

Interview of Ralph P. Holding.

Interviewer: First of all, just give us your name.

Ralph Holding: Ralph P. Holding.

Interviewer: And you were born where?

Ralph Holding: In Salt Lake City in 1922.

Interviewer: All right, and tell us about how you got into the service.

Ralph Holding: My friend Harold Poole enlisted in June of 19 -- would have been 1941 with the idea that he thought they were going to get into the war. The United States was not in at that time. Harold was a close friend of mine, and it was at Hamilton Field and then he shipped out into the Philippines and he was in the 20th Pursuit Squadron. I had -- my folks managed the Hillcrest Apartments. There was a colonel that was a squadron commander of the 88th Reconnaissance Squadron and, uh, he was looking to rent an apartment. His name was Newton Longfellow. And I had an occasion to meet him and I enlisted right in that 88th Reconnaissance Squadron, which was a long-range heavy bombardment reconnaissance squadron at Fort Douglas.

Interviewer: And you enlisted to become a what?

Ralph Holding: Just to become an airman in the Army Air Corps. And, later that year, I went to airplane and engine mechanics school at Glendale, California. Curtiss Wright Tech. And graduated from there and came back to Salt Lake in June of 1941 and in September, let's see. It would have been November we received instructions; secret orders that we were going to go overseas, and the code name was "plum." We didn't know it at the time, but that was

the Philippines. Transported us from Salt Lake to Angel Island in the San Francisco bay. And I can remember telling a friend of mine, we saw this Chinese writing on this immigration port, these buildings. And I said, "Wouldn't it be funny if we ended up in China?" Well, we sailed out from under the Golden Gate Bridge on November 20th of 1941, and were in Hawaii on the 30th of November just overnight to take on some water and we were on the USS Republic. On the 6th of December, we crossed the equator and had shellback and pollywog ceremonies, and the following day, it was announced, "Here the state of war exists between Japan and the United States. Good luck, you're on your own." And that was quite a shock.

Interviewer: How did you feel at that moment?

Ralph Holding: I'll tell ya, it was a new experience. The Pensacola signaled our ship and said at night, if they see a light, they wouldn't order it out, they would shoot it out. And they meant business. We were zigzagging and we finally got into Suva Fiji islands, and Fiji was part of the British Commonwealth, and they had a band there playing "Stars and Stripes forever." And it was so good to see land and take on water and here are these big Fijians had white skirts on that look like the bottoms had been cut with pinking shears. And, the -- our stay there was very short. Ended up over going up the Brisbane River, Brisbane, Australia. And we camped on Ascot Race Track in tents and the funny thing was, about 4:30 in the morning, you hear all these horses running around the track, and we were not used to that. Then we went to a place called Amberley Field and we were assembling A-24 dive bombers and P-40s that were going to be used up in Java. And the Japanese took one of the islands that the P-40s were using to get up to Java and they flew the P-40s over to Perth, Australia; and loaded them on to Langley. And in the meantime, I went by train from Brisbane to Sydney to Melbourne and got on a ship called the Holbrook and we went around the bottom of Australia and went in the

Fremantle, which is the Port of Perth, and they loaded 32 P-40s onto Langley, which was the first aircraft carrier the Navy had. It was obsolete and they made it into a seaplane tender, and they were in convoy and it was called MI 5 and there was the Holbrook and Langley and we had the cruiser, Houston with us.

Interviewer: Which ship were you on?

Ralph Holding: Excuse me. I was on the Holbrook. It wasn't the Houston; it was the Phoenix was our escort. We're steaming toward Java and the Navy had made a commitment they would stay with the Dutch at the last minute. The Langley sailed into Java and we went over into Colombo, "Sri Lan." The Langley was sunk with the 32 P-40s on it, and, uh, then we went on up to Karachi, India.

Interviewer: Did you see the Langley get sunk?

Ralph Holding: No, it was, uh, sunk the day after it left our convoy.

Interviewer: Did you see any Japanese aircraft on board voyage?

Ralph Holding: No. We were fortunate not to. The other thing is that when we got to Karachi, India, that was March 12th of 1942, that was what you call a cultural shock. There are these Victorian coaches, and camels, and native Indians, the betel nut -- it's an entirely different world, like I said. It was a culture shock. We were out of the place called Malir Cantonment and it was a British training grounds. And then we moved back to what they called their main airport. And that was a dirigible hangar called the R 101, and that crashed and never used that hangar, but that was so big you could almost get clouds in it. We were in the Sin Desert, and, a short time later, we traveled by troop train from Karachi over to a place called Allahabad, which is on the Ganges River. It was closer to where the action was, our bombers were bombing Rangoon and over into Burma and the problem with being at Allahabad, the

monsoons were late that year, and it kept getting hotter every day. We had two fellows die of the heat, and it was reported that the temperature was about 139 in the shade. Well, I decided -- they asked for volunteers, and they didn't say where the volunteers were going to go, but I thought any place was better than Allahabad, so I volunteered and ended up in China. Kunming, China flying over the hump in a C-47 at about 18,000 feet with no oxygen and landed at Kunming, China, June 19th, 1942.

Interviewer: And what was it like when you saw that base, what was it like? Was it crude?

Ralph Holding: Well, the American voluntary group, P-40 pilots were still there. They disbanded July 4th and it was --

Interviewer: These are the famous "Flying Tigers?"

Ralph Holding: Yes and when they would come over after a combat mission and do a victory roll about three feet off the ground and then go up into an Immelman and come back and land, I'll tell ya, that would get your heart pumping. It was very primitive. There was no electricity, no refrigeration. We had a large pole and when Japanese would come in for an air raid, why, they would raise a red ball up on this flag pole if the Japanese were within about 60 miles, why, they have two red balls. And if there were three red balls, why, they were bombing you.

Interviewer: I'm sorry -- (inaudible).

Crew Member: (Inaudible), it's on this side, but I want you to put it on the left side.

Ralph Holding: The Chinese government provided our food and lodging. It was called the War Area Service Corps and they also did the guard duty. We only had about

eight or ten B-25s, and if one of them became disabled, we would scavenge parts off that to keep the others flying. That was the only bombing bombers that we had in China at the time. There was the 23rd Fighter Group came in and replaced the AVG's.

The Chinese would walk a water buffalo up to the mess hall about 9:00 and cut its throat and have it in the pan boiling and we'd be eating it at noon. So rice, eggs, and water buffalo and cabbage and, uh, it was pretty primitive. I know that I had to have some cavities filled and they had German Lutheran nuns that had been in China since about 1939 and they had a little foot treadle drill that they could drill the decay out of your teeth and put in a silver filling. As I said, it was pretty primitive.

We had quite a few bombing, air raids by the Japanese. Eshter Nault was a master tactician and he had an alert network that we usually knew when the Japanese were coming and as a crew chief, we were with the airplanes during the day doing maintenance work and if the Japanese were coming in, why the pilots were in the alert shack and they would immediately get in the airplane and take off and fly for maybe a half hour and then come back and land. Mind you, at that time in China, and for almost the entire war, everything had to be flown in as far as bombs, gas, and ammunition.

Interviewer: Where was the nearest logistics base?

Ralph P. Holding: There was a place over in Assam, India, upper India called Chubwah or Dingian and there was about 500 miles from there over to Kunming. The Japanese, the hump was the south end of the Himalaya range. You could fly over it by about 14,000,

15,000 feet elevation, but the Japanese were in there and you were flying in unarmed transports, that's why we were flying over at 18,000. The weather that you could encounter, you could have up drafts or down drafts where the airplane would go up or down maybe as much as 5,000 feet or ice and they were hauling gas into us in 50 gallon drums in C-47 airplanes. It was very primitive. They were still building, uh, some of the runways and the stands, hard stands for the B-25s and they would have about 250 Chinese pulling ropes and this, what you call a steamroller didn't have steam, but it was a huge cement roller and these Chinese would pull that. There weren't any brakes on it. If you fell down, it would go right over you. Um, some of the Tokyo Doolittle fliers that bailed out over China stayed and flew missions with the 11th Bomb Squadron, which I was in. And that was -- our squadron insignia was jigs with a spats packing a bomb. I think the original cartoon was "Bringing Up Father." We would go up to a place called Hanyang or Kweilin where the ice cream cone mountains are. And fly missions and then they were flying missions down around Hanoi and Hai Phòng. The Japanese had Vietnam at that time and, uh, so this Marion Cooper and General Chennault were master tacticians and with a small force, they could hit the Japanese where they least expected. One of the problems, weather would close in or we would run out of gasoline, only have enough to take off in case of an emergency. But, things were so primitive. After a year at Kunming, I spent a year over in Kweilin. That was -- had these ice cream cone mountains with their limestone and have huge caves in there when you were having a bomb, being bombed by the Japanese at night, why, it was nice to be able to get in those caves.

We initially were trying to save the bombers and the P-40s and the B-25s made a good team. We were flying mostly high altitude missions, air bomb and get out so as to not lose the B-25s. Later on over in Kweilin, we got into skip bombing and we were crippling the Japanese coast-wise shipping and river shipping.

Interviewer: Um, let me back up a little bit here to the flying tigers. Did you get to know any of them?

Ralph Holding: Some of them, a few of them stayed and signed on with the, with Chennault's 23rd Fighter Group and Casey Vincent and they were a great help to the new fighters, the 23rd Fighter Squadron. There was also, uh, Colonel Scott, who wrote a book called, "God is My Co-pilot." But, it -- we had confidence in the leadership.

Interviewer: I'm just asking you their personalities. Were you friends with any of them? Or was officer enlisted men thing --

Ralph Holding: Officers, enlisted men -- we didn't stand roll calls or form formations. We were there to do a job. There wasn't a lot of spit and polish and frankly when our uniforms wore out, we wore whatever we could get. We had a lot of locally made chukka boots and it was kind of a rag-tag outfit, but it was efficient. Later on in the air, we had, uh, 308th Bomb Group with B-24s come in.

Interviewer: Um, you mentioned, I've seen photos, movies of these Chinese coolies by the hundreds and hundreds. Did you get to know any -- what were your feelings about the Chinese?

Ralph Holding: Well, they're a remarkable race of people. They not only built the railroads going through the Sierra Nevada mountains but they built the Burma road by hand. You could have 50,000 to 100,000 Chinese building a runway. They built the runways up

at Chengdu, China for the B-29s in 1944. They could take large rocks and make gravel out of them, uh, how they used to make runways, they would have these large rocks, one right after the other. And then, they would take the smaller rocks and like gravel and put between them and they would use a slurry of mud or clay and pour that, it's all done by hand.

Interviewer: Did you get to know any?

Ralph P. Holding: Not really because of the language barrier. Chinese always had the philosophy, "Don't use good steel to make a nail." In their military, their soldiers -- they didn't speak English and we didn't speak much in the line of Chinese. And they would refer to these more or less as coolies, but the United States government was paying the Chinese Government to pay these runways. And the Chinese Government would contract with the Chinese -- whole villages would be building them and we didn't have a lot of -- the contract that we'd have with the Chinese was probably our house boys, mess boys in the mess hall.

Interviewer: Did any of them stand out to you?

Ralph P. Holding: Yeah, some of them had been on ships before the war and they, as in any nationality, some of them were characters. All in all, they were very trustworthy. You didn't have to worry about anything being stolen.

Interviewer: What made them characters? I'm curious, is there anything funny you can tell me about?

Ralph P. Holding: Well, Chinese have a very funny, good sense of humor. Um, I'd been out in their villages where you know, the rice patties, they plant rice one rice seedling at a time, and it is usually the women and they are in water up to their knees planting the rice and then when they harvest it, it's all done by hand. The other thing is that the plot of ground that they have, they bury their ancestors, so to speak, in mounds. They don't put them in

the ground, they put them above the ground because they're flooding the rice patties. Well, sometimes they've been farming that land, China, for 10,000 years. And the arable farm land gets smaller and smaller. But, uh, it's hard to tell a difference between a funeral procession and a wedding procession. They set off a lot of fire crackers and they burn money and a lot of music and what-have-you.

Interviewer: Now, your job every day, you're a crew chief?

Ralph Holding: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell us what you had to do. You didn't do a lot of combat flying, your job was to make sure those planes got in the air.

Ralph Holding: That's exactly right.

Interviewer: So tell us your daily responsibilities and tell us about some of the men that were under you.

Ralph Holding: Well, we had what you call a very -- the whole squadron for about 10 B-25s, pilots and crews and ground crew. Orderly room, first sergeant, operations clerk, probably about 120 people. And, engine changes -- I had an occasion where on a low-level bombing run, the navigator was killed and the plane was pretty well shot up. We had to change the tanks and the Chinese at what they call their factories do a fabulous job on sheet metal. But, there again, engine changes, changing spark plugs, oil change, whatever need to be done to maintain that aircraft. Changing tires, the gravel runways would chew up the tires pretty fast.

Crew Member: Can I interrupt for one second? I always wanted to know this about the pilots in an interview and I'm sorry to interrupt. How, like if they need that plane, that same plane, what is the turn-around like? How fast are you moving?

Interviewer: A B-25 will carry about 700 gallons of gas, and they take off and land at about, as low as 70 miles an hours. That was one of the reasons they use the B-25 to bomb Tokyo as part of the Doolittle flight off of the deck of the hornet. I've got pictures of make-shift gas truck and so, you're re-fueling the planes when they come in, that's the first thing you do. You have to drain the sumps in the morning because you get condensation and you don't want to have water in the carburetor and what have you. And so, the inspections, depending on the flying hours of the airplane.

Interviewer: How fast could you turn around an airplane in an emergency?

Ralph Holding: Well, let's put it like this. If, in an emergency, usually an airplane would be ready to fly combat mission the next day, but it's possible to have two missions in a day. But, you would have to at least -- this is providing that there were no damage from flack or bullet holes or what-have-you. You would have to service it, fuel it and so forth. As a matter of fact, in some cases, we would have a huge funnel and use a chamois covering that funnel and pump the gas through that chamois to take the water out of the gas because, mind you, we're using before we develop this gas tank using a bomb bay tank, you got to make sure that you don't have water in the gas. These airplanes need 100 octane gas. And sometimes, the gas would be contaminated. Uh with that airplane, that's your responsibility. And the people that are flying in it and sometimes during one of the air raids, we would fly -- go with the airplane itself. So you don't want to have something that's not air worthy.

Interviewer: Did you go on any of those raids?

Ralph Holding: Oh, yes. I wouldn't -- I didn't fly combat missions, but sometimes when we'd have to, the Japanese were coming in to bomb our air fields, uh, why, we'd

be at the airplane and the pilot and co-pilot would be flying as an engineer and take off with the airplane and then come back.

Interviewer: Tell me about, I'm really curious. You must have had some close buddies.

Ralph Holding: Well, I -- there was a time at Kunming where we were getting ready to take off because the Japanese were coming in and we thought they were maybe 15 or 20 minutes away. The B-25 in front of us and I was standing right behind a pilot and co-pilot, the B-25 had its engines running and the props were pretty close to the ground. I thought they were kicking rocks back into our propellers and all of a sudden, I'm seeing holes appear in the airplane and the pilot cut the engine. My friend, Jim Clark, was in the airplane just in front of us, and he had the cheek of his buttocks hit with a piece of shrapnel and the pilot had a piece of shrapnel go through his heart and they cut their engines and we all bailed out of the airplanes and ran over to a ditch and another friend of mine that was, the engineering officer, William McNichols, had a piece of shrapnel cut his throat from ear to ear and a Chinese coolly held his jugular veins to keep from bleeding to death and they got him down to a hospital and he survived and a number of years later, I saw him in Las Vegas. He was an engineering officer at Nellis Air Force Base. But, it seemed as though when the Japanese had bombed our air fields, there was a Chinese village on each end of the runway. The Japanese inadvertently would hit the Chinese villages more than they would where our bullets were.

Interviewer: So you had any other close buddies? You mention Jim Clark? What made them a buddy of yours?

Ralph Holding: Well, we had left the states together and also, uh, another friend of mine was Ken Faulkner. Now, he was the first sergeant and was with us in China as the

first sergeant of the 11th Bomb Squadron. The -- I think it was the 74th Fighter Group, P-40 outfit. They didn't have an adjutant and so, Ken received a direct commission and became their adjutant and another friend of mine was a Frank Wigel and he became the first sergeant. Now, most of the mechanics and the ground crewman were -- we were out of the 7th Bomb Group in India. And we had been together in Salt Lake City and were together in China and so we were rather close-knit group.

Interviewer: Any of these other fellows from Salt Lake?

Ralph Holding: Ken Faulkner was from Salt Lake. I was a poor writer and I didn't write to my mother as often as I should have, and Ken, he'd type a letter to his mother and tell her to call mine and tell her that I was all right. And I think I said -- I wrote her on some Chinese rice paper, due to the shortage of paper in China (inaudible). But, when they used to talk about oil for the lamps of China, that's -- we didn't have any electricity in our housing. They were just charcoal stoves, and when I say very primitive --

Interviewer: I'm curious, here you are in the middle of China. You can't get further away than you could possibly be there from what you think is civilization. What would you and your buddies talk about?

Ralph Holding: Food and home. When I left China, I weighed 109 pounds. It wasn't -- I'll tell ya, we were not as bad off as the POW's because we could have all we wanted to eat, but we got to the point there was not a lot of food value. On occasions, we would go into town and buy a meal. The military is supposed to pay you in the coin of the realm, and initially in Kunming, they were paying us in Chinese money and the official rate was 20 to one, and the unofficial rate was 200 to one. And after about four months, they changed and started paying us in greenbacks and American money. But, we didn't have any -- any ice cream or any milk

products. It was strictly -- the peach jam in the mess hall was working and you'd see little bubbles. You could get peanut butter. The rice was rice bread, but it was always soggy, so they would toast it over a charcoal fire and, it -- the little eggs were kind of Pollock eggs. You could have all you wanted to eat, but you didn't have much of an appetite for it.

Interviewer: You must have had some friends that didn't come back. They'd go on a bombing mission and didn't come back.

Ralph Holding: Yes, it's kind of an empty feeling. As I said earlier, I had a navigator that had about three inches of his spine shot off and he navigated them back into our base and blood all over and the airplane was out of commission for about 30 days after that. And, some of the fellows that I would be bunking with in the same room, the flight crews and the ground crews, we intermingled and some of our fellows, Carl May, they were armors and then they decided to fly combat as gunners. Um, it leaves an empty feeling in the pit of your stomach. You know you're not going to see them again. A whole plane goes down and it's, uh, I guess that's part of the cost of war. You make good friends and then you lose some. But, I felt most fortunate after spending two years in China. A lot of rice patties and a lot of malaria and what-have-you. I was lucky enough never to have malaria. There's --

Crew Member: Can I interrupt for a sec? When you're sharing your bunker with all these different people and their roles and jobs, was there a general respect -- everybody respected each other and knew you were linked in this big --

Ralph Holding: It really was a team operation. In other words, the flight crews had their job to do, the ground crews had their job to do, it was -- there was no class distinction or anything of that nature. It was very close-knit organization. Like I said, it was not a spit and polish. It was work and you did whatever was needed, as long as it took.

Interviewer: At the time, how did you feel about the Japanese?

Ralph P. Holding: Well, they were pretty hated. They had been fighting in China, as a matter of fact. They honed their war skills in China. The rape of Nanking, they were bombing Chungking indiscriminately for months and months, it was one of the reasons that they had the American voluntary group was to off-set that and protect Chungking. But at that time, the Burma road was open and the Japanese, they in the early days of the war, the Japanese were winning on all fronts. Our squadron flew in Java and that was a very short campaign.

Interviewer: One thing we like to do is, part of our audience are people that were born within the last 40 years have no idea how we felt about Japan. Try and take us back in time in what, here you are. You are Americans. How did you feel about America, and how did you feel about Japan in that context?

Ralph Holding: Well, initially, I think America underestimated the Japanese. I think that we thought we were quite superior in technology and Japanese had a lot of plastic toys and I don't think we took them real seriously, but --

Interviewer: (Inaudible).

Ralph Holding: -- after Pearl Harbor, I think we had, I'll call it a new respect and a fear. We knew they were a lot better than what we had anticipated. I think we thought they were very ruthless. And they, Chinese were really -- we were relying on the Chinese Army to protect our bases in the eastern part of China over at Kweilin and so forth. And, they -- the Chinese Army was not well trained or well equipped. That was one of the problems that we had, Chennault was an Air Force General and Stilwell, he used to say, "This war will be won by the men in the trenches." And Chennault would say, "Where are the men in the trenches?" And, uh, when the Japanese really made a concerted effort to go up into an area in what they called

Changsha where there was a rice bowl and the Chinese would grow the rice and the Japanese would harvest it for them, so to speak. Why, the Chinese Army just could not, were not capable. The Japanese would wear themselves out fighting the Chinese, but --

Interviewer: Here you are on the ground sending these planes out. Did you ever have any doubts that the United States would win the war?

Ralph Holding: Well, frankly, we didn't at the time we were in China and we were over there right from the, you might say, we had been in overseas from the beginning. There wasn't any rotation plan. We didn't know how long the war would last, and the combat crews were rotated after so many missions, but the ground crews -- there was no program set up for that and frankly, I think in a theatre of operation, you would probably not have the big picture, you just know what's going on in your little area. And --

Interviewer: So what did you think the big picture in your area, what did you think was going on? Did you think we were winning?

Ralph Holding: We thought we were keeping the Japanese -- my, the Air Force that we had in China kept getting larger. We had some P-51s come in. Tom Harmon was there with a squadron of P-38s. They were so cocky and over confident that the Japanese zero shot a lot of them down and we were starting to get more material and more airplanes and I think that the Japanese, toward in 1944 were hurting. Um, it, however, the Japanese still had enough punch where they took most of the eastern Air Force bases in China and we had, I think, one of the slogans was, "Fire and Fall Back." They fell back to Kunming about that time was when I left China in June of 1944. But, uh, they were trying to train some of the Chinese to, uh, as a Chinese American composite wing and the things were looking better. When they -- the B-29s, came in, the problem with the B-29s in China, they used so much fuel it was not practical to keep

them there. They finally flew them out, they did bomb Japan from China, but they flew over to Tinian on an island where they could bring in a tanker to support the fuel requirements of the B-29s.

Interviewer: So, when did you head home?

Ralph Holding: It would have been, I headed back to Karachi, India, left China about June of 1944 and was over in Karachi and they were training the Chinese pilots in some B-25s, Chinese American operational training unit. And I would have been there for a couple of months, and then went to Bombay and shipped out from Bombay and returned back to the states in September of 1944.

Interviewer: So, how was the United States different when you went back?

Ralph Holding: Well, it, I'll tell ya, I couldn't say how much different it was. But it looked so good. You can't imagine -- I've often said, whether it be in India or in China that an average American is living like a Maharajah or a wealthy person. We don't know how good we had it in the United States. Talk about kiss the ground -- my mother was trying to fatten me up. And the food was so rich, I couldn't eat very much of it. But after returning to the United States, I was over in Rapid City, South Dakota for the winter. And mind you, 40 mile an hour wind and 40 below, you could put a coke between the window and the storm window. It would freeze solid for in about 30 minutes. And, in May of 45, I was down in Alexandria, Louisiana in a B-29 outfit. And when I had an opportunity to get a discharge from the military, I was sent back to Fort Douglas where I started from, and that was September of 1945.

Interviewer: Here we are right here, right where you left.

Ralph Holding: And Salt Lake City is home.

Interviewer: Could you still fix a B-25 today?

Ralph Holding: The Confederate Air Force, they have a few B-25s, and there's one at Hill Field I'd look at with a little nostalgia. It's 1700 -- they have two 1700 horse power engines. We were maintaining those with a Kennedy kit and a step ladder in China. I've been away from it for over 60 years. I think at this stage of the game, I just have to look at it and admire it.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that plane?

Ralph Holding: I think they did a wonderful job. They were made by North American Aviation Corporation. I see the new jets at Hill Field. It's a different war, a different time of technology. Refueling in the air and what have you, lots of changes.

Interviewer: I would love to hear your feelings when you look at that plane?

Ralph Holding: When I see a B-25, it takes me back to China and I have a rush of memories. It was a work horse. It did the job, it was a rugged airplane. And it could be maintained in the field with very little sophistication, so to speak.

Interviewer: You know, I was in special forces. I was in the paratroop outfit. And I remember the feelings about, what comes clearest to me is this friends and that's what I miss most of all. I don't necessarily miss the military, I miss my friends. Do you miss any of your friends?

Ralph Holding: I belonged to the 7th Bomb Group and they had an organization and reunion and also to the 14th Air Force Association, but it's reached a point where we don't have any more reunions of my friends that I knew in China, I think there's only about three or four left. And I was one of the youngest, and the same thing at 87 years old, being the youngest in China, a lot of them are gone. I had Doug Radney as a gunner, he flew on the Tokyo Doolittle mission flight. There was Cleave Bingham was a B-25 pilot from Spanish Fork,

he's gone. My friend Ken Faulkner's gone. Frank Wigel, Visberg, I'll tell ya. There's not many left. And it's a little disheartening at times. But, I just feel blessed that and most fortunate probably the prayers of my mother and at the time I kind of think that it was a time in my life where it was a great adventure. And, if I had to do it over again, it would be -- I'm a little older and a little wiser and I think I would be more concerned about my survival. At that time, it was a different world.

Interviewer: And how do you, if there's one thing that you like -- we're here for the record of World War II. All of us feel very strongly that we want people never to forget and understand what happened. What would you like people to remember about World War II from your point of view?

Ralph Holding: I think that the military was kind of like an insurance policy, and we didn't have as much as we should have had. I think we under estimated the potential enemy, we overestimated our own abilities. And I think that that military at that time bought a time where our country was able to gear up and I think that we need to be ever vigilant and freedom doesn't come without a price. And I respect the people that fought in World War I and in II and it's, you have to have commitment and dedication. I'm hopeful of going this September to Washington, D.C. to see the World War II memorial on the mall as a tribute to World War II. But, it's a shame that some of the younger generation don't have an appreciation for World War II and the sacrifices that were made.

Crew Member: Why do you think that is?

Ralph Holding: Somewhat easy living and high-tech and ipods and cell phones and cars and, you know, it's a not a lot of -- you don't have to work too hard. It's a different lifestyle than it used to be.

Interviewer: One more thing, I don't want to be grisly here, but I have talked to other crew chiefs, and they've talked to me about terribly wounded or died inside and they had that job of repairing that aircraft and cleaning that out. You had that experience.

Ralph Holding: This particular mission that they, the flight went out on a -- I had an airplane that was called "Obliterators Excuse Please." 41-12506 was the serial number of that airplane. And it was made for the Dutch. It was flash riveted and it flew faster than any other airplane in the squadron. And the squadron commander liked to fly it. But they were going out on a high altitude bombing mission, and the clouds closed in on the target, and so they came back and went down into Indochina on a low-level bombing mission. And they made a big mistake. They did not re-fuse, in other words, they had fuses that were instantaneous on 500 pound bombs and what happened is they went in low-level over a Japanese truck compound and supply depot. And when you drop the bomb, if you're flying at, say, 200 miles an hour, and you release the bomb, the bomb is going forward at 200 miles an hour, and it explodes right underneath the airplane. And that's between, we don't know whether it was a bomb fragment or part of a truck or what it was, but that came up and damaged the airplane, and the navigator's well on a B-25 is behind the pilot and co-pilot. And as I said previously, it took about three inches off of his spine. He navigated the airplane back to base and died and, the airplane was badly shot up. Had to drop the wing tanks, blood all over in that area, and I had a Chinese crew doing the sheet metal work, but the -- you get attached to the airplanes and to the navigator, I think his name was Hill. And it's a loss, you know? Every life is so important. There's no replacement. You can get new people come in and I know that there's a void and somebody comes in. You may make friends with them, but I notice our original group that was in China, especially we'd been together from Salt Lake and you just have an attachment to your friends. I

don't know how to describe it, but it affects you greatly. It isn't something that's impersonal. And especially when our plane doesn't come back and you've got a half a dozen crew members and they're gone and, I just -- there's not a lot of mud and dirt like the infantry has, but you still lose your buddies.

Interviewer: What I wanted to ask you was, also, what's it like to -- tell us what it's like, Kunming. It sounds so exotic. What's it like when you're smelling and hearing and seeing?

Ralph Holding: I'll tell ya, Kunming China was, there used to be a railroad between Hanoi and Kunming, it was called French Indochina. But, they would go up there for the summer and there's a huge lake and the elevation of Kunming is about 6,000 feet. And, I'd been in villages that I don't think they ever have seen a white person before. And talk about primitive. Most of the food is open air, no refrigeration, they keep it alive till their ready to eat it. And (inaudible) has these glass tubes, and they would maybe have a snake in one or a rat or something and another and they were still, if you had a stomach ache, the bloodletting, let the bad blood out. And the (inaudible) would sell to the Chinese a small amount of the fluid in there. Also, the P-40 or B-25, sometimes when they hit and the sun is on them, the over flow gas drips out and I seen Chinese that had big ulcer sores on their legs and the only thing they've got for a bandage is maybe a leaf and they think that that, they take that leaf off and let that gasoline run into that sore that that was some type of medicine. But the sewers are open, at night it's smoky. The odors, everybody's in the street. There were rickshaws. I've sometimes wanted to go back to China, but my wife didn't care much to travel. It was primitive, very primitive.

Interviewer: What did the Chinese think of you? You're American going through the streets, you're an oddity, what did the Chinese think about you?

Ralph Holding: Sometimes you'd be in a town and a big crowd would be around you. Sometimes we'd carry our side arms, 45 automatic. But the best thing you could do is if there was a big crowd of Chinese around you, tell a joke and then laugh and the Chinese would start laughing with you and then you got out in a hurry. I don't know that they knew what we were laughing about, but it was a good laugh. The problem is that there's so many of them that if you were being attacked and you shot a half a dozen of them, there'd still be 100 of them there. Generally speaking, Chinese are very friendly. However, you could be walking along a road and you never know, you might run into a Chinese fellow that could speak five languages. The other thing is, they had the death penalty on thieves and if you lost something, you could go into town and you probably find it in the thieves' market and you could buy it back or if they caught somebody stealing something, they used to tie their hands behind their back and take them out to the field and shoot them in the back of the head and leave their body there. The next day, all the clothes were stripped off. A merchant, if he had a supply of food, cans or whatever, he would only sell enough to get by because the inflation was so great, it was better to keep the product than it was to sell it because the money didn't inflate, in other words, the product was worth more as time went by. And it was remarkable how the Chinese existed. Kunming is more of an agricultural area. There were, I think probably some opium dens that smelled like it. I never tried it myself.

Interviewer: What was the population of Kunming, do you remember?

Millions?

Ralph P. Holding: I can't remember, it went from a small town to, mind you, the Japanese had the entire coast of China and the, a lot of the population would migrate inland. Kunming being the end of the Burma road and then what happened is, the Japanese started to

come up the Burma road and the gorge there, they were stopped. The AVG's machine gunned them, strafed them, and as far as getting anything from India, everything had to be flown in. Bombs, gas, ammunition, mail, medical supplies, and that's why it was not practical to haul in food and what-have-you. You were living off the land.

Elizabeth: I want him to describe what it was like to fly over the hump.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. You flew 18,000 feet?

Ralph Holding: Well, these were C-47s, and they're an old work horse of the Army Air Corps. And I think I was at a place called Dinjan, which was an air field on the India side and I can remember staying there over night and I thought the mountains -- what I thought were the mountains were only foothills, and they were higher than our mountains all around Salt Lake. And, flying over the hump at 18,000 feet, you're on the south end of the Himalaya range. You're still quite a long ways from Everest, but you're cold, the bucket seats, no oxygen.

Crew Member: Can you look at --

Interviewer: Did you feel woozy?

Ralph Holding: Yes, light-headed. It, like I said, it's about 500 mile flight. It's like flying from Salt Lake, maybe to Denver. But, it was unknown. You don't know exactly where you're going or how long the flight's going to last, and there's all kinds of cargo and you're just more cargo. And, then when you get on the China side and you start letting down and there's that huge lake and it's cool after being in India where it's 139 in the shade, Kunming was delightful as far as the weather goes. They have about five crops that they can plant, but it's like flying into the unknown. Kind of a Shangri-La deal.

Elizabeth: Did you get turbulence like flying into Salt Lake, you do.

Ralph Holding: The hump itself just depending on the monsoon and the wind conditions that you can have 200 mile an hour headwinds, and you're really flying backwards because the plane is only flying 165 miles forward and it's got a 200 mile an hour head wind. Or some of the planes, mind you, with 55 gallon drums of gas loaded in that whole airplane, and you have an up draft or a down draft of 5,000 feet. You can imagine, and then, icing conditions. They refer to the hump as the aluminum trail, and if you happen to go down over the hump on the India side on Naga hills, head hunters, it might take you 30 days if you're lucky to walk out.

Interviewer: You said, tell us about the aluminum trail. Why did they name it "The Aluminum Trail?"

Ralph Holding: That many airplanes went down. In other words, that's why they called it the aluminum trail, the airplanes themselves were made of aluminum, but they were losing -- until late of 1944, we had the C-46 was a kind of an over-sized transport and when they rushed them into operation, and they had a lot of fires, it was a lot larger airplane than the C-47. And, there again, the demand for freight, in other words, initially we had the 11th Bomb Squadron and the 23rd Fighter Group, and then we got the 308th Bomb Squadron with B-24 and then we had some P-51s and P-38 outfits and the more airplanes that we had in China, the greater the demand for fuel and supplies that were bombs and initially, we were using French and German artillery shells for bombs. And they were modified, fit in a B-25 bomb bay rack. But the demand, and so they started what they call the, "Air Transport Command." They were flying in bad weather. Initially, they didn't fly in bad weather as much as they -- but the demand for transport or tonnage. And then finally, they got a pipeline from India to China in early part of 1945. But, that's why things were so primitive.

Interviewer: You talked about the Ledo Road. Tell us about the Ledo Road.

Ralph Holding: The Ledo Road was connected to the the Burma Road. It was, Stilwell had this engineering group, and they had bulldozers and they were building a road to connect to the Burma Road. And it was sometimes referred to as the "Ledo-Stilwell" road. There were a lot of colored troops, and now, the ship that I came back on, those fellows had been in the jungle, and they were, I don't want to stereotype them, but some of them had been in the jungle and were psychos, some were general court-martial prisoners, and the ship that I came back on, they had that completely fenced because some of these fellows would jump over board. I mean, they were not stabile. And I think they were up -- then there were also Merrill's Marauders that landed in the back of the Japanese lines that were up around Michinao in the jungle and they were being supplied by air lift, and Edwin Gates and Merrill's Marauders and Stilwell, when he took Michinao was so desperate for troops, these troops had been in the jungle fighting the Japanese and what-have-you and were trying to recuperate in the hospital and Stilwell, if they could walk, why, he was -- had them up in the line fighting the Japanese.

Interviewer: Well, you guys have any questions?

Elizabeth: I wanted to know, any sharing of experiences in the war?

Ralph Holding: Not a lot. It wasn't that I didn't think they wanted to hear it, and I'm referring now mostly to my relatives at the time.

Crew Member: Ralph, would you walk around and do your (inaudible) thinking about experiences for a long time? And you can look at Jeff.

Ralph Holding: You'll have to say that again.

Crew Member: Did you go throughout your young adulthood creating your life and think about the war often?

Ralph Holding: Well, I was -- when I came back to Salt Lake, and this was in September of 1944, I was still in the military and I was on a 30-day furlough and I reported to Fort Douglas and at the end of the 30 days, there weren't -- I didn't have many friends that were in Salt Lake. Most of them were in the military. And so, frankly, I was, it was so good to be home.

Interviewer: I guess what she's asking, as you got past the war, the war is well over, in the late 40's and 50's, did you think about it?

Ralph Holding: After I got out of the service in 1945, I kept in touch with a number of my war buddies. One of the commanding officers, Allen P. Forsith lived up in Washington and Jim Clark had lived in North Carolina, Frank Wigle lived in Oroville, California. We would see these people in -- we had a reunion in Reno, Nevada. One in Portland, one in Colorado Springs, various places. And so we, we had kind of a networking of our own people and I don't know that I didn't spend a lot of time, I didn't think a lot of people were interested in my war experience.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ralph Holding: And I started at the University of Utah and I met a young lady that lived in the neighborhood and ended up going with her and getting engaged and working for the telephone company and working for the telephone company for 41 years. But at one time, I thought I was going to go back in the military and I said to Pauline, "I think I'll go back in the military." She said, "That's fine, but you'll go in without me." So, that took care of that.

Crew Member: Ralph, so 50 or 60 years plus later, there's this renewed interest in World War II because you and all your friends are passing on, you're not, but you're

getting up there. How do you feel about this renewed interest? You have this amazing, sharp, memory and all of this archived material and it must have been such an important part of your life. Why do you think this is, is it that you want to tell these stories? Why do you think people are interested?

Ralph Holding: Well, my back's gone, but my memory, I think it was an important part in my life. And, a lot -- most of my friends were in the military. I lived in the canyon road area; there was a fellow by the name of Warren Young that was in the Marines. And he was a helicopter pilot; Harold Poole was a close friend. When I think of, and we used to go down to Little America and a batch of us would have lunch together and all of those fellows were in the war, and there are three separate groups, one that I went to school with, and one that I was in the military with, and one that I associated in the telephone company. And I think, frankly, all of -- I don't know why I'm still alive, but the --

Interviewer: Did you find people asking you about the war now more than they used to?

Ralph Holding: Not too many. I think a lot of them don't even know much about it.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Elizabeth: What a shame.

Ralph Holding: This, Jim Parkinson that co-authored the book, "Soldier Slaves," regarding Harold Poole, I think he goes to high schools and they did a documentary on some of that and I think he tells these high school students a little bit about the war. He and Lee Benson and Harold Poole went back to the Philippines. I like history. I just got through reading Theodore White, Teddy White, wrote a book, "Thunder Out of China," about the mountain road.

Interviewer: Well, we find there's a tremendous interest in the war from many of our troops. That's why we're doing this.

Ralph P. Holding: I think, really, if you don't know a little bit about the history, what do they say? You're bound to repeat it.

Interviewer: Well, I'm good.

Crew Member: I'm great too, it was really good.

End of recording.