Harvard A. Bitter– Life during WWII

By Harvard A. Bitter

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Box 6 Folder 2

Oral Interview conducted by Jaime Christensen

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
JC: First of all, where were you born?

HB: Ririe.

JC: Ririe. And how old were you on December 7, 1941?

HB: Well I was in the senior year of high school.

JC: Okay well that’s good… if you were a senior in high school. And what do you remember about that day?

HB: Well we heard of the Japanese invasion, or, actually, flights into Hawaii, and everyone was very upset, of course. And, uh, some wanted to leave and join up right then, and a few did, but our high school leadership suggested we finish out our year and our graduation from high school and then enlist if we wanted to.

JC: And so is that what you decided?

HB: That’s what I did.

JC: Okay. And, you were in the army?

HB: Yes it was the Army Air Force at that time.

JC: Were you ever in combat?

HB: Yes.

JC: And where did you serve?

HB: Pacific islands from Guadalcanal on up through the Philippine campaign.

JC: Okay, and what was your rank and your different assignments… some of the different assignments that you had?

HB: Well, I graduated from flying school in Calif—in Douglas, Arizona. That’s where I got my wings as a pilot.

JC: And…

HB: And that gave me a second lieutenant rank to start with.

JC: What were some of the assignments that you had then as a pilot, or what can you tell me about some of the missions that you flew?

HB: All 48 or 50?
JC: [laughing] Some of them?

HB: Well, first, uh, my assignment in it [the army] was in Tonopah, Nevada to join… a bomber crew and I was co-pilot on that bomber crew to start with, and we trained across Nevada and over the Grand Canyon and around the western United States for about three months and then we were assigned to California… to San Francisco to await orders for overseas assignment. We were given as assignment one morning from San Francisco and told that they were sealed orders, and told to fly west in our case, some were flying elsewhere, and so after you’re out there for eight hours, why, you can break the seal on the envelope and see where you’re headed. So, we were over half way across the Pacific to the Hawaiian Islands when we broke the seal and found out that we were assigned to Guadalcanal for our first staging area.

JC: And, what was it, what was it like when you got there, and, and you actually got into the Pacific and doing those things?

HB: Well it was a mess, [snicker], it’s hard to explain to you what we didn’t have compared to what we have now in terms of radios, maps, and geographical background, but, we flew to Hawaii and then took off toward Borneo, and then from Borneo north up to the… or I shouldn’t say Borneo… trouble after 60 years [JC laughing] is the memory, but I know, but, um, oh…

EB: Do you want your written history… [laughing] would that help?

HB: That would help; dear… give me a moment. Just hold this for a minute…

[Break in tape while wife retrieves personal history – Harvard realizes that he was in Fiji during this time]

JC: Okay, so we left off in Fiji…

HB: Yeah. We landed in Fiji and then went north to Guadalcanal, and we had and interesting time there. We had a map that showed the, island that we were landing on in Guadalcanal to be about 3500 feet. When we got somewhere in the vicinity of Guadalcanal, uh, we were in bad storms, our radios would not pick up much communications, and, and I could bore you with all of the details about what a pilot goes through, or had to go through at that time, but we won’t, I mean I don’t think it’s necessary, you wouldn’t understand it anyway [JC laughing], but we started to let down to try and find the field, and we had audible signals coming into the ear phones, and at one point, there is a silent area which you cross from one side going out the other.

JC: Right

HB: We had so much static and electricity in the air, and we were in solid clouds that we passed over what we call a cone which would have oriented us that we were now to go
down toward the strip, but, uh, we didn’t hear it. And finally at about 3500 feet, which was what we had indicated that the strip map of the island was the height. All at once we broke through the clouds and we were perfectly framed in a canyon, and these are all in microseconds when you’re living them but we thought for minute, I started musing to myself, ‘This is it. They’ll never know where, what happened to us.’ And then we jarred lose and put the plane wide open and from our descent and started climbing and went right back into the clouds, turned right, and we flew through an 8000 foot mountain. I have never been able to determine where we got around that mountain, but we did. Went back up to altitude and started our instrument let-down once again. We didn’t have much gas left, and this time we heard the center cone, as we flew over it, and timed our descent and we came out at about 100 feet before the ground and we were lined up with the metal airport. They had laid out on the mud these metal strips, and we landed on Guadalcanal. And we literally got out and kissed the ground when we turned things off.

JC: I believe it! [chuckle]

HB: And, uh, that was my first base of operation, Guadalcanal was. The main group of our Bomber squadron had gone on up to another island north of there up the strip, but we, uh, we did some training out of there and flew some missions over into Port Norsby and along different places along the island and New Guinea and bombed some areas where the Japanese were still in the jungle holding out. Um…

JC: How long were you in Guadalcanal? How long was your service there? [inaudible mumbling]

HB: Oh probably a month or less. Um, um, turn that off [inaudible].

[Pause while he looks at personal history]

JC: Okay, I remember you talking before about what, what it was like, um during the air raids, and you had talked about what it was like to be there and to be in the different shelters, I think. Could you talk about that a little bit?

HB: Okay, on the islands the, we, had to dig our own shelters and put coconut logs that were cut down over top of us, and when the Japanese would come, and they usually came at night, [they] would try and drop bombs on our locations, and we would get up and jump into our shelter, and wait till the all clear sounded again that the Japanese planes that had been bombing us were gone. And we had the land crabs always down in there with us that had crawled in during the [bombing], and – have you got the [to wife about abbreviated history].

EB: Well, yeah, but it, well it, go ahead and just talk about that cuz this is just kind of general but anyway…

HB: And uh, and we would get, when we, we did some eighteen hour missions we had long – our bombers would go for eighteen hours on fuel, and so, uh, we were kind of weary from going up and bombing other islands that the Japanese were still heavily in
control of at different times, and we would get back and crawl under our mosquito nets and we had, had no sheets, or we had two wool blankets and a mat on an army cot, and one night we came back and crawled in and we were so tired we didn’t even hear the sound that we were going to be bombed and they would shoot off a couple of guns to warn us to get up and get into our fox hole covers is what it amounts to, and we didn’t even hear it one night, and uh the planes came on through and we slept through it all…

JC: Oh wow!

HB: But one bomb hit an adjoining fox hole cover of another crew, our fellow combat crews, and, and blew that up right next to us [snicker]. Yeah another time, they did have old movies and when we had time they would put them on a screen down in an area, we would hike down in the evening and one time we were coming back from that and there had been no alert, and all at once I heard these bombs, and I, I never heard bombs come down before. We were walking along the road and we hollered at one another because, and here coming down the road were these bombs. I mean, blowing up [banging on the table] “boom! boom!”; right, walking down the road, toward us and the last one blew up just before it got to where we were walking.

JC: Wow! Did being a member of the church help you in the experiences that you were having? Did it help you with you outlook as opposed to others who didn’t have those beliefs?

HB: Well always, it’s true, but uh, I left from and inactive community where the church was, had a little branch was all, in fact when… Tooley Lake, California was a wide spot in the road, and yeah. We held a few services from time to time there before I left for the war, and then what happened is before I left, they relocated the Japanese that they had rounded up all over California in the west and made a detention camp for ‘em two miles south of our farm.

JC: Woah!

HB: And so, we would talk to some of ‘em in the detention center, and we were short of help to get our crops out, and, but they wouldn’t let them work for us.

JC: Oh wow!

HB: They were just detained down there, and they offered to – they said, “Well we’ll come and thin your beets” and top ‘em and so forth and, but they wouldn’t let ‘em. But, uh, so I knew there was a lot of inequity in the roundups…

JC: Uh-huh.

HB: Of these people, they were as much American as anybody. They lived in the United States, but there was also the possibility that there was amongst them spies and so forth, so there are a lot of inequities in these things, in a war, because of pressures, and they
don’t have time to check out everybody. There will always be some failings in the system, but I flew approximately fifty missions, and they averaged about twelve hours a mission.

JC: Twelve Hours.

HB: And, uh…

JC: So, were you just exhausted all the time?

HB: No! Interesting thing in the islands out there, you have the monsoon system, time, and there were twice that we were grounded for six weeks; one time for six weeks because of the heavy rains and nothing happening. And then we got off for a couple of missions and then another six weeks that we were grounded and couldn’t do anything. So, there’s a lot of boredom involved [JC laughing], and if you don’t play poker…

JC: [laughing] I was going to ask, what did you do to entertain yourself then?

HB: I read a little bit when I could get magazines, but uh, but I knew better than to play poker ‘cuz I didn’t know cards that well [JC laughing], and so…

EB: But he did have some church meetings…

HB: We did have some church meetings in, out in the edge of the jungle where there were enough of us that we could hold a sacrament meeting occasionally as we did, and uh…

JC: Did you make, um oh what’s my question? Did you make new, new friends while you were there, any good friendships while you were serving…

HB: Oh yes.

EB: Yeah tell them about your…

JC: I would think that that kind of experience would bring those of you who were serving together, kind of close.

HB: We, we were. There was, on this bomber, ten crew members. There were four commissioned officers which were, were two pilots, a navigator, and a bombardier. And we had radio operators, gunners, and so these were six non-commisioned officers, so there were ten of us in a normal crew. And occasionally we had and observer with us that would be a number eleven, but we flew pretty much everything together. Except near the end of the, my tour, before the group moved up to the Philippines, a pilot of another crew, brand new crew came in, and to give him some experience, why, the colonel of the base took him as a co-pilot to observe, and took off one night over New Guinea, and as far as we know they crashed into New Guinea somewhere…
JC: Oh.

HB: Never seen again. And I was assigned then as the pilot with a new crew. So, I flew wingman for awhile opposite my own crew.

JC: Wow!

HB: And, uh…

EB: Tell them how close your crew was, and have been all your life.

HB: Well, we’ve, had contact of course through the years with all of them until they died. Most of them have died. And uh, one of the latest ones was in California, and, called, his daughter called actually to find me and see if I was still alive and wanted to talk. And uh, he was a Mexican-American. He was a gunner, and so I gave them a lot of background on Grandpa.

JC: Wanted to know about him…

HB: And, oh, it…

JC: Were you from all - were the people in your group from all over the States?

HB: Yes. Yeah, they were. Pilot was a Georgia boy. And Wisconsin was an, was an engineer, and uh, the navigator was Portland, Oregon, and the bombardier was mid-west, I’m not sure which place he really called home back [JC laughing] there, but, the mid west, and we had, General Private Jackson. He was an Arkansas boy; he was one of the gunners [laughing]. So, yes they pulled us everywhere, and started putting us together through our training programs. So, yes, and we… and actually this, this one that was a gunner, who’s daughter called me, uh, uh, it was his grandson that interviewed me in California…

JC: Okay [laughing]

HB: And uh…

EB: But you really learned to depend on each other.

HB: But we, we learned to depend on each other. In the course of my flying we had one boy wounded, but not bad, from a bullet from a zero that got through and hit him. We had one boy crack up mentally…

JC: Oh!
HB: Right at the tail end of the war, and we… I’ll tell you about one mission that was eighteen hours…

JC: Wow.

HB: We took off at midnight, off a little island, yeah with bombs – load of – the bomb bay had four compartments we had. Because of the long-range mission, why, we had two gas tanks in two of the compartments and then, the other two compartments held bombs. We were flying to Balikpapan, Borneo, in which was a Japanese staging area where they cracked the aviation fuel for their fighters, and bombers, and that means processed, and, to where and it was well known in the pacific, and we were to take it out, and so, eighteen hours, was the mission length. We flew basically half of that time to get there, and because of the distance involved, and it takes extra gas to climb to high altitudes, which we were more protected from anti-aircraft fire.

JC: Right [nervous laugh].

HB: But, uh, so we flew in at about 18,000 feet instead of being up another five, or so, and dropped bombs on the gasoline facilities, and we hit them. And when I say “we,” that was a squadron of twenty-four planes.

JC: Okay

HB: Took the, bad deal, and the clouds, or the smoke from that were up around us almost immediately blowing up down there…

JC: Wow.

HB: There is a time when, for your bombardier to have control of the plane you turn it over to him, and he’s , he’s controlling it through his Norton bomb sight.

JC: Oh.

HB: You have to go straight and level, keep the same altitude, not turn left or right, except as he varies- does a variation and until he gets his target in sight and releases the bombs. Once that’s over we take back over and do a screaming dive out to the left or right, whichever the plan was to get out of the area as fast as we can because they’re shooting at you. Those arrows have followed you into the target, shooting at you, and then they pick you up and follow back out with you.

JC: Oh wow. Right.

HB: And, um they called it the Ploesty of the Pacific for those who are World War II buffs, they did that in Romania in the Pacific. We did it in, in, -or in the , uh European theater. We did it in the Pacific and took ‘em out down there, But, we ran a second mission over there again, but the first one was the tough one, when we hit the facilities.
And then, on that mission, we had one engine on the plane out to start with that had been shot out or hit with anti-aircraft fire, and then, later on, the next engine went, and we could not maintain altitude once our bomb load was gone on three engines. But once you drop to two it was slowly settling; you could not hold your altitude to get back for nine hours. Or while it would, yeah, it would be near nine hours to get back to our base. And so, we stripped the plane, and threw everything over board we could throw over board to lighten the Plane, and we had procedures to, with our pliers to crimp lines going out to the engines or different things to stop the fuel from leaking, the oil from going, and uh we just slowly settled, and we did get back to our base. We landed there with two engines out, and, and um, we had thrown everything overboard to lighten it, til we could get back, and we landed on the strip and they just pushed it off into the jungle, and that’s the last I saw that plane. We got another plane.

EB: How many of there were you that got back? There weren’t as many…

HB: Only a third of us got back off of that run.

JC: So how did you, how did you stay calm? Is it just because you had to be, or were you…?

HB: Well I don’t know what you mean by…

JC: I don’t know how to say it [laughing]…

HB: Stay calm. You have a job to do and while you’re busy doing it, you do it. I have seen the face of, of zero fighters pass, go up through the- I’ve looked right over and watched them go under our wing going through, and the expression on their face, and, as they were driving on our bombers. And of course, well you have heard of kamikazes, why we had them before you ever heard of them, starting in the Pacific, and uh… Every now and then if you had a Japanese zero up high above you, and he, and we had hit him, and he was smoking or something, you knew he was going to try and take someone with him. Well, we’d tried [to] open up and let him go through, and uh they did not parachute out often. But they did have parachutes for a while, Then they quit giving ‘em parachutes, But, if a parachute opened in view of our gunners, our gunners would shoot at ‘em as they floated down, And you kept telling your self ‘If I , if I have to go overboard, I don’t open my parachute ‘til I’m almost to the water because…’

JC: Right.

HB: Otherwise I’d get scraped going down, And, so you just grilled that in your mind. You don’t open the parachute if you have to bail out. And uh, but um…

JC: I guess, and that would have been part of your training to do – you had to jump? And learn how to do that?

HB: Yeah. Now it, in normal situations you get to, to jump from airplanes.
JC: Right.

HB: But, in our speed-up programs we got to jump from towers.

JC: Oh great!

HB: We got to hike up the towers and then get up there, and they hooked a harness on ya, and…

JC: Threw you off.

HB: You’d dive, And if you couldn’t, and there were a few that could not force themselves over, they were washed out to other areas of the service. But we in the air force, we had to dive off the towers and just before you hit the ground, you’d pop [the parachute] and you then landed on your feet. Others, you learned to jump off a tower building, and it was to simulate hitting the ground, and you learned to double up and roll as your feet hit the ground so that you wouldn’t break a leg.

JC: Right

HB: Those were all training procedures which we did. Um…

JC: There was one other thing I was wondering about, um – was your family able to stay in contact with you? Or – how was the mail, I guess?

HB: The mail we got on rare occasions [laughing], And so yeah. Occasionally we got a letter, and did mail out letters, oh every two or three weeks to come back states side. And the families would get them. But, we could not say anything because – where we were or what we were doing – that was all classified information. And, as officers, why, we were assigned to the mail monitoring duty, I guess you could say it, to read all letters from those before they were cleared and sent out to be sure that nobody was saying anything that could be picked up by the enemy and know who we were, where we were, etc., etc. So, it was interesting what some people tried to tell their families, and we’d have to edit it and clip it, and so forth.

JC: And what was it like, I mean, one of the last things I want to ask you  is what was it like to, when you came home, to come back to your family?

HB: Okay. We were given new airplanes when we left Stateside to go to combat. When we came back we were given a birth in a banana barge. Ours was a German ship that had been captured going into the Pacific somewhere and picked up bananas and went from island to island and so forth. And so, they used that to, to get us back stateside. And that was an interesting thing. We then took evasive action back and forth, so we didn’t come in a straight line, and, to get back to, San Francisco.
JC: That’s where you went…

HB: That’s where we left from, and that’s where we came back to, the way our particular deal was. And, but on that ship my, my crew did not move up to the Philippines as a base. We were in the Celebes. But the ship had already picked up some that had been on the Philippines. And they were skin and bones, just skeletons. How they had survived, I [unintelligible] but then March, and all of that had, and they were on the boat to come back with us. I remember them vividly, but anyway, we floated around for about six weeks on the Pacific Ocean to get back. And, uh, and then we got into San Francisco. Well, I’d had six weeks since combat, really and I thought I was quite relaxed, you know – settled down- but my parents said when I got home I – that I couldn’t sit still. I’d get up and walk and pace, and … It takes quite awhile to, I guess, get that out of your system, but I thought I was as calm as could be when I got back here. But it was one thing they noted.

JC: So what year was it that you left, and then when did you – Or, when did you leave, and when did you come back?

HB: Oh I, it’s, yeah, turn that off.

[pause while looking for years in history]

HB: That would have been, 44B was, which, I went over in about May of ’44, and I was back in ’45, and again reassigned to the Ferry division, so I was…

JC: So you were reassigned. Right. About a year that you were…

HB: That I was in combat, per se.

EB: After fifty missions they figured the Pilots couldn’t do much – I mean, that was about all they could handle [laughing]

HB: Those of us that were left.

JC: Um, well, thank you very much! Um, I don’t know if there’s anything else that I wanted to ask you. You shared a lot of good experiences. Is there anything else that you’d like to share?

HB: No.

EB: I would like to say something, not about, but… It’s amazing to me now to think how we mobilized this country when we didn’t have, you know, just farm kids and all these people that were from all walks of life, and they jumped in and learned how to be bombers and how to be foot soldiers and how to be marines, or whatever, and do the job that we did. It was just amazing to watch it and more amazing the more I think about it.
JC: Yeah we really appreciate… well I think my generation, we don’t appreciate enough what you guys did, but I…

EB: We just knew it was a job that had to be done.

JC: Just do it. That’s a big difference from then to today. Definitely

HB: I, I had a cousin that was in the navy, who I was close to, and he dove into the Puget Sound on a diving run, at a practice, training, bomb training. We never heard from him again. All we know is he dove in. His plane didn’t pull out, or, the, the controls broke, and he couldn’t pull it out, or who knows? That’s one thing, there a lot of stories that you’ll never know because in the war they don’t compile them. I mean you get a letter saying that your son was killed in action, or in this case, he dove into the Puget Sound in a training mission, and that was that. My cousin West, and he went Naval aviator, and I wanted – I didn’t like the idea of being on the water, so I went for air force.

JC: [laughing] And then you…

HB: And I ended up living over the water, there’s the whole Pacific.

JC: Well, I think that’s good, Grandpa, Thank you so much for sharing.