

Interview of Robert Erickson

Robert Erickson: Robert E. Erickson.

Interviewer: And you were born where?

Robert Erickson: 21 January, 1921 in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Interviewer: And you grew up in Salt Lake City?

Robert Erickson: I grew up in Salt Lake, went to the 2nd Ward as a member of the church for years, and went to Summer Grade School, Roosevelt Junior High, and graduated from South High. I lived right near Liberty Park. I was always interested in athletics and flying. Then when the war came, why, as soon as I had the two years of college, I tried for and was accepted by the United States Army Air Corps, except that I had broken my nose playing ball, and before they give me an assignment date, they said you've got to have that nose fixed on your own, which I did. They repaired the cartilage. I think I went back every two weeks and they finally accepted me. I was put into the Army Air Corps as an aviation cadet -- got to remember the cadet business -- in either January or February of 1942. But they weren't ready for us, so they just put us on kind of an administrative leave. By doing that, I couldn't enlist in the Navy or the Marine Corps. I was going to go in the Army Air Corps, and they put us on board a train ride here at the Union Pacific Depot in early July of 1942 with, I don't know, hundreds of Wyoming, Montana, Utah -- young fellows. They took us by train to Santa Ana preflight, in Santa Ana, California, where most of us learned how to carry a gun and learned how to drill and learned how to march and the Morse code. We continued our training and the wash-out rate was pretty good. You know, there were some people that didn't take to that military, but I was assigned to class 43-D, meaning that if I continued on, I would graduate in April of 1943. I went to Cal-Aero Academy for my

primary training in the Stearman, which was the famous biplane trainer for a lot of us. I got 60 hours of training and link-trainer, and after making sure that I didn't bust any check rides, I went on to Merced, California for basic. Sixty hours in the Stearman, then Merced, California, the Vultee BT-13, which was a little bigger, a little more powerful. It had fixed landing gear, low wing, enclosed cock pit, and I got 60 hours in that airplane and managed to do well. I let all of my instructors know I wanted to fly fighters, but I was always told I was too tall. They were building fighters for 5'10" and below. I didn't accept it. I had hoped that that might change then I went to Williams. I finished basic and went to Williams for advanced training and we flew the AT-9, which was a twin engine metal airplane preparing us for P-38s, in a way. Then that airplane, for some reason -- I think it took off at 110, it flew at 110, and it landed at 110 -- the accident rate was a little high.

Interviewer: Just one minute. I think we have a lot of shine on him. Do we want to--

Robert Erickson: Too fast, maybe?

Interviewer: No, no, no. You're fine. Are we rolling?

Crew: We are.

Interviewer: So, we were there, you were in flight instruction school and you graduated on to some, the one that went 110 miles per hour.

Robert Erickson: AT-9, and then as we approached graduation, we were interviewed by an Air Force one-star that came in and said, "Now, all of you that are over six feet are going to go in the bombers. But you have an opportunity if you like to volunteer for the B-26, which is a little smaller." So I said, "I will go that B-26 route." Well, it wasn't more than perhaps a week or two

when, for some reason, the Air Force needed us, they said, "You're all going to go into fighters," or at least part of us. Those that were accepted went over to Luke Air Force Base, which was 40 miles away, and checked out in the AT-6 Texan, flew a little acrobatics and a little formation, and went back to Williams. Flew the P-322, which was the very early, early version of the P-38. Both props went the same way and I remember taking off from Williams in this wonderful airplane, and I think I went almost all the way to Tucson before I had enough courage to turn the airplane. No, not really, but it was a marvelous experience. So I graduated with my class on April 12th, 1943. Some people got leave, some didn't, but I had a chance to go to Muroc, which is now Edwards Air Force Base, and check out in the P-38 with a future assignment to a tactical unit, which I didn't know. There were about six of us that were in that class -- did that, went to Muroc, had one piggy-back ride, and we had about six or eight solo rides in the early P-38A and waited further orders. They weren't very long in coming, and they sent -- from my class, I think there were four of us that went to the 55th Fighter Group at McChord Air Force Base, Washington. En route there, they sent us to Portland for OTU, Operational Training, in the P-38. So we went there flew the airplane and really learned how to fly it there. Single engine, acrobatics, end trail formation. Of the four of us, one fellow decided for some reason he didn't want to be a fighter.

So the three of us went up to Paine Field, or McChord, and I was assigned to the 38th Fighter Squadron out of Paine Field, Everett, Washington, and I can remember to this day reporting in to my first squadron commander by the name of Major Milton Joel, and he said, "Why do you want to fly fighters?" We had an A-20 -- I'm going back a lot of years -- we had an A-20 there that he personally put you in. It was an early A-20, a light attack bomber, but it had handover controls. He'd take each one of us up and give us a 30 minute, 45 minute orientation to see if he thought

we could fly his airplanes in his squadron. When we did that, then we were assigned to a flight. My first flight came in, it was a fellow by the name of Ayers, A-Y-E-R-S, that had at that time three or 400 hours in the P-38, which was exceptional. I was a low second lieutenant and I was a "tail end Charlie" and we flew for I think about three months right there in the Seattle area -- Beautiful, wonderful place. Not much weather at that time of the year. So we learned, we flew air-to-air over the Straits of Juan de Fuca, we flew air-to-ground at Whidbey Island, we flew formation in not much weather because we didn't have any weather experience. We had link-trainer. Most of it was VFR. We would get caught in the weather occasionally, and we lost a couple pilots. Then in August of 1943, we were stood down and we were on alert. We had received orders to eventually go to England, but it turned out, we went on three separate trains out McChord. I went the northern route -- no insignia, no wings, just a train load of Army people. We stopped outside of township, and whether it was four or five days, I don't remember, but three trains left about the same time, three different directions. We all off-loaded at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and we were there, I think, three or four days. We got one leave into New York City, and when we got back, they said, "Okay, we're now back to business. Put on your second lieutenants or your captains, whatever you are. You're now in the Army Air Corps." We were proud to be in that situation and they boarded us on a troop ship, the HMS Orion, which was a converted British liner. We became part of a huge convoy going across the North Atlantic out of New York. I can remember saying goodbye to the Statue of Liberty, and didn't think about it too much, we were going to go over to England and fly our P-38s and really do bad news to the Germans. We were on board that convoy, that ship, for about 11 days, and I think we spent a lot of it on deck in life preservers under U-boat warnings. I don't know the exact number of ships, I think one or two were sunk, and one or two sent back. It was, you know, August and

the North Atlantic I can remember bad weather. We landed at the Firth of Forth in Scotland and we got on trains and we went to our home for awhile, a base called Nuthampstead near the town of Royston, England. We landed there, or we got in there, and I think we all expected airplanes. Well, there wasn't an airplane there. It turned out they were all coming over by boat and they were going into Prestwick. So, we were formed up into our normal flights and we each had a Nissen hut. Each flight had a Nissen hut. I think we had eight guys -- a flight leader, an element leader, and the rest of us were wingmen. Bicycles -- we were issued bicycles and we got to ride around the country side and watch. We were in an area where there were 150 Army Air Corps Bases, mostly bombers -- some 47s, some B-17s, and a few B-24s. Then we got the word that our airplanes, or some of them, were waiting for us in Prestwick, so I made two trips to Prestwick, most of us did. They flew us up in a British airplane of some kind and we'd be taken out to a brand new airplane, a P-38, brand new and put together. Our orders were to start it up and taxi out, take off in a circular pattern and that was a test flight. If everything was running, off we'd go for our base. We landed in Nuthampstead, and I guess we were the first operational P-38 group in England. We had three squadrons and each -- we flew 16 airplanes to a squadron, but we had a few spares. Our first operational mission, you know, we had briefings on what was going on. The weather was terrible in England. The old saying was, "Wait a few minutes and it will change," but we knew our main concern was going to be the escort the bombers. In order to get a little experience, they sent us on a couple of fighter sweeps. Well the only people who flew the fighter sweeps were the high-ranking people. It was just a quick jaunt over the channel, and into land, and then right on back and no enemy aircraft, nothing. Then our first big raid, I think, was to the Roer Valley of some kind where we were going to escort the bombers. This happened to be either October or November.

Interviewer: Okay, stop.

Robert Erickson: Okay.

Interviewer: What you're doing is all brand new, isn't it? This whole idea of escorting bombers is brand a new idea?

Robert Erickson: Well, yes, because P-47s would take them into the coast and they didn't have any fuel so they had to turn around, and now the B-17s were on their own. So we were going to be top cover for them and give them a little protection, at least make the Germans remember that we were up there and our. We would "S" over the bomber force. We'd always take off about an hour after the bombers. We'd watch them circle and form, and then we'd take off and we'd rendezvous with them over the continent. Each squadron would have a certain box to fly over and protect the bombers. We would develop a crossing technique at 30 or 32,000 feet. The airplane was very cold, was hard to get heat in to the cockpit. We had to be very careful with manipulation, as your book points out -- with RPM and power, we'd lose the engine. At first, we were told to keep the drop tanks on it because as long as we had them on it, we had enough fuel. But once we dropped those, we were down to internal fuel and our loiter time, our stay time, our protective time to give the bombers was shortened. At first, it was "Keep the tank as long as you can," but then we'd run into problems where we'd try to drop the tanks and maybe one would come off, maybe neither one of them would come off. The electrical systems didn't work. So it didn't take many missions for the maintenance people to Jerry-rig a system where they had wires that would manually pull and we could get rid of those tanks. We had the Luftbury maneuver. We'd try to maintain at least flight integrity, and at the very minimum, element integrity. When

you get into a battle of any kind, you could lose your other people and you're on your own type of thing.

Interviewer: Let's walk through, because I want to come back and ask you questions about that a little later

Robert Erickson: Okay.

Interviewer: So your first mission over Germany was over the Roer, is that correct?

Robert Erickson: Yep.

Interviewer: Tell us about that mission.

Robert Erickson: Well, it was, as I remember, when you go into the briefing room and you see where you are in the scheme of things and who you're going to be escorting. Then all you're doing is flying your airplane -- I am a wing man. I'm making sure I'm staying with my element leader. He's making sure he's staying with the flight leader, and we are able to do that while we're "S'ing" over the bombers, keeping them in sight as they proceeded on. Then the flack starts coming up and you wonder -- you're glad you're in a fighter and you admire those fellows that are just droning straight on. Then we always knew where the bomb site people would engage, and we knew that those bombers were going to go straight and we were able to move on out a little bit and watch the bombing. On the first couple of missions, we had very little or even none, as far as fighter opposition. We continued to pound the Roer Valley and Essen and Kiel and those missions changed. In a period of about four months, we lost close to 50 percent of our pilots. Those of us who stayed alive were promoted and went from wingman to element leader to flight leader. We went in those days by 10 missions, and then if you were lucky you got a

leave. We had a place in London we could go to near the USO. At the end of 50 missions, when I first got over there, that was the end of your tour unless you extended. Well, I extended a short time and then D-Day came on -- I'm really jumping ahead at times. But the missions in most part were high-altitude protecting the bombers. Then, as we started developing more air power, the 51 started coming on, the next P-38 groups came in. Now we had three P-38 groups where we only had one for awhile. We had close to 70 P-38s over those bombers and made the Luftwaffe change their tactics. The things we always remembered, you know, the Luftwaffe could go up there without external fuel, have a very maneuverable airplane, shoot at somebody. If they got shot down, they could parachute down and pick up another airplane and come back up. If we were shot down, if we survived, we were either a prisoner or we're not going to get back into the thing. So survivability was important, tactics were important, we sometimes dove into clouds just to keep from getting shot. I was shot up a couple times. I ditched a P-38 in the North Sea after a mission to Kiel. I was leading a flight and we got engaged in shooting. We had already attacked some Me-109s, but I shot down a Ju-87 that had a rear gunner, and as I was hitting him, he was hitting me left engine. We proceeded on in, it was a fairly nice day and I thought I could get back to England, but because the left engine was gone and there was no generator, I could not transfer my fuel so I had to -- I thought about jumping out. I said, "That's England in front of us," but it turned out it was just low clouds. So I ditched in the North Sea and by the time I got in my little dinghy, the airplane was gone. I did some damage to my leg and then a British -- similar to a PT -- was over me while my wingman was there, but the airplane couldn't land and so they always picked up by a British version of a PT boat. That was their main responsibility, to make sure they picked up air crews that didn't make it back to

England. So they put me on there and they fed me grog to keep me warm, took me into Manston, and then I returned to my base.

Interviewer: Tell me about -- there're a couple missions I want you to talk about. If you tell me in detail what you were doing on these particular missions, describe what it's like to be in the cockpit. How cold it is and what you're wearing and things like that. For example, the mission over Berlin. Talk about that one.

Robert Erickson: Well, we were part of the mission to Berlin, which we had been building up to. You talk about clothing, I barely fit in the airplane. I couldn't fit in the airplane with the Army Air Corps issue of fleece-lined flying gear. None of us could. I've got pictures that'll show you that. So we traded off our equipment, our flying gear. The British had a wool type of flying suit that was similar to what they wear now days that was more adaptable to us and didn't take up as much room. We changed over to them and we traded our American helmets for English helmets. They had the big ear pieces. You know, English weather wasn't the best in that time of the year, and you were cold just getting in the airplane and starting up. We wore all the clothing we could. We wore two or three pairs of inner gloves and outer gloves. When you got into a combat situation, you'd get rid of them of that so you could have more dexterity with your hands and manipulating the canon, the gun switches, and throttles, and everything else. The first mission to Berlin, I think my group commander was Jack Jenkins, a Texas Ranger, and he either didn't receive it or didn't acknowledge it -- we were recalled. Most of the people went back, but our group continued on and we were the first group over Berlin, then we got back to England and things changed--

Interviewer: How did it make you feel?

Robert Erickson: Well, we knew that this is what we'd been fighting for. I lost an awful lot of people. I lost my two class mates. I had probably twenty or thirty 19, 20, 21 year-old fellows that either didn't come back, crashed, they located them, or they were prisoners of war. We had a big turn over. They almost stood the group down waiting on replacements because the casualty rate was too high. Production -- the bombers came on, more bombers, more fighters, and the Germans were less available to us. Then we started dropping our tanks and we were making a lot of tactical units, and then once we got the bombers on the way back, if we had fuel, we were clear to go in and I think we called then a "rhubarb mission." We were able to strafe trains, barges, marshaling yards, anything that we could hit coming back out. This was in early '44. We knew that D-Day was coming, so everything we could do in support of the bombers and to get down and do some strafing, we had a great strafing airplane. It had a canon and four machine guns. We blew up a lot of trains. We went after airfields and airplanes on the ground. The 55th did a good job.

Interviewer: Tell us about D-Day. Tell us what you did. You got up and--

Robert Erickson: Okay, D-Day, as you know, we stood down while they painted the airplanes and put the stripes over them.

Interviewer: Why was that?

Robert Erickson: Visibility for recognition, primarily, so that the ships we were in support of, -- everything, as soon as they saw the stripes -- if it was a P-38, a P-51, a P-47 -- if it had stripes, those people that were on the ships trying to watch. As it turned out, there was very little air opposition to the D-Day operation. Our main force of the D-Day landing was to the Cherbourg Peninsula, and if the weather was bad, we were under a cloud deck, we were circling over ships.

We flew either two or three missions a someday. One squadron would go in, do whatever they could in making a show of force, primarily. As the ships moved forward, we did this for five days. Then those of us that were there when the bombardments started, the weather again was never very good, but I don't think anyone in our squadron even saw a German airplane. That's what the stripes were for. Even the C-47s, the ones that were pulling gliders, the gliders were all striped. In that book, it will show the stripes that were on there.

Interviewer: What could you see below? Could you see the invasion going on? Describe--

Robert Erickson: The thing I remember more than anything, of course, was all these ships moving across. Then when the battle wagons started firing, you could see the blast from the guns. You've got to remember you're flying an airplane, and if you're leading a squadron, you can see a little bit. If you're flying as an element leader or a wingman, your responsibility is to keep them in sight. So it's a look and be seen type of thing, and then get back to what you were doing. During D-Day, again, we stayed out over the water, but you knew what was going on. When we'd land, we were briefed by intelligence officers and I can remember even in those days thinking what those young people, like myself, were going through on the ground. I've since gone to that area. I visited the cemetery and I made trips back and forth and thought about it a lot -- been to the cemetery. Our base was at Royston, which was 15 miles from Cambridge. Right today, there's a huge memorial cemetery in Cambridge where there are some, I think 20 or 24, either remembrance crosses or on the wall of honor, that were from my group. That really -- that hurts to think that I, for some reason, was able to come back and have a family and those people couldn't. War is not good.

Interviewer: Tell me about the mission that you had to ditch. What happened? Tell me about that.

Robert Erickson: It was a typical bombing mission. We were in support of the bombers, and then when we got involved in some dog fights, my flight leader and I, we went after some Me-109s, I think he went after the two. The flight broke up and we went after the two and we destroyed -- my wingman and I -- destroyed a 109 and we were by ourselves and fuel was in such a state that we knew we had to start going back. We headed on back and we encountered the Ju-88s that had been up there. I think they were firing some type of a missile into the bomber formation, so we shot at him and knocked him down, but he knocked out my left engine. Being of Swedish descent, I almost went up to Sweden because I was closer to Sweden and it was over land, but I knew I had to cross that -- if I was going to go home -- I had to cross the ocean and I made a decision to go and continue to drop down conserving fuel on one engine and not being able to transfer all the fuel. I made a decision, I thought I was going to be able to get to England, but I ran out of fuel. So it was a very quick few moments of trying to put the airplane down between waves and my wingman later on told me that that is what had happened. The airplane went down and by the time I got out on the wing and into the little dinghy, why that airplane was gone. So I survived the ditching and was picked up by the British.

Interviewer: Describe for us dog fighting. What happens? There is this romantic notion -- tell us what it's really like.

Robert Erickson: Well, you're controlled by a number of things. First of all, you've got an airplane that you're flying yourself, and it's easy to watch what the Germans doing, remember that he's more agile, he has less fuel than you do, and the P-38 was such an aerodynamically

clean airplane, once you dropped the tanks and got into a dive, the airplane would start picking up compressibility. In order to control that airplane --you stop going after a German or whatever -- now I've got to go from trying to shoot down an airplane to conserving, to making myself safe. So you have to throttle back, you have to start inching back on the throttle and the stick, and you can't control it till you reach heavier, denser air, which is below you. When you reach that point then, in most cases, you're able to recover and get it back. But by then, you're out of formation. You've lost your flight, so you're either alone or you're with one more man. We very seldom broke down less than an element, but compressibility and the airplane at high altitude couldn't turn too well, but once it got in to a dive, it was a going machine.

Interviewer: What's it's like in the air? I think it's almost impossible to pick out another airplane somewhere, how do you do that? How do you see those things going on all at one moment?

Robert Erickson: Well, from the beginning you start flying, eyesight is important. That's why you have to have at least 20/20 eyesight to get in. Now they can correct it, but you developed your eyes. I always had good eyes. The better you could see, the better you could turn and pick out a glint in the sunshine of an airplane. We went by the o'clock system, and everyone's idea -- you had to fly your wing. You had to make sure you're on position, but you had to scan the skies as well as you could. There was very little radio chatter except from the squadron commander or the group commander, "The bogie's at 11:00, or 3:00," that type of thing. We developed a number of combat maneuvers, like the Luftbury, which was when we get in trail and circle the bombers and try to keep the Germans from coming down through us to get to the bombers. Then we'd peel off after them. You know, we had a wheel -- it wasn't a stick. We had two engines. We had two throttles, we had two RPMs. We had to manage all of those things. We had a button to shoot the canon, a button selector to shoot all five guns at one time, or just the machine

guns. We only had 50 pounds of canon, I think, but it was lethal. We didn't have the best gun sights in the world. There were a lot like skeet shooting, you had to lead them. So eyesight was important, no question about it.

Interviewer: Tell me about.

Crew: (Inaudible) and describe that.

Interviewer: Okay, let's do that right now. Tell us, as a fighter pilot, what are all the skills you have to have?

Robert Erickson: Well, the basic things, of course, if you didn't enjoy being a fighter pilot, you were in the wrong business because you were there by yourself. You had to inspect your airplane, get in the airplane, start up the airplane, check it out, fly it, navigate it, scan the instruments, make sure it was operating properly, regulate the throttle and the RPM. Because everything *you* did, you had to do in order to make yourself survive. If you did anything wrong, if you didn't fly it properly, if you stalled it, if your navigation was off, uh, you had no one up there to help you. Now, most of the time we had wingmen, most of the time we were in a group, but at the same time, there's no one in that airplane with you. It's a single-seat fighter and that's exactly what the word means. There's nobody up there. In all the airplanes I've flown, I'd been in that category: single-seat fighter plane.

Interviewer: So you navigate, radio.

Robert Erickson: Navigate, radio--

Interviewer: You did everything.

Robert Erickson: --monitor. If you're leading a flight, you keep the ground control advised as to where you are, and they keep you advised. And if you're leading not only are you flying your own airplane, but you're wingmen are depending on you to get them through. When you're wingman, your man job is to fly on your leader and protect him. You expect him to get you where you're going. As a leader, you're trying to do the job to get you and your wingman, and if you miscalculate a turn or a g-force type of thing. If you fly the airplane erratically so that the wingman can't stay with you, you're hurting yourself as well as him. In flying fighter airplanes, in order to stay in formation -- and this had been proven true through all the years -- if the leader does something wrong and flies into the ground, the wing man's going to fly into the ground. That didn't happen very often, but it has, so you pride yourself on knowing how to fly your airplane, what to do with it, and what limitations are there -- g-forces, air speed control, especially close to the ground type of thing. In the old days, we used to come in on the runway, pitch up and land. Nowadays, it's a circular-type pattern, but the responsibility is still there. Even today, these guys flying these modern day airplanes are by themselves -- the F-16 and the F-15. It's just like driving a car -- you're responsible for steering it, breaking it, and watching the traffic. The same thing applies to flying an airplane. I think that's too few words, but you do recognize the responsibility and hope that you're doing right and you work at it. You know, you don't forget about it just because you're home eating or something. You plan, there's a lot of flight planning, a lot of pre-fighting, a lot of checking the weather. For a two hour mission, it's two hours preparation, two hours flying, and two hours of debriefing type of thing.

Interviewer: You're very busy.

Robert Erickson: It's busy, it is. It's a busy occupation, and I think fighter pilots are proud that they're able to do that. You know it's just like in business or what you're doing, you're talented

and you work at it. You don't leave this office today and forget all about it. So, whatever you do, whether a stenographer, a typist. Flying airplanes, you can't just stop the airplane, get out and rest for a minute. You've got to complete the mission. You've got to make sure you're preflight, your take off. In flying airplanes, I guess, take off and landing still are the two most critical parts of the flight because you're close to the ground. The engines of course are a lot more dependable now than they used to be. The jet is a lot different than propeller.

Interviewer: Now, tell us about going into the P-51.

Robert Erickson: Well, I think I mentioned, the P-38, we changed -- they modified them as we went on. They came out with a better modification for the engine. They came out with a better way to keep you warm. Then Tony LeVier, the test pilot, would come over and fly this and he knew that we needed better engines so they were further modified. The superchargers were modified a little bit. We did know that we could use (inaudible) boost and dive breaks. We had three P-38 groups in England and we started getting this new airplane. Now we're happy. Then all of a sudden, the P-38 was more valuable in the Pacific, so we were told we would change to 51's. The initial thought was, we didn't want to because now we've got the airplane we've been waiting for, but it didn't take as long, I think. We didn't have any two-seaters, so the way to check out in the P-51 was to have another guy that had flown the airplane -- you started on the ground. You went through cockpit checks. You went through simulation. You read up. You got everything ready to go and you got in the airplane. He helps to start it up and you set the rudder and make sure you don't have counter-rotating props. You know you're going to get torque. The airplane was designed to take off in a three-point attitude, but the worst thing about the P-15 was taxing it. You couldn't see in front of you unless you "S'd" it. Once we got in the P-51 and run it up and got everything squared away -- now we had cross runways and we had a

control tower in the middle and I know I thought, "Boy, I want to make sure I go straight down the runway with that airplane." So I got it up off its tail wheel pretty quick. I got it on its main gear and took off and it was a delight, a joy to fly. It was a wonderful airplane and I enjoyed just flying it. That first hour or so was great, but I still had back in my mind, "Now how am I going to land this dude?" I don't have a tricycle landing gear and I don't have the best -- they said the best way to land it is the tail-low, three-point attitude. As I brought it in, I kept it on its wheels and let it ease down. It was wonderful landing airplane and I think I had about five hours in it when we flew our first combat mission knowing that we were more comfortable, more agile, more range, we could go a lot further, it had internal fuel for just one engine. Of course, that P-51 had that Merlin engine and it was a good airplane. But I wasn't with it too long. I was shot down and jumped out. I guess the powers that be thought maybe I could -- so they brought me home and

Interviewer: Wait a minute. You've got to tell us about this mission. Tell us about day that you were shot down and what happened to you.

Robert Erickson: We were on a ground support mission, and in those days, we were very definitely one pass. We would go over an airfield or over a marshaling area, make one pass and get out of there. We were in front of the advancing armies -- this was in August of '44 -- and we were not very far east of the Paris area. We had a certain area and we were just sweeping the ground. We had, as I remember, we had hit some locomotives and I got by ground fire. You know, they were shooting at us with everything from BB guns -- and I don't blame them -- and they hit my airplane. I had a coolant problem, so I pitched it out, went straight, my wingman went with me and I went straight west of Paris somewhere in the uh -- forgot the name of the town -- but I jumped out of the airplane and the airplane crashed. I was picked up by our own

ground forces and taken back to England -- survived that. In our flying the 38, one of the biggest problems we had, we didn't particularly want to jump out of the p 38 because we had the two tails. In the 38, you were supposed to belly roll it over and fall out, or stall it and slide down the wing. But in the early 38s, there were some people hit by the tail. In the 51, it was almost the same thing if you could control it, stall it and slide out the wing, which I did. But it was -- I hated to leave that airplane. It was a good airplane.

Interviewer: So how many missions did you fly in Europe?

Robert Erickson: Well, I flew the 50 and then I took a 25 hour of extension for D-Day. Then I came home for 30 days, went on a bond selling thing and went on a honeymoon to Santa Monica, then went back to England and changed over to 51's. You know, I've got all of my log directors, and I've got everything at home, it's on the wall. I think I had around, let's see, 70 some odd in the 38, and I was up around 50 or something in the 51 -- five distinguished flying crosses, numerous air medals, accommodations, Legion of Merit. I never got the Purple Heart, thank goodness. I was dinged a couple times. I had a single engine landing where the landing gear collapsed on me at Manston, England, and I got roughed up a little bit, but that's it.

Interviewer: Tell me about VE-Day, what was going on that day?

Robert Erickson: In VE-Day, I wasn't over there -- no. I had been brought back and was instructing in 51s at Luke. We knew we were going to go to Japan, so we were training there. Luke was a wonderful instillation for training not only seasoned combat veterans but new people to go over. We knew the war in Japan was going to be a different thing, especially if we had had to invade it. Dropping the A-bomb -- I don't want to get into that, I guess -- but it was the greatest thing that happened to us. Invading, you know, history shows that when we had to

invade some of those Pacific Islands -- Okinawa and how bad the casualty rate was -- think about what would have happened if we had gone into Japan. But I didn't go to Japan. Then I went back to school for awhile and then I was in the training detachment. I started flying jets in '47. I was first in jet school at Williams Air Force Base, and the Air Force expanded and we became an Air Force, and then Korea was cranking up. We trained lots of pilots into the jets. Some of those young fellows that had washed out in flying school for World War II and were made bombardiers and navigators came back into the Air Force, went through pilot training, and became good fighter pilots. It turned out that you could fly an airplane, and if you needed extra time, that was what we should have done. The wash-out rate, I don't really know what it was, but we washed out a lot of good people that we all knew could have done a better job.

Interviewer: Tell me about this bond tour. This sounds interesting.

Robert Erickson: The what?

Interviewer: The bond tour. This sounds interesting.

Robert Erickson: Oh, well, they just brought us -- I had a friend at the Deseret News -- so they had a little bond tour here in the Salt Lake area. There were a number of us up and down Main Street. I don't remember too much about it, and we then went to Santa Monica. It was just, some of the people in our leather jackets and our crushed hats came back too and participated in that.

Interviewer: So, was this a parade or what?

Robert Erickson: Yeah. I'm not sure if it was part of the 24th of July or when it was, but it was sometime in there.

Interviewer: So you went right down Main Street?

Robert Erickson: I think it was State Street, one of them.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Erickson: That might be chronicled in the Deseret News. Probably not -- there's too many things that went on. But you had said, now, are we off the air for a minute or something?

Interviewer: We're still on.

Robert Erickson: We're still on.

Interviewer: I have a question.

Robert Erickson: You wanted, uh, pilot P-38?

Interviewer: We'll need those photos.

Robert Erickson: Can you redo some of those? What are we going to do with them?

Interviewer: We're going to scan them.

Robert Erickson: It's interesting, in my P-38 group, the 55th Fighter Group -- three squadrons, hundreds of enlisted people -- there was only one other man from Salt Lake in it. He was an engineering officer and I took him for a ride in a P-38 piggy-back.

Interviewer: What was his name?

Robert Erickson: Aveson, Paul Aveson. This is my flight getting ready to go to London.

Interviewer: Is that your wallet? Clearly, you were afraid.

Robert Erickson: Clearly what?

Crew: You were afraid.

Robert Erickson: Absolutely. I, uh--

Crew: Can you talk about that fear with Jeff and what your thoughts were and what was going on in your head?

Robert Erickson: Well, the first one, of course was -- I was very certain that I was going to make it back to England and land on one engine. So when the engine sputtered and the water was there, I think I just plunked it down and thought, "Well, I'll just do what I'm trained to do and get out if I can and get in my dinghy and be picked up." Obviously that worked, and when I was in the dinghy and saw that the flying boat couldn't land because of the swells, that bothered me a little bit. My wingman, who had been circling me, as well as the flying boat, rocked their wings and then I was able to pick up the British version of a PT boat. They took me on board and I really don't think that I was in the water too long, but enough that they wrapped me in blankets and poured down the English grog, I believe they called it. Being a Mormon boy, I don't know what that stuff is, but I think it kept the body heat. Then they took me into Manston and I was in the hospital for a couple days and recuperated

Crew: What does it feel like to ditch a plane and be in a parachute and all that?

Robert Erickson: Well, I've done it -- that time, of course, the parachute was of no value. But the water was cold and I just didn't think too much except, "I hope they pick me up." Jumping out of the P-51, I was close to the ground and I made sure that I pulled the D-ring as quickly as possible. I don't think I floated very long. Later on in 1958, I ejected out of an F-100 and that

was a little longer parachute jump and I ended up in the East China Sea and made sure that I got my shark repellent that was in my boat. Then the islanders picked me up and took me to their little island off the coast of Okinawa. So I've got two D-rings and I'm a member of the caterpillar club twice.

Crew: Elizabeth, Bob, and I are editing all these interviews together and we were coming up with big questions for all the vets. One of the main themes is the camaraderie that you experienced because every vet -- they're interested in other vets of that time and their stories and especially if you were in the same squadron, unit, or whatever. So can you talk about being in a single-seat plane, a fighter jet. What kind of camaraderie occurred? The second question is why do you believe World War II veterans have this strong bond today?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Crew: This brotherhood?

Robert Erickson: Well, the first part of the question, when you're in a fighter plane, you're with other fighter pilots. They're all doing the same thing. You're all working towards protecting one another, supporting one another, doing the job as well as you can. That seemed to be the main the main focus of staying alive. The worst thing in the world was watching one of them go down or missing a wingman and not accounting for them at the end of the mission. I don't think any of us that went through that will ever forget the basic thought of "Why him, not me? What could we have done to prevent that from happening?" As you know, I don't know all the figures of the war, but casualties were common place and they certainly didn't make it any easier. We all felt bad, but the war had to go on. The job had to go on. Survivability was important, and you knew that, that that survivability depended on your own capabilities, not particularly skill, but in

anything that you do in life, the better you can do it, the better you're going to survive. The better you're going to be with. The other part, I have been in the Air Force a long time. I'm a member of a number of different organizations including the 55th Fighter Group and other groups that I was in. We have reunions, and those reunions are always a rekindling of who we are and what we are, what we all went through. The worst thing about it all is the young people that didn't get through this thing. What would their lives have been? What kind of families would they have had? Of course, you're never going to get that answer, but I know that's the way I feel. I have a very good friend that lives here in Salt Lake. He didn't get to combat, but he was in B-24s, and was on his way to Japan in a B-29 when the war ended and he's also experienced that. We started losing people in cadets. Now here we are going out of farm and out of small cities and we gather at flying school and we learn, or at preflight, where we learn how to be a soldier, some of them washed out there for one reason or another. You start flying an airplane and it's a different world. There were some fellows, I remember -- going in to cadets, I'd always been active playing ball and doing things. I had some of my classmates that came out of farm lands that never played ball. They had a little trouble with hand-eye coordination type of thing, but they mastered it. If you worked hard at it and were dedicated towards it, you did it. Then whether you're a bomber pilot with a crew depending on you, or if you're a fighter pilot with other members of your flight depending on you, you just worked at it. I think that's about the only way I can figure it out is that we all did our best with what we had. We hated like heck to see anybody not get through a mission or continue their career.

Crew: One last question. I know that you had a flying career after the war, World War II?

Robert Erickson: Had a what?

Crew: A flying career.

Interviewer: A flying career after the war.

Crew: After the war, but specifically for your experiences in World War II, how do you feel like that war defined who you are today?

Interviewer: I have a part two to that: how is that war different from other wars?

Robert Erickson: Well I think World War II -- we were invaded. We all went into that feeling that we were there for a purpose. We had to defend our country. We had to defeat whoever had attacked us. We were patriotic. I'm sure we still are, but the war brought the whole country together. Operationally, productions increased. The flag was there, we took the oath, we wanted to defend not only ourselves, but our country and our family and our people behind us.

Interviewer: How did that war define you personally?

Robert Erickson: Well I hope it made me understand that life is very precious. As a fighter pilot, as a bomber pilot, as a guy in an infantry, it made you realize that if you didn't do your job, you were hurting someone else as well as yourself. So you develop your skills and do the best that you can.

Crew: Any others?

Interviewer: I'm pretty well.

Crew: Me too.

Interviewer: Okay, Bob. I hope that was--

End of recording.