



Heber Butler

United States Army Air Corps

Flight Officer

European Theater

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Interviewer:
Geoffrey Panos

THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Geoff: Can you spell us your first and last name?

Heber: H-E-B-E-R initial M, B-U-T-L-E-R with one T.

Geoff: And where were you born?

Heber: In Garland Utah on November 22nd 1921.

Geoff: Did you grow up there?

Heber: Yes, I graduated from grade school through high school in Garland.

Geoff: And your brother Richard?

Heber: Yes Richard also, he was roughly two years older than me and we flew combat together in the same fighter unit.

Geoff: Tell us about how you got into the Army Air Corps and how you became a fighter pilot and how you and Richard did this together.

Heber: I was concerned during my Senior year in high school what I was going to do for a living as an individual and I received a letter from California from some of the aircraft industries like Lockheed and North American that said “*come here and be Junior Executives and we’ll teach you how to fly later*” and I thought ‘*hey this is a great idea and I’ll get rich and then I’ll learn to fly*’. When I took that to my boss...you know the story of Scott that said, “*God is my co-pilot*”, but when I took it to my co-pilot he said “*uh uh*”. So I studied it out again and in the meantime I had heard an Army Chaplain in an interview on the radio and they asked him if the Army would make a man good or bad and he said “*no, the military will not make a man good or bad. It will make him more of*

what he already is". And that impressed me. So when I graduated from high school and having taken that to my co-pilot I joined the Air Force.

Geoff: What year was that?

Heber: 19th of July 1940.

Geoff: So this is well before Pearl Harbor?

Heber: Oh yes.

Geoff: So did Richard go in as well?

Heber: Yes we went together. He went with me and I give him credit for keeping me out of trouble.

Geoff: So you enlisted in the Air Corps?

Heber: Army Air Corps.

Geoff: Tell us about when you went to training and how that was and where you were.

Heber: Well I went through a typical GI boot camp. I learned how to carry a rifle over my head around the parade ground because I made a mistake and I only did it once – I learned quick. From there I went to Offutt Naval Air Station which was an Army Air Base at the time, that's where the dirigibles were and all that and it was impressive to me. The reason I was there was because I had mechanical skills and they were going to make an aircraft mechanic out of me.

Geoff: Did you get these skills growing up in Garland?

Heber: Yes, fixing diesel Caterpillar Tractors and farm machinery were all part of my training.

Geoff: When you were at the Air Corps did they allow you and Richard both?

Heber: Yes they did, they allowed us both to go together and we went to the same base. In fact my first military assignment was to see that all of the troops got from Fort Douglas to Hamilton Air Force Base and my brother Richard's assignment was to see that all the troops that went with us got fed and he wouldn't let them have their meal chips to buy alcohol with.

Geoff: So you enlisted right over here then at Fort Douglas?

Heber: That's right. Actually we were sworn in at the Federal Building in Ogden, I think it was about the second floor where the offices were.

Geoff: Did you know you wanted to be a Fighter Pilot?

Heber: Yes.

Geoff: Was there a particular fighter that you wanted to fly?

Heber: I just wanted to fly fighters. I had a great desire to fly.

Geoff: So tell us about your training and tell us about how you got to your first fighter.

Heber: Primary flying school was at Santa Maria California called '*Allan Hancock College of Aeronautics*'. We flew PT17's and PT15's (bi-wing airplanes) and had fun with it. I learned how to spin an airplane upside down and how to recover from it. The second base was Lemoore California where we flew what we jokingly called '*the Volte Vibrator*'. It was made by Volte Air Craft (sp?) and it was a 450 horsepower, two-seater.

From there we went to Luke Field Arizona. By the way my brother Richard was not at these bases with me, he was at different bases until we got together at Luke and at Luke Field we flew the AT6 Texan which was 650 horsepower. We graduated from flying school there as Sergeant Pilots. We had high school educations and before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor you had to have a college degree to go through flying school as a cadet. I was a Buck Sergeant and my brother Richard was also...we graduated as Staff Sergeant Pilots. We were a couple of the original Sergeant Pilot bunch. By the way the 82nd Fighter Group which we joined was primarily Sergeant Pilots initially, all those old guys that showed us how to fly were Buck Sergeants at one time.

Geoff: So you got to Luke Field and then where did you go?

Heber: From there (with my wings) I went to Tallahassee Florida and checked out in the P39 Cobra, which is a neat little airplane. It's so tight it fits you like this, you can't reach over and (it has car doors on it if you can believe it) and you pull the doors shut like so – well you can't, you've got to reach across like this and shut it and then reach over and get this door and then you lock it and crank up the windows. It's like an automobile; it fits you like a single seat automobile. We finished flying school there and headed for Europe via the Queen Elizabeth.

Geoff: When did Pearl Harbor happen in all this?

Heber: Prior to me starting flying school.

Geoff: When you joined the Air Corps did you think you'd be going to war?

Heber: I knew we were.

Geoff: And whom did you think we were going to war with?

Heber: Germany. At least I knew Germany because as a high school kid I had a bicycle 'Deseret News' newspaper route and I read the paper, I could see between the lines that Hitler wasn't going to stop until somebody stopped him. I didn't know Japan was going to get in on it but they did and when they did that's when the government changed the rules and allowed high school graduates to go through flying school in-grade. So we went through as Sergeant Pilots and graduated as Staff Sergeant Pilots.

Geoff: So you took the Queen Elizabeth to Europe, tell us about that journey.

Heber: Oh, we had a big room about the size of this studio with 90 some odd fighter pilots in it, decked about seven decks high. I had the good judgment to pick the top bunk. A lot of the guys couldn't stand the ocean swells so it was neat to be on top. We disembarked at Scotland.

Geoff: So you got to the UK then what happened?

Heber: We were there late in November and all of December of 1942 and in mid or late January (I don't know the exact date) we boarded the British ship the TSS Stratenhabner (sp?) and headed out of Liverpool down along the coast out to sea then down through the Straits of Gibraltar and arrived at Oran North Africa. From Oran we were transferred by Gooney Birds (airplanes) to a base just south of Casablanca and that's where I was when Caserine Pass took place. So I was not in the battle of the Caserine Pass.

Geoff: So that's about February of '43.

Heber: Yes.

Geoff: You talked to me about putting together a plane before?

Heber: Oh yeah. Some of the young men that were entrepreneurial, they discovered that three AT6's had been shoved off from a landing barge when the tide started going out

(during the invasion in November of the preceding year) and they transported them by flatbed into our little base and the senior officer had been looking through my files and found that I had gone through the School of Aeronautic Engineering at Glendale California and he said “*build me an airplane*” because we didn’t have any airplanes to fly. We were just sitting there getting stale.

Geoff: This is the 82nd Fighter Group?

Heber: This is before the 82nd Fighter Group.

Geoff: So you were replacement pilots?

Heber: Yes. We were looking forward to something but we didn’t know what it was. I was able to put an AT6 together. Some of it I had to drill the rivets out and re-rivet it but it flew and do you know what they did? They gave me the honor of being the Engineering Officer and test pilot. So every morning I flew it.

Geoff: Tell us how you got to the 82nd and tell us how you got into combat.

Heber: As Lieutenant Jackson from the 82nd Fighter Group came to that replacement depot where we were and the word went out “*anybody that wants to fly P38’s contact Lieutenant Jackson*” which my brother Richard and I did. And within a couple of days and five hours sitting in the cockpit with a manual and memorizing where all the switches were and what they did and all that, I was airborne. Five hours in the cockpit and a blindfold check to see if I could find everything with my eyes closed and cranked her up, there’s the end of the runway – go!

Geoff: Did you do well?

Heber: Oh yeah. I got it airborne, flew it around an hour and a half or an hour and 15 minutes (I don’t remember the specifics) but landed and within 30 days I had about 30

hours in the P38. Then the transfer to the 82nd Fighter Group took place along with a total of 24 pilots that had checked out on the P38.

Geoff: So that was over in Algeria and Tunisia?

Heber: Yeah. We weren't in Tunisia at the time, we were still in the eastern part of Algiers but we eventually got to Tunisia.

Geoff: So you get there and you and your brother Richard get assigned to the 82nd Fighter Group and you were checked out on the P38, now tell us about getting into combat.

Heber: My first combat mission was on the wing of my Squadron Commander and he said "*you won't see any airplanes today*" but I had better eyes than he thought I did. We hadn't been airborne more than about a half hour (we went out over the Mediterranean on a Fighter Sweep looking for fighters) and I called out "*two 109's coming under your nose from 10 o'clock to 2 o'clock*" and he said "*okay, here we go*" and I'm sitting back there looking over our tail to make sure there aren't a couple of them out behind us and he went in and took a firing pass and did the damage he did and that's all we saw that day. But I did see fighters that day.

Geoff: So tell us more about these fighter missions.

Heber: I can tell you about one that I thought the planning (in my humble opinion) was very poor. We had a group of B17's to escort over the docks and airfield at Palermo Sicily and because of the combat losses and maintenance problems we got airborne with 10 P38's (that's two flights of four) and my leader and me. And a two-flight is a weak link and we escorted them out there. What they did they flew out there and climbed to 26,000 feet, flew past Palermo, made a 180, came back across the docks and dropped bombs on the harbor and on ships in the harbor. Then we came over to the airfield '*Boccadefalco*' was the name of the place and dropped the remainder of them on the

airfield. Well when we were escorting them across the harbor I could look down and see 109's coming up off of the airfield down there and in my opinion they should have hit the airfield first but we didn't. And as they came off from the target heading back towards base the German fighters were coming after us of course and just 10 P38's up there escorting a group of B17's was inadequate and even as a Junior Pilot I'd never seen an airplane get shot down before. But as we came, they cross weave like this so that as they're turning like this your flight can see what's happening behind him and they can see what's happening behind you but here we are two alone there and no one to cover our tails. I looked off to my right and I see a P38 at 26,000 feet with both engines on fire heading straight down and an ME109 doing this and I thought *'oh boy, I've seen my first Fighter Pilot die'* and then I thought *'well maybe he'll bail out but I hope he doesn't open his chute out here at 26,000 feet that's too high'*. He came out of the cockpit and he hadn't fallen very far before his chute opened and I knew he would suffer from cold (it was 40 below at that altitude) and we were wearing summer flying gear and he opened his chute and I thought *'oh boy'*. All he had to get him to oxygen level (at atmosphere) was a little *'bail out bottle'*. It was about yea big around about an inch and a half in diameter and about six inches long and it supposedly would supply you with eight to ten minutes of oxygen. Once you pull the starter on it it would flow constantly but with the parachute open he's not going to get down there that quick. Anyway while I'm looking at him I should have been looking over my tail and looking at my flight lead but I wasn't. Then I remember some of the old saying *"hey, if you hear machine gun fire when you're up there look behind you because he's close"* and I looked and do you know what I saw in my rearview mirror? I saw a black leather helmet, green goggles and an oxygen mask and I thought *'good hell is he that close?'* About then a cannon shell exploded in my left wing and another cannon shell hit my left engine and one skipped off the wing just outside my cockpit but it didn't detonate and my airplane just when *"whewewerwerwe"* heading straight down. The hole in the left wing was making the ailerons do this and anyway it was an interesting experience and I was going down there thinking *'how do you get out of a snap-and-spin with one engine?'* and I didn't know, nobody told me nothing about flying with one engine. Then I heard a voice (believe me or not) that said *"Heber, pull off the other throttle"* and I reached over and grabbed both throttles and

pulled them off and “bam” that P38 snapped out of that spiraling dive just like that. It was so hard it threw a kink in my neck, you know when you turn your head abruptly and it did! It snapped out of it so I eased a little power on my good engine, more power, more power. I turned out the torque and trimmed up the torque and pretty soon I was cruising along at about 180 miles an hour catching up with the bombers. I caught up with them and I’m sitting back here and here’s the formation of bombers (B17’s) and I’m coming up to them like this and I said to myself *‘hey, don’t fly up behind bombers like that because they’ll shoot at you’*. So I slid out to the side and turned it up sideways like that so they could see I was a P38, then I slid in a little closer and did it again and then slid under the closest B17. Boy that ball turret looked...he was rotating above that and the guy sitting in there he goes like this...and I go...and “whew” all the way back to the coast. When I got to the coastline I figured I’d bail out and I thought *‘why bail out and see if the parachute rigger did his job right?’* These were thoughts going through a Junior Pilot novice mind. And I thought *‘if you get to the coast why not go over to the airfield and bailout there if you’re going to bail out – over your own airfield.’* I got over to our airfield and I said to myself *‘I’m going to try and land it’* and I did the only thing they ever said about a single-engine with one shot out – “get the bad engine up” and so instead of pitching out like this (it was my left engine) I just “chuchuchuch” put it down and rolled down, landed in deep and wiped the sweat off my forehead and they towed me in because I couldn’t taxi it. All it would do is go in circles. That was my second combat mission. That’s the only time I ever let a fighter get behind me.

Geoff: Tell what was the most dangerous or most memorable mission you ever had (this is the one north of Sicily).

Heber: This one wasn’t over Sicily; these were railroad yards behind Naples. I had had about 25 or 30 combat missions by that time and we had been a lot of places including Rome. We had a milk run to Rome. We flew up there and the B17’s dropped their bombs on the railroad yards behind Rome and no enemy fighters at all came up. That’s what a Fighter Pilot dreams of. But anyway to answer your question, we had a mission, a heavy mission to hit the railroad yards and the marshaling yards back at Naples. And this

was obviously (to my estimation) a prelude to the invasion of Italy. The first group was the 82nd Fighter Group, we were escorting the Martin B26 'Cigar Bomber' (it looked round like a cigar) it had a reputation of being a real fast airplane but we found it miserable to escort because it was slow. We'd sit back here like this weaving trying to keep up enough air speed so that if enemy came up we'd have some speed to go after them. But our assignment was once you get them over their target and they've dropped their bombs and escort them out to sea a little bit, you turn around and go back and join the fighter group that's bringing in the B25 Mitchell's. And then after that when they've gone off you turn around and go back and you've got three fighter groups up there now to protect the B17's and that was the day that we really dog fought you know. Coming off of the B17's we were in a swirling thing and one neat thing about it was that there weren't any Spitfire's up there because we knew that any single-engine airplane was the bad guys.

Geoff: So no allied single-engine planes?

Heber: We were all P38's. We went round and round and up and down and you'd see one and you'd take a shell.

Geoff: Tell us about how these fighters came up and you saw them, you had quite an interesting story there.

Heber: Well pretty soon you end up and you're down on the deck and I fought the shot and I broke out of the bottom of that thing and I started heading towards Sicily because that was where we were to land if we got in a hairy dogfight and were getting low on fuel. So I'd gone maybe five miles and I looked up and here's another ball of fighters – P38's and 109's and Focke-Wulf just tangling and I pulled up into them and a 109 came through my gun sight and I hosed off a bunch of rounds at him and ran out of ammo. Because I'd been busy in the first ball of fighters. So I said "*woops*" and peeled off and hit the deck right on the ocean heading south. I hadn't gone more than five or ten miles and I look up and here comes the P38 and he latches onto my wing on this side and

another one (there was another ball of fighters up there) that was really an interesting day!

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Geoff: So you're escorting these B17's, tell us about the first big dog fight.

Heber: Let me finish this one – okay so I'm heading south and here comes two P38's to latch on my wing and I pressed my button and said, "*Hey, stay alert guys. I'm outta ammo.*" The radio beeps "*number two – I'm outta ammo too.*" And the third guy said "*that's three of us*" and we were on the deck heading south towards Sicily getting home we hoped and about two or three miles later we saw a flight of ME109's (there were seven of them – I counted them) going north and the one on the left hand side he turns like this like he's going to make a tail on pass at us and if we had just sat there he would have shot one down. But this kid on my right just did the reflex action – haul back on the stick and stood that P38 on it's tail like as if he was going to make a head on pass right at that 109 and the guy just "*swoop*" back into formation and kept on going. We made it all the way to Sicily, refueled and flew to Africa. I'm grateful that kid (I don't know his name) but there was three of us and we were about the same age.

Geoff: Tell us what you talked about a little earlier about bombing.

Heber: Oh yeah. I dropped at least two, maybe three bombs during the whole time of my tour in Africa. The P38 wasn't designed as a bomber, you had no bombsight. All we did was roll in and look at the target and say "*umm that looks about right*" and push a button and drop the bomb. You could drop a bomb all right but it takes some experience to be accurate in any degree. Anyway so I rolled in on my target, I was sent over to Italy to hit a railroad bridge – just a single ship, you know "*you go get that one*". We had been scattered out to do that trying to disrupt the transportation system (this was later in my combat tour) and I got there and looked around and everything looked good, it was a nice sunny day and there was no enemy aircraft and I spot my bridge and I rolled over and set

up my switches for bomb-release and I dive down there and I got it right in my gun sight and I thought *'it looks good'* and I reach over and I pushed the button to release my bomb and I climbed and turned like this off to the right out over the ocean and took a look to see where my bomb hit. It didn't hit, there was no bomb released so I came on around again and I rolled in there and punched the button four or five times and pulled her up like this and looked out of the right side of my wing and there's a bomb splash out about two miles out to sea. My bomb had hung up and fell off when I leveled out coming around. Then I looked to my north and here's a big white ship with a big red cross painted on it and the next day over the propaganda network from out of Germany and out of Italy "*American's Bomb Hospital Ship!*" Well that bomb wasn't five miles from that ship. Anyway that's one of my real bomb stories.

Geoff: Tell us about when you flew over in the Invasion of Sicily.

Heber: Okay, the day before we escorted. We flew down to Tripoli (I don't know the name of the airfield – it was dirt strip) all of our Fighter Group flew down there and the day of the invasion we got up at the proper time and made our take off time and flew north towards Sicily and picked up the escort airplanes (troop transports) and spotted gliders that were being towed and when we got to Malta the Spitfires came up and they joined us. So we had Spitfires and P38's on the invasion top cover. My flight that day was assigned to protect the bombers and some of them had your top cover, watch for fighters and mine was to *'if fighters get through them, you go get them and protect the bombers'*. Our fighter group did a good job of protecting the bombers.

Geoff: Could you see the fleet below?

Heber: Yeah we could see the ships down there and when we got to Sicily we could see the landing barges coming in. Right there is where it got interesting because when we crossed the coastline the ME109's, the Focke-Wulf 190's, the Italian Fighters were coming up and we had P38's, 109's, Spitfires, Italians – it was one big hairy mess. It was a dogfight! If my memory is correct, we lost seven pilots from our group and nine

airplanes. How could we lose nine airplanes and only seven pilots? Well the airplanes that they brought back were shot up so bad we just junked them. So it was a hairy dogfight and all the way across Sicily to the west coast to Palermo is where we finally broke out of the fight.

Geoff: When you're in the middle of a dogfight like that I guess you can go a long ways in a very short time.

Heber: Oh yeah, you're doing about 300 miles an hours so your circle can be tight depending whether your on the tail of somebody and shooting or whether somebody's getting on your tail and you're evading him.

Geoff: How was your brother Richard doing through this time?

Heber: He was up there doing it. One of the pilots told me about his experiences over Sicily and he said "*Richard was on a 109 and there was a 109 after him and a P38 after the 109 and a Spitfire coming in from....*" Anyway you can't visualize it. You've got to be up there.

Geoff: Did you have a little bit more concern for Richard? I mean I guess you must have with your brother in the same unit.

Heber: Only when he was on my wing or when I was on his wing. That's what the wingman is there for to protect his leader and when I had Richard on my tail...when he was out there I knew my hind end was covered. If I had a fighter to go after I could go after it knowing that he was protecting me and the same way when he flew with me. Fortunately or unfortunately (I don't know which) we seldom flew together. I don't remember more than a half a dozen times that we flew with each other in the same flight. We may have been on the same mission but not in the same flight.

Geoff: Tell us about the huge mission where all the P38 groups got together.

Heber: About the 25th of August our Wing Commander got approval from higher headquarters to do what would be a real strafing run. They had intelligence that indicated that the Germans and Italians had marshaled a considerable number of bombers and fighters in the Foggia Aerodrome area which is over on the Adriatic Sea side of the peninsula of Italy. We were briefed on it, we flew a practice run on the coast just south of Tunis and then the next day...our Wing Commander said "*I'll Court Marshall anybody that's over 100 feet in the air*". We were assigned sea level to 100 feet above the ground and above the water and that was our assigned altitude.

Geoff: How many planes in your fighter group?

Heber: We had 75 normally 25 per squadron and we had three squadrons so that would be 75 P38's like this.

Geoff: And there were other groups involved too?

Heber: Yes the 82nd Group and the 1st Fighter Group and the 14th – all three of them. We were assigned 0 to 100 feet, another group was assigned 100 feet to 200 feet and the third group was assigned 200 to 300 feet.

Geoff: So that's about 220 airplanes in the air.

Heber: Oh yeah. You have to visualize this – we're going across the ocean in spread flights like this and as we crossed over Italy nobody fired at anything. We got over on the Adriatic Sea side and we did this, you see that puts a series of fighters in line. And with three groups you've got 200 airplanes strung out like this. Then when we get to our initial point where navigation says "*the airfields are right over that ridge*" these that are like this turn and are like so. So we're all coming out of the sun line abreast – 200 fighters. Each group had certain assigned airfields and interesting enough going up the Adriatic Sea before we got to our turn point to go over there was an Italian ship out there

and the crew was out looking at us. I flew right past it like this and the flight to my left went right over the top of them. We never fired anything until we hit our targets, that was our instructions. But that was interesting to see four P38's go *'fwth, fwth, fwth'* and the people on the ship just surprised. That was what we wanted – the element of surprise. We came across the airfield and my buddy Urban Francis Stahl happened to be lined up with a group of JU88 bombers and he shot holes in four of them. I was one of the unlucky guys, I didn't get any...all I saw in front of me was a road, here was a big truck with people in it – a military truck so I disabled it and next was an anti-aircraft battery – just right in line, we were not to turn. You take what's in front of you and let somebody else take what's to the side of you. Anyway this anti-aircraft battery was firing and most of them were going behind our boys but he was right in my gun sights and I just pulled the trigger on the cannon and it stopped firing, let's just put it that way – it stopped firing. Then there's one airplane right in front of me and I took it out with a long burst of machine gun fire and then we were heading home over the mountains. We did lose some airplanes. According to verbal reports of the bombers which came in after we had gone across they said there was over 80 aircraft or other vehicles on fire from our strafing run. So we did some good damage to their fighting capabilities.

Geoff: Were you there for the invasion of Salerno?

Heber: Yes.

Geoff: Tell us about that. What did you see from the air?

Heber: I just saw barges going in and our people running up and down the line. I never got into a dogfight that day, not one. The next day, the 9th of September was my last fighter mission and I just went up and flew top cover over the beach. No enemy fighters came after me.

Geoff: So you were supposed to fly 50 missions before you could go home. How did that turn out?

Heber: Well I don't remember volunteering for more but evidently I did because a few weeks ago I was going through my Flight Form Five (that's the official Air Force record of our flying) and I counted down the number of missions where it had said "*combat*" on the record and I counted 64 combats.

Geoff: So 64 missions?

Heber: Yeah.

Geoff: Are there any other memorable dogfights or missions that we'd love to hear about?

Heber: There were some. Well I told you about the Sicily invasion and the one over Naples...I've got a little bit of a humorous one. We escorted B25 Mitchell bombers to Villacidro A rodrome in Sardinia and one of those missions a couple of the B25's got out of their formation and was off to the side and Richard and I happened to be flying each others wing (my brother was on my wing) so we swung over like this and off to the side of them to give fighter cover and just as we got over here and rolled out flat a flack burst from down below hit right between the two airplanes and both of them exploded just like that. It was spectacular but I felt terrible! My thoughts were with all of the crew on those airplanes and that was the only loss that day but it was a terrible one for the guys involved in it – the whole crews, both of those crews – the airplanes just blew up and down they went. The next time we went out there we didn't get much opposition – fighters or anti-aircraft and on the way back my brother Richards' mic button was stuck and when your mic button is stuck it's transmitting you see and you don't know that its stuck because you don't hear anybody calling you because your radio is on to transmit. And he was flying back singing "*I'll take you home again Kathleen*" – can you imagine that? A whole song and when we got back to the intelligence debriefing they said "*okay, who's mic button was stuck?*" and nobody spoke up because you don't know if your mic button is stuck except it's awful quite because nobody's talking on the radio and we

didn't talk much anyway because of radio silence. And finally he said "*okay – who knows how to sing I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen?*" And my brother just blushed all over the place and everybody had a big laugh about that.

Geoff: After you finished your last mission how did you get home?

Heber: Oh on my last mission I landed at one of the Aérodomes at Sicily that we had moved to and a day or two later (it must have been longer than that because it took me from the 9th of September when I finished my last combat mission till the 28th of September to get to Miami) anyway a Gooney Bird flew me from there to Algiers and then from there to Casablanca and then from there clear down to Dakar West Africa and from there we were picked up by a C54 (four engine joby) and all the way across the Atlantic to (what's the place in Brazil? Someday I'll remember it) clear across non-stop to Brazil and we were there one night and then the same airplane to British Guyana, we landed there and refueled and on up to Puerto Rico to refuel again and then on into Miami. It was interesting.

Geoff: Why was that?

Heber: Because it was slow and long and boring! When you're used to cruising in fighters at 300 miles an hour or better and you're sitting in an old prop-driven cruising along at 150 it's boring!

Geoff: So what was it like to get back to the United States?

Heber: It was great! It was like going home. My family and I used to come home on leave from the various military bases where we were assigned after and when we crossed the border into Utah we'd all say "*YEAH!*" It feels like home. I think you can understand it but it's hard to describe. It's a feeling of '*I'm home*' and it just feels good all the way up the highway of Utah.

Geoff: Did you have a nice homecoming when you got back to Garland?

Heber: Yeah I went to church and everybody knew me.

Geoff: Were you wearing your uniform?

Heber: No. I don't recall that I did.

Geoff: What do you think about the war now? When you look back on it all, it's an extraordinary event and you were there through so much of it, what do you think of it?

Heber: We lost a lot of good people. We lost a lot of good German people and Italian people. War is a hellish thing. It defeats some individuals (I'm talking about the combat man) some men can't sleep because of their experiences. I've had dreams of some of the airplanes that I shot up and wondered. I wondered *'did he get home?'* I was always glad like the MiG I shot down in Korea – to see the pilot bail out. I knew I had done one thing, I had done my duty as a combat man and I'd shot down an enemy airplane but I'd not killed a man. Now some guys would get the killer instinct where they're not interested in that aspect but most pilots didn't. For most pilots it was airplane against airplane – me against them and to my knowledge none of our boys over there in the 82nd Fighter Group ever shot at a man in a parachute or in a dingy in the ocean. There's stories of German 109's circling a guy that's in his one-man life raft until he was picked up and then he went home. So there's good men on both sides. We hate to lose any of them.

Sally: What is the rule of conduct when a man is shot down?

Heber: Basically it was unwritten. Like I was saying this one of them just circled until the man was rescued. That's what we did when one of ours got down, we'd stay until our fuel was low and then we'd fly back and designate the point where he could be picked up. I suppose there were German pilots that shot at men in a raft. I had a little primary class ask me one day, I was talking to them about the war and shooting down airplanes and one of the boys said *"did you go shoot him in his parachute?"* and I said *"no! That would be*

murder.” Now that’s my feelings about it and I’m sure many of our other pilots felt the same way. We didn’t shoot a defenseless man floating down in a parachute and they (to a large degree) didn’t either. All I know is hearsay, I don’t know of any German pilot shooting up a man floating down in a parachute to my experience and that’s all I can tell you.

Geoff: How do you actually shoot the guns on a fighter and how is it arranged?

Heber: On a fighter aircraft your guns are mounted to the airframe and you aim the gun by aiming your airplane. You’ve got a gun sight in your airplane and that points to where your nose is pointing. The P38 had a wheel in it for ailerons and the stick came back like this, it came over the side like so and this is the elevator and the rudders are down here at your feet. So you’re rolling her up like this and you get on somebody and you get your gun sight leading him (you do it in less time than I’m telling it) and you pull the trigger. On the P38 the trigger was here, the cannon button was here. But some of our crew chiefs took the wires apart here and put them all on the trigger button so when you pulled the trigger everything was going out the front – the machine guns and cannon.

Geoff: How many rounds did your machine guns and cannon hold? Was it very much?

Heber: I think the cannon held 90 or 120 rounds and the machine guns were in the 100’s.

Geoff: That’s still not a lot is it?

Heber: It’s not a lot, you can run out. I had several times when I came back empty of ammo like the one I told you about.

Geoff: Tell us about Richard coming home.

Heber: Let me tell you about the day he went down. They had escorted bombers to Naples and this was on the 20th of August before the invasion of Italy at Salerno and we

were still knocking out railroad yards. A bunch of enemy fighters came up and Richards flight was one of these – a weak link because his number three man's nose gear door didn't close and although I heard on the radio and Richard called him on the radio and told him to go back so that the spares could fill in and give him a flight of four – the man didn't until he crossed the bomb line then he turned around and went back. That way he got a combat mission credit but it left a two-man flight up there and the enemy likes a weak flight and anybody would. But he had shot up a 109 and a Focke-Wulf 190 and an ME109 was making a head-on pass at him and this is in the 82nd Fighter Group history where his wingman said he was terrified but he couldn't see all the fighters that were being called out on the radio. Well this 109 made a head-on pass at Richard's airplane and Richard fired the whole works and blew the right wing off from the 109 and parts of it tore a hole in his airplane and set it on fire. So he had to bail out, there's no fire extinguisher system on his fighter. So he spent 22 months in a German prison camp. The Italians picked him up and turned him over to the Germans. The Italians had surrendered a day or two before or after that (I don't remember the exact date) but if you got picked up by the right Italians they'd save you and protect you but if you got picked up by the other ones they'd turn you over to the Germans and they shipped him to Germany.

Geoff: That must have been awful for you.

Heber: That was a sad experience.

Geoff: Because you still had to fly missions knowing that your brother was down there.

Heber: I think most fighter pilots don't spend much time thinking. I've been asked if I wasn't scared when I went up – no I was too busy! Did I worry about my brother Richard when I was flying when we weren't together? – No. But when we were together I was watching for him when he was on my wing or I was on his wing. Just the same as I would any other fighter pilot – it was the same. And what was it like when he came back? He came back and when I met him I grabbed him (tears) by the shoulders like this

and I said “*Richard are you all right?*” and he said “*Yep, I’m fine*” and I said “*well what’s that scar on your chin there?*” and he said “*well when I bailed out my parachute buckle was a little bit loose and it snapped up and cut my chin*” and we had a little bit of a laugh. There’s an emotional part there and there’s a long story behind it why it’s so emotional and I’ll tell that if you wish. I was flying as an instructor pilot at Dagget as fighter gunnery in the 4th Air Force and the two of us got in the P38 (piggybacked where the guy in the back seat sits with a chest pack parachute and he’s leaning over your shoulder like so) and you’ve got on a backpack that just moves you a little farther forward and gives him a little more room but you’ve still got room enough where you can pull the stick back enough to get airborne. Well I took him up in a piggyback and we changed seats – I scooted over and unbuckled my parachute and he scooted over and unbuckled his and he slid around in the front seat so he could fly the P38 one more time. Then we scooted back around and I landed it. Pilots do some fun things sometimes and that was fun. I wouldn’t recommend it for everybody.

Sally: Can you tell us the story again how you heard about the war and tell us what you knew about Hitler at that time? How old were you when that happened?

Heber: I would have been 16 or 17. I knew what was going on because he had invaded Austria, he tried to invade Britain, he invaded Poland with the help of the Russians – what was to stop him? He’s just like a gangster that goes and robs a bank. He thought ‘*oh hey, this is neat stuff! I get money for this!*’ I can tell you one other thing why I knew there was going to be a war and why I was going to be in it...you’ve been to Garland, you’ve seen the tabernacle there and I was sitting in the balcony there as a 17 or 18 year old boy (sitting in the aisle not in a bench) and the visiting General Authority of the LDS Church was talking. Now I don’t think we were making a lot of noise or chattering or being unruly, we were just sitting there and all of a sudden he stopped talking and it got awful quiet and he took his hand and he pointed his finger at us boys right up there and he says “*there’s going to be a war and you boys sitting right there are going to fight it.*” I don’t remember anything else that he said during that meeting but I do remember that. It made an impression on me and whether this gets edited out its up to

you but when we finished our fighter training at flying school and had our wings we had leave at home for a few days (this is before I went to Tallahassee Florida) and the Bishop of our ward asked us to stand and bare our testimonies and we had been taught the Mormon LDS philosophy about alcohol and tobacco and we had committed ourselves to live it and when it was my turn I stood up and I talked a moment or two and then I said *“we’ve kept the word-of-wisdom and we shall go and return unharmed by the enemy”* and when I sat down I said to my brother Richard *“why did I say that? How can I know that? I don’t know that, it just came out of my mouth.”* And he said *“don’t worry about it it’s true”* and that’s why when we embraced and said *“are you all right?”* was so emotional for me (tears). Of all the combat missions that we flew, never did I worry about him and he didn’t worry about me. We were too busy doing our jobs. We had three sets of brothers in our 82nd Fighter Group. There was a set of Hattendorf twins (I understand they were twins, I never met them) and another set of brothers in the other fighter squadron and my brother Richard and I in the 97th. So we knew how it felt.

Geoff: In Korea you flew an F86 and shot down a MiG there?

Heber: Shot down a MiG, yeah. The only MiG that I got up with on the south side of the Yellow River.

Geoff: You once told me that you were gifted as a flyer, you had a natural ability to do some things and you felt pretty lucky about that, can you tell us a little bit about that?

Heber: Oh I don’t know that I was gifted, I just loved flying!

Geoff: Well you once told me that you could do certain things that other pilots couldn’t do physically.

Heber: Oh, basically it comes from running on the high school track team you know. I did a stupid thing or two in the airplane that other pilots didn’t get away with and that may have been because of that promise.

Geoff: Is there something we've missed that you feel strongly about?

Heber: The more we sweat in peace the less we bleed in war – some interesting individual said. Just between the few of us, there was a lot of experiences you have that gives you (or a person) the feeling that we're all God's children and as much as it hurts to see one person go it seems useless to see them taken in war. And yet I've seen the aftermath of war where people are blessed because of what the Americans did. I can tell you about a young man who was a 13 year old in Germany when the Berlin airlift was taking place and he was amazed about these Americans who just a year or so before were fighting our people and now they were feeding us and they were giving their lives and dying in airplanes in bad weather to help us. And he said "*we're no longer the hated enemy, we are loved by those who we can truly call our friends*". His mother eventually married an American soldier, came to America and do you know how he signed the letter that he sent to me? Wolfgang A. Samuel – Colonel, United States Air Force (retired). I used his letter in a Memorial Day presentation. "*Not the ugly Americans*" he said, "*they're the beautiful Americans*".

Geoff: So he joined the Air Force?

Heber: Yeah. He came to America, joined the Air Force, went up through the ranks, made Colonel and retired an American citizen.

Geoff: Thank you very much!