

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Rolf Slen
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

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LJ: Could you please state your name?

RS: **My name is Rolf Slen.**

LJ: What branch of the service?

RS: **I was in the Army Air Force.**

LJ: I don't know about your past but can we start the interview by you telling me a little bit about your parents? What did they do?

RS: **My father was a lawyer in Madison, Minnesota. My mother was a housewife there. I spent all of my grade school and high school education in Madison, Minnesota, graduating from high school in 1942.**

LJ: What did you do after high school?

RS: **After I graduated from high school, I went to South Dakota and Nebraska and helped build barracks on two or three different bases for the Air Force.**

LJ: Were your parents supportive when you decided to leave home to do that?

RS: **Oh sure. I mean I had finished high school and this was summer and I needed to earn some money for college. I knew I was going to go college. And I did after working that summer at these air bases. I started school at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, in September 1942.**

LJ: What did you study at St. Olaf?

RS: It was a general course. I didn't know what I wanted to do but eventually majored in history after the war.

LJ: So you didn't complete college before you went into the military?

RS: No, I started in September of 1942 but technically enlisted in November of 1942. But I was able to finish that semester before I was called to go to Fort Snelling and then down to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, 1st of February of 1943.

LJ: What was your training at Fort Snelling like?

RS: Oh, that was just a stopping spot. I didn't get any training there. I just went up there and immediately got on a train and went down to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.

LJ: So that was the boot camp?

RS: That was boot camp, yes.

LJ: What was that like?

RS: Miserable, it was cold. It was dirty. And the first thing we heard when we got off the train down there was quote "You ain't going to like it here," end quote. And we didn't.

LJ: How many weeks were you there?

RS: Oh, I think maybe six or eight weeks. I don't remember. We cleaned latrines and we marched and we did all kinds of stuff in the mud and the cold. I can't remember that I learned very much there. From there they sent us to Kansas City, Missouri, for some college training in rudimentary college education in terms of meteorology; even got a little smattering of military history and a little mathematics.

LJ: Was that a happier time?

RS: Oh, yes, that was fun. That was hard work, too. We did lot of close order drilling; but I enjoyed the educational part of it. We had 10 hours of dual instruction in a Piper Cub because we were on the track to become members of a crew. But I washed out of pilot training. I wasn't able to coordinate the

hand and arm, hand and feet, and so on, in flying an airplane; and they just plain washed me out of pilot training. And that's when they put me on a course for navigation. And from there on, I was strictly going to be a navigator; and I enjoyed that much more than I would have enjoyed being a pilot.

LJ: What was the first plane that you were introduced to?

RS: In Kansas City, Missouri, we flew in Piper Cubs. And later during our training at these various bases in Texas, we flew in – oh, I don't know what you'd call them – training planes of some kind where we could practice our aerial gunnery and navigation.

LJ: For those of us who do not know, can you describe what a Piper Cub is?

RS: Yes, Piper Cub is simply a little single-engine, small airplane that beginning flyers always learned to fly in when they first get any training, whatsoever.

LJ: How much training was spent on the Piper Cub?

RS: Well just those 10 hours before they washed me out. Said I'd never make a pilot, so that's the only time I ever spent in a Piper Cub. I'd never had any flying before I got in the service either, so I didn't know a thing about flying.

LJ: So what is the difference between being a pilot and a navigator?

RS: Well, a pilot, of course, is the one in charge of flying the plane, operating the rudders and the ailerons and taking off and landing. He goes through an entirely different course of instruction than a navigator does. I eventually ended up in the navigation school in Hondo, Texas, H-o-n-d-o, Texas. That was 16 weeks of intense training in all aspects of navigation.

And there are four kinds of navigation techniques that you learn. One is what we call "pilotage" p-i-l-o-t-a-g-e. That's simply looking down from an airplane to something on the ground to see where you are; that's all that is. The other things we learned were what we call "dead reckoning" and the celestial navigation and radio navigation.

Celestial navigation was the most difficult. We had to learn the names of 55 different stars. And, of course, how to "shoot" the sun and the moon in carrying out navigation over areas where you couldn't see the ground and that was very important out in the Central Pacific because 95% of the time

you were flying over water. There was nothing to look at down below and you had to navigate with your sextant getting your location from the sun.

LJ: Interesting. I've never been told that before.

RS: Now the truth is, we didn't use a lot of that in the South Pacific. All of our missions were daylight missions, so obviously you couldn't see any stars and all you had was the sun. But the most important navigation technique was what we called "dead reckoning." Dead reckoning was knowing the exact angle from due north, from your place to the target. And the navigator would instruct the pilot what heading to take to get to that target. Then he would set his instruments by those instructions.

But, of course, when you were over water, you had to determine how much you were drifting off course. You were always going to drift one way or the other because of wind. There was always wind. And the heading of the plane has to be adjusted to account for the wind or you'll go way off course one way or another. So you had to read what you called "drift" off the ocean waves. And, of course, inform the pilot about it so he knew how to direct the course of the plane in the right direction.

LJ: What was that like learning all that? How did you manage? I mean, it just sounds so complicated.

RS: Well it was sort of intense training. I liked it. I thought it was very exciting and interesting. I enjoyed it. You learned all about these stars. And you learned about how to use a sextant in "shooting" the sun. Getting sun lines and lining them up maybe with a radio signal of some type. Today, you know, they don't have navigators on airplanes anymore because they have such sophisticated equipment that there's nothing to it. But in those days, during World War II, especially over the Pacific, you had to be real careful. There were a lot of planes that were lost in the Pacific, not so much from combat as from getting off course; never finding your base.

LJ: After this point, where did you go?

RS: From . . .

LJ: From learning all the . . .

RS: Oh, after navigation school?

LJ: Navigation school, yes.

RS: Then I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant and was assigned – I got a rest leave of 10 days to go home and then . . .

LJ: What was that like, getting 10 days leave?

RS: Oh, that was great. That was the first time I'd been home since I left college for Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. So then I knew, at that time, I'd be going overseas. So after 10 days, I went down to Arizona and was assigned to a crew down there. The crew consists of a pilot, a copilot, a bombardier, navigator, front turret gunner, tail turret gunner, upper turret gunner, waist gunner, radio operator, and crew chief. There are 10 men on a B-24 and the belly turret gunner, too. There are 10 of us, anyway. And so then at that time, you see, we learned to fly as a crew. First time I'd ever met any of my crew members. And we lived together and worked together very well.

LJ: Were you a cohesive unit then?

RS: Yes, very much so. My pilot was from Montgomery, Minnesota; my copilot from Superior, Wisconsin; bombardier from Rhode Island; and the gunners were from various places – Florida, New Jersey, New Mexico. We worked together very well.

LJ: And now this was in a base in Arizona, correct?

RS: Correct.

LJ: And where did you go once you got your, your crew together?

RS: We started flying practice missions and simulated bombing missions over various places in Arizona. Then we moved up to Boise, Idaho, and did some more training up there and a lot of simulated bombing missions on the bombing range ... artificial 100-pound bombs with nothing but sand in them. And from there went to Kansas City, Missouri, at which point we flew to an airbase near Sacramento, California. From Sacramento, California, then we took off across the Golden Gate Bridge down to Hawaii. There we spent another five months in Hawaii, getting together with the entire group.

I was with the 494th Bomb Group, which was the last bomb group to go over as a unit into a combat area. So we were one cohesive unit from the very beginning. We were not substitutes going over into different groups.

In November 1944, we flew down to various islands in the Pacific and ended up, as I said earlier, in the Palau Islands; based on the southernmost island

in the Palau Islands, a little island called Angaur, A-n-g-a-u-r. This island was about a mile long and half-a-mile wide. It had been taken away from the Japanese by the – I think it was the 81st Army Division – and there were still a few Japanese hold-outs on one part of the island when we got down there; but they were isolated pretty much by, I think, the Marines. Anyway, we pitched our tents down there on this island and almost immediately started flying our missions from there.

LJ: How long were you there?

RS: We were there from November 1944 through June of '45. We flew a whole bunch of missions from there – most of them against the Philippine Islands. The Philippines, at that time, were occupied by the Japanese; so we bombed the various Japanese bases in the Philippine Islands from November 1944 to – well, through June of 1945.

LJ: What was life like on those islands?

RS: Well, believe it or not, it was kind of idyllic in a way. We were right on the shore of the ocean. And there was a nice lagoon right in front of our base where we could go swimming, and really kind of neat. But, of course, we were under pressure to fly missions every, oh, every three or four days. And so it's a pretty tense situation.

LJ: What were those missions like?

RS: They were quite long, most of them. We flew missions against Corregidor Island and Luzon in the Philippines. And, I think, maybe as many as 20 flights against these various bases that the Japanese held in the Philippines. We'd always be met by flak anti-aircraft fire on almost every mission, and sometimes by Japanese fighter planes that would attack our formations.

LJ: Sounds scary?

RS: Well it is scary, because you're always afraid of getting killed or maimed or shot down or something, and some of our planes were shot down on these missions. So it's a very tense situation. But we worked together very well and I was always very proud of the fact that no member of our crew ever failed to show up for a mission.

LJ: That's amazing. Tell us about some of the people you met while in the military, any particular buddy stories that stand out?

RS: Oh, I became very close to the pilot and copilot, maybe because they were from Minnesota and Wisconsin so we were closely aligned in that way. But my bombardier, who was from Rhode Island – the four of us – the pilot, copilot, myself and the bombardier all lived in one tent. The six enlisted men, the gunners and so on, they lived in a tent of their own. So we became very close. We each had a cot in this one tent and lived together for months, just the four of us. So, you know, you become very close to those people. And we had reunions after the war, too. We got together after the war.

LJ: So you went to reunions, do you still talk to any of them?

RS: Of the ten men in my crew, six are dead; and there are four of us left. I'm going to go out and see my friend, the turret gunner, next year out in Visalia, California.

LJ: That's wonderful.

RS: He's still in good health.

LJ: Amazing.

RS: My copilot, who I think I was probably closer to than any of them is in an Alzheimer's unit down in Florida. I went to visit him a year ago and he didn't know me anymore.

LJ: Oh, I'm sorry.

RS: Which is pretty sad and the radio operator lives in a little town near Atlanta, and I've seen him at a number of reunions.

LJ: That's great.

RS: So.

LJ: How did you feel about leaving the military and when did that occur?

RS: Well at the end of the war. Our obligation during the war was to fly 40 missions. We flew our 40th mission from Okinawa to Japan the day after the Japanese offered to surrender, but before the United States had accepted their surrender terms. So between the time the Japanese offered to surrender and the time the war was over, we flew our 40th mission and there was no letup of any kind until the United States accepted the Japanese offer to surrender. So it was kind of ironic, we didn't want to get killed after the

Japanese had already offered to surrender; but we still had to fly that last mission. We finished that last mission ... two days later the war was over. And because we'd finished 40 missions, we were one of the first to go home.

LJ: Good for you.

RS: **And we flew down to Manila in the Philippines; and then took a Dutch boat. It took us 28 days to go from Manila to Seattle. The boat moved at about 15 miles an hour. We never saw land for 28 days, but we got back to Seattle in October of 1945.**

The thing that I remember most about Seattle was landing there and seeing all the color – red and white and blue. We'd never seen that for months and months. Everything was gray ... all the gray uniforms and so on. So there were men there with red cheeks and we all were sallow or brown. We had taken Atabrine to ward off malaria, and that gave our skin sort of a yellow cast, and that didn't go away for months afterward. But nobody got mal, nobody got malaria.

LJ: That's great.

RS: So.

LJ: So what was the feeling like being on that boat for 28 days, knowing you were going home? That was a long time on a boat but you knew you were done with your military service. What was that like? Was it a sense of relief?

RS: **Yes, it was totally different. The time that you felt this huge burden off your shoulders was when I was at an outdoor movie on Okinawa and I heard a lot of guns going off. And then in the background, I heard someone saying, "The war is over. The war is over." And I couldn't believe it. The atom bomb had been dropped some days before that which we knew nothing about, of course. This was a huge sense of relief because we knew we'd probably live. So that was a huge sense of relief that we were going to go home and we'd be okay.**

LJ: What did you do for 28 days on that boat going home . . .

RS: Oh, we read books . . .

LJ: knowing that the worst was behind you?

RS: Oh, yes. Well it was a good feeling. Of course, we didn't know what it would be like when we got home. But I read books. I'd stand on the prow of the boat and watch the flying fish – fly out. They'd go as much as a hundred feet or more, as the boat was plowing through the water. It was a Dutch ship with Dutch crew.

The Dutch crew hadn't been home for five years ... all during the war. The Nazis, you see, invaded Holland in 1940 and this crew was out on the ocean at the time so they never went back. They participated, of course, in the war effort just like the rest of us. So I suppose they were anxious to get home, too.

LJ: I bet. I can't imagine five years.

RS: Those guys were gone five years.

LJ: And how many years had been for you?

RS: We were overseas from June of '44 to August of '45, a little over a year.

LJ: Rolf, what did you do after you left the military?

RS: Well I went home during the fall of '45; and I knew I wanted to finish St. Olaf College. So I went back to St. Olaf College, starting in February 1946.

LJ: What was that like going back to college after that?

RS: Oh, it was good. There were other guys that had been in the service that I knew and they came back, too. So, yes, that was great.

LJ: And what degree did you walk away with from St. Olaf?

RS: It was a bachelor degree and I majored in history. Then I went to law school and spent four years in law school and . . .

LJ: Where did you go to law school?

RS: I went to Harvard Law School after St. Olaf and came back and joined a big law firm in Minneapolis for a couple years and worked for the City Attorney's Office in Minneapolis for two years. Then I spent seven years in the attorney general's office in St. Paul, assigned to the highway department. And then I went down to Albert Lea, Minnesota, and was there for 20 years before we moved up here to Fertile.

LJ: Do you have any stories that stand out you'd like to tell before we close?

RS: **Oh, I've written up all those stories in my memoirs.**

LJ: That's great and you wrote how many books?

RS: **Two different memoirs, I got all kinds of stories in there.**

LJ: That's wonderful. That's a great keepsake for your family, too.

RS: **Yes, I thought they would enjoy it and I think they did. And I thought I should contribute to the history of World War II by someone who knew something about it.**

LJ: Who lived it.

RS: **Yes.**

LJ: Absolutely, that's terrific.

RS: **You see, we got back after the war and it was impossible to talk to anyone, who hadn't been in the war, about what we had done because you didn't feel that they could possibly understand what it was like. Maybe they could, but we didn't feel . . .**

So I didn't talk about it for years and years, until I wrote those memoirs. I might talk about to those who had been through it, but not to others. My younger sister, was always pestering me for "Tell me what happened? What happened?" Then my dad finally told her to "Lay off, leave him alone. Don't ask him all these questions."

LJ: Did it take a while for you to want to talk about it and finally put in on paper?

RS: **Oh yes, I didn't put it on paper until 1997. Which was some years after the war ended. And I was glad I did because I felt better about it. To write it up you had to relive the whole thing again, and that was kind of difficult.**

LJ: Difficult but also maybe cathartic?

RS: **Yes, I think so.**

LJ: Good for you. That's great.

RS: Yes, I think it was.

LJ: Rolf, how would you like to be remembered?

RS: As a veteran? Oh, I'd like to be remembered as a person that did his duty during World War II. I never thought that we were quote *The Greatest Generation* end quote that Tom Brokaw talked about. I just thought of us as doing our duty and being proud of what we did; and then, after the war was over, we just took up our lives and went on.

You hear a lot about posttraumatic stress syndrome now. That was unheard of back after World War II, but I suppose there were a lot people that had that; I don't know, maybe we all were. But it was one of the greatest experiences of my life. It really was. I'll never forget it ... can't forget it. I mean, I shared that experience with nine other men that none of us were able to really explain very well to other people.

LJ: Thank you, Rolf.

RS: You're welcome.