air Medals in Viet Nam?

Colonel Burks

From those helicopter runs every day.

Mr. Misenhimer

Even though you weren't in the Air Force, you got the Air Medals?

Colonel Burks

Oh yes.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then when were you finally discharged, or I guess you were not discharged, when did you leave active duty?

Colonel Burks

I left active duty in July of 1976.

Mr. Misenhimer

You never leave when you are a Colonel.

Colonel Burks

(laugh) That's right.

Mr. Misenhimer

Then what did you do?

Colonel Burks

I came back to Pauls Valley, Oklahoma to work as a bank officer in the local First National Bank. In a town this size, we're about 6,500 people, you get all kinds of opportunities to have positions of responsibility at no pay. (laugh) So I did the typical stuff. I was on the planning and zoning commission. I was chairman of the airport board. I'm an Episcopalian, so I did everything but sweeping the church. Like I say, you have all kinds of opportunity to volunteer. I was head of the United Fund for two years. It was a good experience but I don't need anymore. (laugh) It wasn't all that bad and I met a lot of nice people.

Mr. Misenhimer

From your units in World War II have you had any reunions with those people?

Colonel Burks

Only one. Unfortunately late in the game, probably the early 1990's, the co-pilot, the engineer, waist gunner and myself, just four of us, met in Las Vegas with our wives and tried to renew old acquaintances. It was a wonderful experience. I recognized everybody and they recognized me. It was a good experience but unfortunately the pilot, bombardier, radio operator, the armorer and the tail gunner were all absent from the scene for one reason or another, mostly because they had died. They were deceased. The only person of that crew that stayed on active duty was the pilot. He retired as an Air Force Colonel. We were neighbors at one time in Springfield, Virginia. That was kind of interesting that we both kind of made the system together. We were promoted to Colonel within weeks of each other; he in the Air Force and me in the Army. Before I went to Viet Nam, I had just made Colonel myself; I went by his office in the Pentagon and

shook his hand. We had a chance to reflect on a few things that had happened early in our careers. I gave him a big salute and headed for Viet Nam.

Mr. Misenhimer

Now the 26th Bomb Squadron, you have not had reunions with them, is that right?

Colonel Burks

No. They still have those reunions. In fact the last one was in Colorado Springs just a few weeks ago.

Mr. Misenhimer

Anything else you recall from your time in the service?

Colonel Burks

No except that I picked the right career. I did what I wanted to do and got all the breaks that I deserved and not very many disappointments. I'm happy with my choice. When I finally graduated from the University of Maryland I was stationed at the Pentagon. I went up to Maryland to get in line with about 6,000 other people. I was a little confused as I recall. I took my family; I've got a wife and four children. I took them along with me and I was kind of stumbling around looking for my group and some guy stood up and said, "All you guys fat and forty, over here." (laugh) That happened to be my group.

Mr. Misenhimer

How many total years did you spend in the service?

Colonel Burks

33 ½ counting the three years that I was in the Reserves, so I had a full career and a little more.

Mr. Misenhimer

MacArthur was in charge of Korea; what did you think of MacArthur?

Colonel Burks

Not much. He was 33 years a General officer and that's a hell of a long time to be a General. He was two or three different people. Most people just know him as the guy that graduated from West Point and served 33 years as a General and Hero of Inchon and other landings. Anyway, when he defied the President all of the positives that I had for him went the other way. He knew better.

Mr. Misenhimer

Colonel Burks I want to thank you for your time today. Thank you for serving our country and we'll talk to you later.

end of interview)

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