Interview with Herb Ericksen

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Interviewer: Lee Patton

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Patton: My name is Lee Patton. This is January 10, 2008, and I am interviewing Herb Ericksen: E-r-i-c-k-s-e-n, at his home in Springfield, IL. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library *Veterans Remember* Oral History Project. As a general overview, Mr. Ericksen served in both World War II and the Korean War. He was a pilot in the Air Services, and since his discharge from the service, he has lived in various parts of the country, and now resides in Springfield.

Herb, I'd like to begin by asking you to talk about your family background. Where you were born, where you grew up, your family, and so on. So if you could talk about that, I'll ask questions to fill in.

Ericksen: Okay. I was born in 1925 in Chicago, IL. I lived there until I was eighteen, and then went into the Service. It was World War II. My father's occupation was tool and die maker; mother was a housewife. Siblings: I had one sister, six years my senior. My education included high school, college with a degree in mechanical engineering, bachelor of science, and study, partially for an MBA, and did not complete.

Patton: How did you come to be interested in joining the military?

Ericksen: Well, World War II broke out when I was in high school, and I was always a fan of airplanes. I used to build models of them from the age of eight years through high school. When the war broke out, there was opportunities to get into the pilot training program, which I joined.

Patton: Could you explain a little bit more about the pilot training program, and how you joined?

Ericksen: Okay. I got my issuance of orders at my home in Chicago to report to Fort Sheridan, IL. And from there, we took a troop train to Miami Beach, FL, where we had basic training in marching and drilling. And then that began transfers to Army Air Corps training program. [At the time there was not a separate Air Force; the services had their own corps.]

Patton: Okay. Could we back up a little bit before you actually went off to training, and talk about how you got into the service? My understanding is there was a special way to join while

you were still in high school?

Ericksen: Yes. The losses during World War II in the Air Force was quite high. They were losing a lot of pilots and air crews due to anti-aircraft guns. The need became great, and so they decided to go to high schools all over the United States and give an exam for those who wanted to get into the pilot training program. If you passed their written test, you were then offered to come in. And you were then, so to speak, drafted into the Army Air Corps.

Patton: So was that your senior year in high school?

Ericksen: That was my senior year. Correct.

Patton: And how did your parents feel about you taking this test, and joining up?

Ericksen: Well, they weren't very enthusiastic about it, but it was wartime and they knew that people my age and older were going and volunteering to go in the Service.

Patton: You probably would have been drafted had you not joined. I mean, after—

Ericksen: Yeah. If I had not done that, I would have been drafted. Yes.

Patton: So while you were still in high school, did having been accepted to this program mean you did anything, or you were just on a list someplace?

Ericksen: Well, I took the test.

Patton: Uh-huh. Then what? Did you have any training while you were in high school, or just—

Ericksen: No.

Patton: You were on the list?

Ericksen: Just on the list to be called.

Patton: So when you graduated, what happened?

Ericksen: Okay. I graduated in 1943 in June. They gave you a choice of when you wanted to start the program. Well, you had to be eighteen years old, and when I graduated from high school I was seventeen. I would have been eighteen on October the first, and I asked to go in November 1, 1943. I got my orders on November first to report.

Patton: And the orders were to go where?

Ericksen: First to, well, to report to Fort Sheridan, IL, and from there on, they took over.

Patton: What do you remember about your first couple of days in the Service? Were you scared a little bit?

Ericksen: Apprehensive would be a good term for it. Not knowing what comes next, and wondering

about the future of the war, and what our part would be.

Patton: Was anybody else from your neighborhood or your high school there at the same training session?

Ericksen: No. My best friend went into the Navy Air Corps, but other than that, I did not have any classmates or neighbors that went in at the same time.

Patton: So how did you get into pilot training? Was that something you had to specially request, or because you were in the Army Air Corps, was that a given that you would become a pilot?

Ericksen: That was a given. That was the test to get into the pilot training program.

Patton: Okay. And did they give you any further testing, to see if you had that kind of aptitude?

Ericksen: Well, yes. After we got in, as I mentioned, we went to Miami Beach, FL, and we were given two things: a psychological exam by a doctor, and also a—they called it a psychomotive test –a dexterity exam. Interestingly enough, that reduced the number of people that reported to about, oh, less than a third passed both of those hurdles, so to speak.

Patton: And you were one of the successful ones.

Ericksen: I was one of the third. Right.

Patton: So then what kind of training did you go through at that point?

Ericksen: Well, we became—it was Army Air Corps, so we had to learn how to march. It had nothing to do with flying airplanes, but that was part of their program. Oh! We also, then were transferred to the University of Tennessee for five months of college training in math, physics, and geography. I attended the University of Tennessee in Knoxville for five months.

Patton: Had you had those kinds of courses in high school?

Ericksen: Yeah, but not at the college level.

Patton: Right. So how did you find it, in terms of difficulty?

Ericksen: Not that difficult. It was just a little more advanced.

Patton: Something that you felt comfortable with, the kind of demands that were made. Was it in the context of flying, or was it just straight?.

Ericksen: The only concept of flying was, one of the courses was weather, in depth, and geography in depth. It was a world training program of geography, which was a little beyond the high school level.

Patton: Going back to before you went to Tennessee, I understand you had interesting living

accommodations and training accommodations? You lived in a high rise, I believe?

Ericksen: Yes. It was one of the famous high rise hotels in Miami Beach, was our living accommodations. Hardly typical of Army quarters, but it was very comfortable.

Patton: And you trained on a golf course?

Ericksen: And trained on a golf course. And marching, and—yes. So.

Patton: Did other people give you a bad time about being in such luxurious quarters here?

Ericksen: No. They just felt we were luckier than the ground troops.

Patton: Back when you were learning to march, were your instructors pretty demanding, or—

Ericksen: Yes. Typical Army. They were Army Sergeants, and they gave us Army discipline in marching, which is pretty vocal and demanding.

Patton: So how did you feel about your training at that point? Were you anxious to get into the airplane?

Ericksen: Well, that was always the hope. And the sooner the better, yes.

Patton: When did that happen for you? When did you get into real planes, or even simulated planes?

Ericksen: Well, it was after the University of Tennessee. And then it was back to Florida, in Arcadia, FL for primary training, which is the first of three phases.

Patton: What were the three phases?

Ericksen: Well, primary flying, and then basic flying, which was in Montgomery, AL. And then advanced flying training was in Albany, GA. Then we graduated at that time, and got our wings, and commissioned officers.

Patton: And that was in 1945?

Ericksen: Nineteen forty-five, yes.

Patton: So, from November of '43 to June of '45 was your background training, and so on.

Ericksen: In the military. Correct.

Patton: Do you remember the first time you got to actually fly an airplane?

Ericksen: I should back up. That was in the University of Tennessee. We did get ten hours in a Cub airplane—that was my first experience of flying an airplane—because that was part of the college program.

Patton: And how was it for you?

Ericksen: Very interesting. I became more interested in going ahead with it. At that point, I had no choice. I was there.

Patton: (laughs) You were there, but you enjoyed it nonetheless.

Ericksen: Absolutely.

Patton: Before that had all been making model airplanes, and—

Ericksen: Right.

Patton: And so on.

Ericksen: The first real—

Patton: Did you ever, when you were in training, have any close calls or problems?

Ericksen: No. No, I never had a problem. In advanced flying, your final exam was—this was, now, a high-powered bomber called the B-25 –and your last flight was as a solo, so to be with a companion student. We used to go, under an instructor, to what they called an auxiliary field and practice landings and takeoffs. I had decided that we should go over there, and take a break, and have a cup of coffee, and then take off again. When I got back to the headquarters and they found out I'd gone to auxiliary field, they said, “No student is allowed to do that. It has to be an instructor that goes on auxiliary field.” So that was my big mistake, but I obviously survived it.

Patton: Did you get disciplined for it?

Ericksen: No. Reprimanded verbally, but not too tough.

Patton: But I take it you landed and took off without any problems.

Ericksen: Absolutely.

Patton: Tell me about your plane. Didn’t you say it was a B-25—

Ericksen: I did.

Patton: —was what you were training?

Ericksen: That was the last phase of it.

Patton: Last phase of it.

Ericksen: The advanced.

Patton: How many different kinds of planes, or what different kinds of planes did you—

Ericksen: In training?

Patton: In training.

Ericksen: There were four. The Piper Cub at college, the University of Tennessee. Primary flying as an ancient airplane called the Stearman, aerobatic capable plane. It was a single engine biplane, which means two wings. Primary basic was an advanced training plane, called the AT-6, still in use today. Then advanced was B-25 bomber, twin engine. High powered.

Patton: Was that bomber designed for some specific activity? I mean, was it designed to bomb—

Ericksen: Bomb in war. Yeah, low-level bomber. Uh-huh.

Patton: So at that point, everybody was being trained on bombers, and to be bombers?

Ericksen: No. No. Good point—At some point—I don't know whether it was—I think it was recommended of the instructors. They split us off, and I don't remember the proportions, but some of our classmates went into fighter pilots. Then I was in the other part of it—bombers and larger airplanes.

Patton: Did you have to choose that or would they just assign you?

Ericksen: No, they assigned it based on instructors' judgment and whatever.

Patton: And was that okay with you?

Ericksen: Yeah. Yeah.

Patton: Did you prefer to do that, or wherever you could be a pilot?

Ericksen: Didn't matter—to me. I'm glad I went where I did, but at the time it didn't matter. There was one more step to my training. After graduation from getting my wings and a commission, I then went to a field in Illinois, as a matter of fact, at Lawrenceville, and was checked out in a plane that I ended up flying in Korea. It was called the C-46. It's a transport. That was 1945. By November first, I got discharged.

Patton: So you had all this training, and then they sent you home.

Ericksen: Sent me home, yes.

Patton: But the war was over, so it was—

Ericksen: Yes.

Patton: –represented a good reason.

Ericksen: Yes, it was.

Patton: How did they come to send you to Lawrenceville to the cargo training?

Ericksen: Well, interestingly enough, based on proficiency of how well you did. This is a side story, and it's an interesting one. The C-46 which I learned to fly in Lawrenceville, IL after graduating from pilot training, the airplane itself was designed to fly over the Himalayas. There had been no airplanes to that point that could fly over 30,000 feet, and you had to do that to get across the Himalayas. In World War II, there was a thing called the Burma Road, which was a long, arduous mountain trip to get supplies to India. [Claire Chenault's Flying Tigers made it famous] The Chinese had blocked out any other path. So when they designed the C-46, it was designed to fly the Himalayas. Well, when I went to George Field, IL at Lawrenceville, they wanted to replace the guys that had been flying the Himalayas, and I was assigned to be part of the relief crews. We went through Kansas City to wait for further orders. Well, in Japan—Korea, at that time. But they decided they no longer needed to do that. The war was over, and all the paths were open. So, fortunately—I didn't care to go to that, but I would have, obviously.

Patton: Why would you not have wanted to?

Ericksen: I wanted to get out and go to school. I'd gotten my training, and I flew the airplanes, and it was successful. I wanted to get on with my life. Civilian life.

Patton: I see. So you weren't much interested in—didn't they call that "flying the hump" or something?

Ericksen: That's exactly what it was: flying the hump.

Patton: So you never had to do that, because they discontinued the activity.

Ericksen: The need was no longer there.

Patton: While you were in training, the war was still going on. How did you follow it? What did you think about? Were you concerned that you might never get home? Ericksen:Oh, in the back of the mind, but when you're that young, you're invincible, and so I never really had the fear of dying, although I was aware that our losses had been quite high. But you always have the confidence that you'll not be one of those that have problems.

Patton: Before they brought up this cargo, the hump thing, were you anxious to get into the actual war?

Ericksen: Mixed emotions. Nothing either negative or positive. I knew that was a duty, if that's what I was assigned, but I didn't have a concern over it, no.

Patton: Were there any other particularly memorable experiences in your training during that year and a half period?

Ericksen: Positive one. My primary instructor had forwarded a recommendation that I complete my pilot training in the next two phases with the class at West Point, which I thought was a tremendous honor, and it would have been. Unfortunately, this was June of 1945, and World War II ended, and they did not feel they needed to extend that offer to me. I would have loved to have done that. I would have graduated with the class at West Point.

Patton: That would have been...

Ericksen: Quite an honor.

Patton: …quite an honor, I suppose.

Ericksen: Yeah.

Patton: At least you know that they thought you were capable and a good candidate for that, which is very complimentary.

Ericksen: It's a high point in my ego trip.

Patton: When you were training, is there anything unique about training to be a pilot of a cargo plane, as opposed to just flying a plane?

Ericksen: Well, good question, in that in your training, you go through three phases, and each time you're in a bigger and more powerful airplane. Jumping into a twin-engine transport, which is, by comparison, a huge airplane, that just takes more effort and knowledge to take it off and land it. Other than that, it just adds to your proficiency and training.

Patton: Now, I'm hypothesizing here, but if you have a planeload of cargo, do you have to learn to accommodate that weight, or—

Ericksen: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Interesting scenario to that: when I first landed—I may be getting ahead of the story, but—are we to the point of talking about the Korean War yet?

Patton: Well, not yet, but go ahead.

Ericksen: Well, there's a story that—I'll wait until that one.

Patton: Okay. So you felt that your training was appropriate? You felt like if they did send you right away, you would be ready to start delivering cargo out of one of these planes?

Ericksen: Oh, yes. My trip to fly the hump was cancelled. I was well aware of the capabilities of flying the hump. Yes.

Patton: When we talked a little earlier in preparation for this interview, you mentioned that you flew, I think, is the right hand seat, or the left?

Ericksen: Left. Left hand, and—

Patton: That's the command pilot seat.

Ericksen: Command pilot. How did you earn that distinction?

Patton: By proficiency.

Ericksen: Proficiency. Yeah.

Patton: So did you have to go through the chairs? I mean, did you have to fly on the right hand seat first, or you just were good enough that they put you immediately into the command pilot?

Ericksen: Went right into the left seat. Yeah.

Patton: So did that involve a lot of decision making?

Ericksen: Yes.

Patton: And other kinds of non-manual kinds of activity?

Ericksen: Well, yeah. You were in command of the crew; the crew varies from anywhere from four to six people total, and you were in charge. Yeah, I had additional responsibility, other than taking off and landing an airplane.

Patton: So you were pretty proud to have achieved your wings and your pilot status?

Ericksen: Command pilot status? Absolutely. Yeah. Still am.

Patton: That's very good to hear. It's quite an accomplishment. So at that point, when the Burma thing was cancelled, you were discharged. How did they let you know you were no longer needed?

Ericksen: Would you ask that question again?

Patton: I said, How did they let you know, at the time of your discharge, that you weren't going to have to fly in the hump?

Ericksen: Oh. We got orders, depending on where you lived and your home territory, that got you back to your home state, and discharge papers, leading up to discharge, so.

Patton: You knew what was coming?

Ericksen: Yeah.

Patton: And what was your reaction to that?

Ericksen: I was pleased at that point, since I was no longer needed there for what I went into initially.

Patton: You weren't married at that point, is that correct?

Ericksen: No. No.

Patton: But were you totally discharged, or were you kept in some kind of reserve?

Ericksen: No, I was totally discharged. Joined the Reserves at a later time.

Patton: Okay. I want to digress a little bit. I warned you that I would want to talk about this. At some point in your Service career, the Army Air Corps became the [United States] Air Force.

Ericksen: Yes.

Patton: Do you remember when that occurred, and what was the background for that?

Ericksen: Okay. Yes, it occurred after I got out. I got out in 1945, discharged. Then 1947—advancement at aviation had really expedited as a result of the war, and the Army Air Corps became so big that it was equivalent to the other three Services: Marines, Navy, and Army. They decided to make it another major stand-alone military organization. That created the US Air Force, no longer Army.

Patton: Did you have an opinion on whether it was a good idea?

Ericksen: Oh, I think it was a good idea. Yeah.

Patton: What kind of differences does it make, in terms of the operation of the—

Ericksen: Oh, I think behind the scenes, the Army was prejudiced in using it for their methods and needs, and it proved out later on they did create some ... airplane activities in the Army. But the Air Force has grown, and it still is a major part of the military.

Patton: Are you saying that the Army sort of recreated its own air support?

Ericksen: Yes. Yes. So that they had control of the things that were directly applied and needed for their military mission. So.

Patton: I read someplace that there was so much desire to be separate that the new Air Force people, transformed Air Force people, even wore their insignia on the opposite side from where they had been. Did you ever hear that?

Ericksen: No. I'm not surprised that it happened, but I don't recall that in my history.

Patton: What did the normal serviceman think about this? Did you have an opinion about whether it should have been part of the Army, or—

Ericksen: From a personal standpoint, I thought that it was definitely the right thing to do, to have a separate Air Force under its own command, yes.

Patton: So when you went back in, did you notice much difference?

Ericksen: Oh, quite a bit. Oh, yes.

Patton: And what would that have been?

Ericksen: We didn't have to march anymore. (both laugh) The whole philosophy of the Air Force was support, not active war zone activities to the intensity the Army needed for its own

use. So we still—I may be jumping ahead a little bit, but it was still our mission to drop Army paratroopers. But that's the primary Army connection that we had that I thought we were well equipped to do in the Air Force.

Patton: Okay. So going back to the time of your discharge, you went home to Chicago—

Ericksen: Um-hm.

Patton: And what did you next?

Ericksen: Went to college under the GI Bill. Well, I went to Wright Junior College first, a two-year college. Now they're called community colleges, like Lincoln Land. And then we got married. And—

Patton: This is your high school sweetheart?

Ericksen: My high school sweetheart—and took a job for a couple years. At that point, they opened up a Reserve Air Force unit in Chicago O'Hare field. It was called Orchard Place at that time, airport. That's where the ORD comes on baggage tickets.

Patton: For Orchard?

Ericksen: Uh-huh. Orchard Place, the original airport. So I joined the Reserves there at O'Hare, which was great. They had all various types of single engine, and trainers, and twin engine, and C-46s. It was while I was going to Wright Junior College. I could call up out there and ask for an airplane, and go out there and buzz around. Didn't cost me anything and the government supplied the gasoline, so it was a nice arrangement. However, I paid for it by getting called back in Korea, but that's another chapter.

Patton: Do you know why they formed the Reserve unit out there? Were they expecting problems, or...

Ericksen: Yeah. I think ... I think there were people that were of high level, General level, in the Chicagoland area that felt it would be nice to have an Air Force unit in Chicagoland area.

Patton: So did you have to do any formal reporting? I mean, did you have to go off to summer camp and those kinds of things?

Ericksen: Yes! A good question. We had monthly meetings, not required, but almost everybody showed up. And then we had two weeks of summer training. Used to go to Indiana, Atterberry.

Patton: This was on further pilot training, or other aspects?

Ericksen: Efficiency and just proficiency, and yeah. More practice.

Patton: Did you get paid for doing this?

Ericksen: No. Air Force Reserve did not get paid until after the Korean War.

Patton: So main benefit from your perspective was to be able to go out and buzz around in an airplane when you chose to.

Ericksen: Yeah. Right.

Patton: Could you take your sweetheart/wife?

Ericksen: No. No. I would love to do it, but no.

Patton: How often do you think you did that?

Ericksen: Well, that was two, three years.

Patton: I mean how often would you go flying?

Ericksen: Prior to going to camps?

Patton: Prior to going to camps and over to Korea.

Ericksen: Oh, at least once or twice a week.

Patton: So you really kept your hand in this as a flier.

Ericksen: Yeah. Oh, yes. Yes.

Patton: What was the size of the plane you could use?

Ericksen: It was a single engine advanced trainer called the T-6.

Patton: Okay. So it wasn't a big bomber type, but it was—

Ericksen: We did that as a group once a month. We'd fly formation with our bigger airplanes.

Patton: So at what point were you notified that you had to be activated?

Ericksen: Okay. There's a step ahead of that in my career, my life. We had gotten married while I was at junior college, and August first we got a telegram, saying, "You have ten days to clean up your personal affairs and report to O'Hare Field." It was O'Hare Field by then.

Patton: Was this 1950?

Ericksen: Nineteen fifty. August first of 1950, and you had ten days. And so it came as a shock. I didn't expect that to come that soon, if ever. The wife and I decided to celebrate, so we went to the Allerton Hotel in Chicago and had dinner. Celebration. Ten days later I was at O'Hare.

Patton: You're getting ready to go off to Korea.

Ericksen: Yeah. Right.

Patton: Did you know where you were going to go?

Ericksen: No, no. That's a very interesting question. We had forty-eight airplanes—which is considered a wing, four squadrons of twelve planes each. We didn't leave for about six weeks, because our planes needed to get more fuel tanks; they put them inside the cabin as our auxiliary tank, because our jumping off point from the United States was Sacramento, California, and the trip to Hawaii was our next stop. Twenty-four hundred-some miles. The plane we flew, the C-46, did not have that range. That's when we had the extra tanks. So it took about four or five weeks to get these gas tanks added in the fuselage. In the meantime, we had gone to Shaw Field, Sumter, South Carolina as our staging area. So while our planes were being shifted back and forth to get more gas tanks, we were down there. Then we left from there to Travis Air Base to Hawaii, and then island hopped all the way to Japan. That was our ultimate base.

Patton: At that point, all you knew was you were going to Hawaii and...

Ericksen: Yeah. And we didn't know any more than that. We knew then we were going to a few more places, island by island. Each was an overnight stay. But it was Johnson Island after Hickham Field, Hawaii. Kwajalein,[1] one of the islands they got with terrific battles in World War II. Guam was our next one. At that point, we had an All Assembly, and then told us where our destination was at that point.

Patton: I'm sure there was a lot of speculation as you were hopping.

Ericksen: Well, we knew we were going to end up somewhere in the Far East, but, uh...

Patton: But where is...

Ericksen: … where, is the question. Where we ended up was the southern island of Japan, which is Kyushu.

Patton: And could you spell that for me?

Ericksen: K-y-u-s-h ... a-a, I think. Kyush*a*. [Kyushu] I've got it in a map somewhere.

Patton: Okay. And you say that's an island at the south of Japan?

Ericksen: Southern island of Japan. Well, I kind of—here, I've got it.

(pause)

Patton: We're temporarily ... hunting for a map. Okay. Good. So ... You ended up in Kyushu, southern island of Japan. And, ...

Ericksen: It was our operating base to fly missions to Korea.

Patton: That's what they told in this big group?

[1] The southernmost and largest of the Marshall Islands atoll.

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Ericksen: In the meeting in Guam.

Patton: Did your whole wing go to the same place?

Ericksen: Forty-eight airplanes went there.

Patton: What were you told would be your specific mission?

Ericksen: Transporting supplies: gasoline, food. Christmas presents—we flew in at Christmastime for the Army, Navy, Marines—and wounded out.

Patton: But you were going to be based...

Ericksen: In Kyushu.

Patton: In Kyushu.

Ericksen: It was only 109 miles to Korea from there.

Patton: So you'd pick up—

Ericksen: Forty-five minutes of—

Patton: —materials or whatever it was you had to pick up in—

Ericksen: No, no. We'd be loaded.

Patton: But you'd load up in Japan?

Ericksen: Yeah, in Japan. That was cared for. And when we got to the airplane to leave, it was all loaded.

Patton: And how often would you go? Every day? Every other day?

Ericksen: Oh, I'd say about every third day you'd fly a mission into Korea.

Patton: Did you go usually to one place, or...

Ericksen: No. All over.

Patton: All over.

Ericksen: Well, the war changed almost—not quite daily—but it moved back and forth. North Koreans at one point almost got the whole country of Korea under their wing. The city of Pusan was the last spot where the South Koreans were holding off. But at that point, the United States had entered into it, and started pushing it further north. So as our success progressed further north, we had more and more missions to follow them.

Patton: Would you go to several places on a trip, or would you—

Ericksen: No.

Patton: Just one destination?

Ericksen: One motive. They'd take everything off and we'd fly back empty.

Patton: What was it like when you would fly? You said that the plane was all loaded when you went out to get aboard. How early would you leave?

Ericksen: Six or seven in the morning.

Patton: And did you ever encounter any flak or other dangers en route or while you were there?

Ericksen: Fortunately we were enough behind the fighting action that we did not get any. We didn't have to fly over enemy territory, so we didn't get any ... flak, so to speak.

Patton: So it really wasn't that dangerous, the actual flying?

Ericksen: Correct. With one exception. I was about to land in Pusan, Korea, and a Navy fighter plane by control tower was called in to go ahead of me. It had what they called hung bombs: they tried to release them as bombers over Korea, over the enemy, and they didn't release. They wouldn't let it land on the carrier, understandably. So they directed it to the air strip I was going to land on, and I was right behind them. Navy planes, in order to make it a short trip landing on a carrier, they come in very hard and just slam down. Well, if you did that with bombs hanging out, it might release in the air. Well, it did. When I followed him in—and they wanted to get you in fast, because we still had guerillas in the mountains that overlooked the airbase—so when I landed—my wheels not too far behind this—his bombs had flown off. And one of them exploded under my right wing. Fortunately, it missed the gas tank. But it was—

Patton: Close call, yeah.

Ericksen: Scary.

Patton: Yes, I should think so.

Ericksen: After that, put a big hole in the bottom of the wing and top of the wing, went on through. It got repaired there, and then we took it back.

Patton: Did you have difficulty maneuvering the plane like that, or you were able to make it stop?

Ericksen: By that point, yeah, I was...

Patton: You were down?

Ericksen: Down, yeah.

Patton: Were there any other particularly memorable flights for you?

Ericksen: Oh, bad weather was always a factor. Always ended up getting to the place I wanted to be, even though the weather was bad. Couple of times I flew only fifty or sixty feet off the water, following the shoreline of Korea to get to the point where I wanted to go. Other than that, and that accident with the Navy plane, no serious incidents, threat of life or what have you.

Patton: You said you went about every three days. Were there other planes going alternative—I mean, there were flights each day?

Ericksen: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Patton: So it was just your turn was on a three-day rotation?

Ericksen: Well, and I wasn't the only one that day. We had forty-eight airplanes. So there's probably fifteen or twenty of them, or any odd number, going every day.

Patton: What were the circumstances when you brought back wounded? Was that like a special situation? Did they call you out?

Ericksen: Well, yes. You knew what your mission was. We rarely ever went over there empty, but when you went and got wounded, you were empty going there, and then come back; I only did it once. There was a Naval hospital ship anchored off of South Korea where most of the wounded went. We only brought back some serious ones that, then, were transported to the United States for major help.

Patton: Was that in relation to a specific battle, or a particular...

Ericksen: Yeah. As a matter of fact, the only one time I—one or maybe twice—the worst battle in Korea was the Chosin Reservoir—they call the Frozen Chosin—where the temperature was, oh, thirty and forty below. Unfortunately, the poor Army guys had ill-equipped boots, and they had frozen feet. It was a sad situation. They would get transported to the Naval hospital ship.

Patton: Was there a specific landing field near where …?

Ericksen: Well, yeah. Hung Nam, which was the northernmost airstrip we went to. Way, way up north. Pretty close to China.

Patton: How did you feel about being a cargo pilot? Did you feel—was it just a routine job, or was it sort of a mission?

Ericksen: Flying into Korea in wartime was not routine. (laughs) However, the hazard wasn't—the known hazard—was not that great. I really never had any fear of being able to come back after a mission. You felt you were a mission of mercy, so I guess that helped with the attitude.

Patton: So did you think of yourself as part of a team that—

Ericksen: Yeah.

Patton: The folks on the ground and the folks in the air?

Ericksen: Absolutely.

Patton: What did you do in between flights?

Ericksen: Played baseball on the field. We had our own baseball team. At some point in our discussion I had a career change while I was over there. Base operations conducts the pilot dispatch center, the weather station, and the control tower. I was moved in as Assistant Base Operations officer. So I was taken off of significant missions to Korea anymore. Occasionally I would go, but...

Patton: When was that?

Ericksen: Well, it was after I had been there, oh, eight or ten months. I was there a total of eighteen, so that was an enjoyable experience, having...

Patton: To be the Base Operations Officer?

Ericksen: Assistant Base Operations, yeah.

Patton: What were your responsibilities in that role?

Ericksen: Well, every pilot that leaves the base has to fill out a form that says what they're doing and where they're going. That has be approved by the Base Operations in general so that we know where they're going, why, and when they're coming back.

Patton: Not just when they're flying, but anywhere they're going?

Ericksen: Oh, yeah. Especially *when* they were going.

Patton: In case they were needed, you needed to get them back.

Ericksen: Right. Now, the weather station, of course, is highly important. And then the control tower, personnel.

Patton: Did you work in the control tower, or were you just a supervisor there?

Ericksen: A supervisor of them.

Patton: So you sort of got into an administrative—

Ericksen: Absolutely. Yeah.

Patton: And how did you feel about that?

Ericksen: I felt good.

Patton: You were chosen for your demonstrated skill?

Ericksen: I hope so, but (laughs) nobody told me that.

Patton: They just said, Here's what you do tomorrow, huh?

Ericksen: Well, yeah. I wasn't asked if I want to do it, but...

Patton: So you flew for nine or ten months, and then you did that for how long?

Ericksen: Another nine months. I was there eighteen months altogether.

Patton: Eighteen. Okay. So half of it was flying, and half of it was administering the—

Ericksen: Right.

Patton: Flight operations.

Ericksen: Right. Flight operations.

Patton: So, certainly this would have meant less time for baseball?

Ericksen: Oh! No, (laughs) that was only an occasional once or twice a week activity.

Patton: Okay. Well, what I meant was that there was less routine and more everyday you were on the job.

Ericksen: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. Yes, I...

Patton: I read someplace that there was a very tight control over the activities of American service people that—and I can't remember if it was the people in Japan, or only in Korea, where—no fraternizing with the communities. I've heard it described as very boring. Did you find that in Japan?

Ericksen: Not at all. That must have been Korea. No, we got off the base, and went into town.

Patton: What town was that? Was it Kia(?)? What town was it?

Ericksen: Okiyoka(?).

Patton: And do you know how to spell that?

Ericksen: Boy.

Patton: That's okay. Okiyoka(?).

Ericksen: I can find it somewhere.

Patton: That's all right. How large a town was it?

Ericksen: I'd say somewhere around eighty thousand.

Patton: Oh, so it was a—

Ericksen: Good size.

Patton: —large city.

Ericksen: Oh, yeah.

Patton: And what did you do there?

Ericksen: Uh... mostly go to dinner. Japanese food, which was excellent. It's really the only real reason to go in.

Patton: How were you received by the Japanese?

Ericksen: Well, interestingly enough, I never saw any animosity, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki both were not too far from the city that we were based at. I never saw an open animosity displayed. For the most part, they were friendly, with one exception. After I became Assistant Base Operations Officer, and since we didn't have children, I asked my wife to come over to Japan, since I now had a different schedule and a little more free time. So I rented a house a half a mile outside of the airbase, and she flew over. I met her at Tokyo, and we took a Japanese high-speed train back down to Kyushu. We lived there for another eight months before I got sent home. She and I went home back together to the United States via commercial airline. Anyhow, the episode I wanted to mention about—Japanese attitude towards us. I took my wife and I on sightseeing—places. We were on one historic site, and a Japanese guy behind me spit on the back of my neck, so I took my handkerchief, of course, and wiped that off. I turned around and looked at him. And that's the end of it. I didn't want to do any more than that. But that's the only animosity I ever saw in public in Japanese cities. Otherwise, they were cordial and whatever. I always had my uniform. I had to have that, so.

Patton: You had to wear your uniform off base?

Ericksen: Off base, yes. So they knew I was in military. So I was surprised.

Patton: Did you ever go to Hiroshima?

Ericksen: Oh, yes. Yes.

Patton: And what was your reaction to that?

Ericksen: Terrible tragedy, unfortunately. There was a man sitting in a chair at the center of where the bomb hit—of course they left the devastation there: the churches and buildings in the condition they were after the bomb hit, and they were in mostly rubble—and he sat on a chair. He had a sign on it: "Number one atomic bomb victim." He had shorts on and his whole body was burnt and then scarred from the blast of the atomic bomb. So that was a

rather stark sight to see. You had to give, obviously, a lot of sympathy for the people that faced that problem. So my wife and I got a real close feel of what happened after the atomic bomb, or at least a small part of it.

Patton: Was it difficult to get permission for your wife to come over?

Ericksen: Well, yeah. I had to wait until military wives were allowed to come, but they took restrictions off of the civilians coming, and that's why I then brought my wife over. She could come over as a tourist.

Patton: Oh, she came as a tourist!

Ericksen: Tourist, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Patton: Long-term tourist!

Ericksen: Long-term tourist.

Patton: Before she came, where were you living?

Ericksen: In the north side of Chicago.

Patton: No, I mean—did you live on base?

Ericksen: Oh, I lived on base. Yeah.

Patton: And what kind of accommodations did you have?

Ericksen: Lived in a tent. There were four of us in a tent.

Patton: The discussion is always that the winter weather is horrible in Korea. Were you cold in Japan as well?

Ericksen: Oh, yeah. In the wintertime, absolutely.

Patton: How did you keep warm? Did you have heaters?

Ericksen: We had a little coal stove, and fuel oil—a stove in the tent, yeah. It was comfortable. Adequate.

Patton: And what did you have to eat?

Ericksen: Our meals were very good. Military is, generally, unless you're on battlefront, you know. Infantry soldier will eat canned food, mostly. We had good food.

Patton: American food?

Ericksen: Yes. Yes.

Patton: So then if you wanted Japanese food or something else, you could go into the city?

Ericksen: Into town. Right.

Patton: How far was that away?

Ericksen: Oh, five or six miles.

Patton: So I'm going to review. You flew into Japan. The first nine months or so you were there, you were a pilot combat, I mean a—

Ericksen: Combat pilot. Yeah.

Patton: Cargo plane. And then the next, you were the Assistant Base Operations officer...

Ericksen: Manager.

Patton: Manager. The first part of your period there you lived on base, and then your wife came over and you lived outside base in, like, a regular apartment?

Ericksen: Rental home.

Patton: Rental home.

Ericksen: Beautiful Japanese-style home.

Patton: That must have been (laughs) a little bit different than living in a tent.

Ericksen: Oh, yeah! (laughs) It was quite an upgrade. Yes. Beautiful.

Patton: Did you feel that you got a taste of Japanese culture?

Ericksen: Oh, absolutely. We had a live-in maid. Then I got my wife a full-time dressmaker, and she had clothes made for her. It was unusual, but very nice arrangement. I was one of six that brought our wives.

Patton: I was about to ask how common that was.

Ericksen: Around six of us that did it.

Patton: Did you all try to live around each other, or just wherever you could find accommodations?

Ericksen: Well, wherever you could find accommodations, but our social life became with the other five couples.

Patton: How expensive was that, to live off base?

Ericksen: (laughs) Very inexpensive. Oh, my. Yes. It's hard to relate to the ratio of the Japanese yen

to the American dollar, but it was 350 yen to the dollar. We paid the maid a thousand yen for the month. That's a little over two dollars, American money. So. It's not that way today.

Patton: What did you think of the war while it was going on? What were your reactions to the war itself?

Ericksen: Terribly emotional thing, when you saw the wounded. It was very ... tough to ... Lot of young fellows that…were wounded that you came across. It was tough. I ... I have a vivid memory of that…experience, of what they suffered.

Patton: How did you feel about the way it sort of operated, back and forth, up and down the peninsula? Ericksen: The only chapter on that question that I … When the Chinese were contemplating coming into the Korean conflict, it was just—up until then had been just the North Korean conflict.[2] China is right across the Yalu River, which is the boundary between North Korea and China. The Chinese Army and military was lined up across the Yalu River, and MacArthur wanted to go across and start bombing them out. Harry Truman said no. MacArthur made such a fuss out of it he was removed from authority. He came back to the United States, and classic—he went to congress.He was retiring under duress, and then he came up with the slogan that "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away."[3] It's classic in Korean War history and MacArthur's history. But other than that, I ... War is a terrible thing… when you see wounded. It's tough.

Patton: And you had plenty of opportunity to see the wounded.

Ericksen: Several. Um-hm. (coughs)

Patton: So at what point were you able to return to America? Did you earn points, or was it—

Ericksen: No.

Patton: —a certain amount of time? How did they determine it was time to go home?

Ericksen: The condition of the war established that our mission was not (coughs) basically needed, so they phased us out, and they had brought in regular Air Force personnel; pilots and crews took over. (coughs)

Patton: Do you want to stop and get a drink?

Ericksen: Can you?

Patton: I hope.

Ericksen: Well, then let it run.

[2] It was also referred to as a police action. War was never officially declared. At the time of this interview there is still a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), with each side at a distance guarded full time by troops: on the south by the U.S. and allies, and on the north by North Korea and China.

[3] In his speech MacArthur referred to the this line as being from an Army song.

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Patton: Undo your thing.

(pause in recording)

Patton: Did you see a lot of the wounded, and so on?

Ericksen: I saw the wounded only on a few occasions, when—

Patton: But it was memorable?

Ericksen: Oh, absolutely.

Patton: So at what point did they decide you could go home?

Ericksen: They were starting to talk ... with the North Koreans' officials about terminating the war, and—

Patton: So that's when they went into those negotiations?

Ericksen: Negotiations were, were—

Patton: And you said that they didn't feel that they needed you any more for the mission, you mean.

Ericksen: No. Oh, and they brought some Regular Air Force people.

Patton: Okay. As opposed to you, who were Reserves? Is that the distinction?

Ericksen: Yeah, that. Exactly. Yeah. And then they phased us—Patton: They phased you out.

Ericksen: —out.

Patton: Since you had, what, ten days before you went into the Service when you were reactivated, how much time did they give you to get ready to go home?

Ericksen: Oh, that was almost at my call, at that point. I shipped stuff back that we had purchased, through the Army, Air Force supply organization. I got a friend to do correspondence that got my wife and I military travel on commercial airlines to get back to the United States, which was a really nice arrangement. So that took about a few weeks before we left.

Patton: And you went directly back to Chicago, or where did you go?

Ericksen: Well, we landed in San Francisco and had a second honeymoon there for about four or five days. And then flew back to Chicago.

Patton: How long did it take you until you were formally severed? (Ericksen sighs) Or did you continue in the Reserve for a while?

Ericksen: No. No. I resigned from the Reserve. But that was optional, because I was a member of the

Reserve, and unless I opted out, it went on. Probably six months later, I got out of it.

Patton: You decided that you didn't want to take another chance on getting reactivated again?

Ericksen: Again, right.

Patton: And they were okay with that?Ericksen: Yes. You had the option, yeah.

Patton: Did you have any hesitancy about doing that, or you felt that you had served your country?

Ericksen: I ... I was proud to have been able to be part of the effort to save Korea. I agreed with what Harry Truman did when they decided we'd go in there. I felt I've had the experience, and I wouldn't want it again, but I had no hard feelings about having done it.

Patton: Going back to when you were there, did you have any experiences interacting with the Korean people? Did you begin to have any feelings about the politics of the situation there or the people, what they were experiencing?

Ericksen: No. The only contact I had with Korean people was those who unloaded our planes when we came there with cargo. Never had the opportunity to have conversation. They had a mission, and so did we.

Patton: Well, on what basis did you agree with Harry Truman? You said you were glad to have helped save the peninsula. What was the basis for that?

Ericksen: Well, when (coughs) when North Korea decided to attempt to take over South Korea and make it one nation, it was Harry Truman's decision to create the Army to go over there and fight them.

Patton: But why did you think that was a good idea?

Ericksen: Well, North Korea was not a democracy, headed up by a military man. And Harry Truman wanted to save democracy in that part of the world. Japan already was.

Patton: So, after you were sent home, what did you do? Did you have a home there?

Ericksen: No. We rented. I went into the Service with nothing. I was out of high school, so. And then we got married and still had nothing. But...

Patton: So essentially you started your adult life when you got out of Korea.

Ericksen: That's well put. Wife was working, and I was going to school for a few years.

Patton: Where did you go to school then? You had received your Associate's degree, right?

Ericksen: Associate degree from a two-year college, then I went to a technical college called Illinois Institute of Technology. Graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering. (coughs) And then went into a working career.

Patton: And for whom did you work?

Ericksen: Illinois Bell, at that time. Ended up with thirty-five years and retired.

Patton: With Bell?

Ericksen: With Bell, right. Great company.

Patton: What was your role with them?

Ericksen: I was a District Manager for twenty-six of my thirty-five years there.

Patton: So you became an overarching administrator again?

Ericksen: Right. Right.

Patton: Did you feel that your experiences in the Service had an impact on your career, or...

Ericksen: Probably subliminally. But yeah, I'm sure. Administrative experience was... Military trained, so to speak.

Patton: And you had children, I believe?

Ericksen: Not for a while. ... Eleven years later after marriage, we had our first child, and then over the next six years, we had three more, so we ended up with four children.

Patton: And they're all.. grown now, and you're a grandfather?

Ericksen: I'm a grandfather of ten wonderful grandchildren.

Patton: Do you talk with them about your military experiences?

Ericksen: Yes, I—oh. When I first moved back here, I moved back here in Springfield in 2003, because my three daughters and seven of my grandchildren lived here in Springfield, and I wanted to be close to them. A year after I was here, I asked each of the daughters to, let's do a family program here and ask your children to come up with questions, because I always regretted, my parents coming from Norway, that I didn't get as much information from them on how life was like on Norway. So I wanted my grandchildren to come up with any questions, and we'll have a session, and record it with a video camera. Which we did. And it's in one of my daughters' hands, and it's in a digital camera. I've got to get it converted to regular camera, but it turned out to be a very nice experience for them to research it, and then to ask the questions.

Patton: Were you surprised by their questions?

Ericksen: One of them.

Patton: What was that?

Ericksen: Explain my first kiss.

Patton: Oh! (laughs) I thought it was something related to the war.

Ericksen: No. (laughs) First kiss of a girl, that is.

Patton: Uh-huh. So in the years after the war, what kind of continuing contact did you have? For example, did you join any of the military organizations?

Ericksen: No, but our unit had reunions. Two years after the Korean War ended, we had a reunion out at, it was then O'Hare Field. They had a place where you could have a reunion. Then five years later, we had another reunion in Sumter, South Carolina, which is one of the bases we were at. And then two years ago, we had a reunion in ...

Patton: Kansas City, maybe? You were stationed there.

Ericksen: No, no...

Patton: Missouri? Go ahead.

Ericksen: Missouri, or... Where the, uh ... Ah! Escapes me for the moment.

Patton: That's okay. When you say "we," was it a pilot group or was it—

Ericksen: No. Oh, everybody that had...

Patton: That wing?

Ericksen: Yeah. Any person in the wing. We still keep in correspondence via e-mail, but there aren't many of us left anymore.

Patton: So you made some pretty good friends during your service?

Ericksen: Life-long. Still have them, that have survived, yeah. Absolutely.

Patton: What do you think is the basis for that friendship?

Ericksen: The experience of camaraderie while you're in the Service. You depend on each other, particularly under wartime conditions. You have respect for each other because of the mission and the experiences. And we shared a common background and interest, so it was just a natural osmosis of friendship that has been wonderful over the years. Unfortunately, there's not many of us left, but...

Patton: For somebody who hasn't been in the military, can you explain what the experience is like? I mean, is it like anything else in your life, or is it just a unique experience of...

Ericksen: The only thing I can state that sticks in mind is that it changes your lifestyle, and your life, and the people that you had been close to in civilian life. You're restricted to mostly… In all assignments you're away from your birthplace and where you grew up and know your

people, so you make a whole new life of social life in the military. That's one of the reasons I got out. I didn't care for that restriction.

Patton: Do you ever regret having signed up as a seventeen-year-old?

Ericksen: No. No. Gosh, I wouldn't trade the world experiences for anything. No. Never regret it.

Patton: Do you think it changed you as a person?

Ericksen: Oh, sure.

Patton: In what way?

Ericksen: Hopefully more tolerant. Since you face ... serious lifestyle conditions. You value life a lot more, I think. Or at least I did. Hopefully my children believe that. ...

Patton: Do you feel that your ideas about war, and democracy, and so on were shaped in any way by your experiences?

Ericksen: It reinforced my feelings about fighting and going to war for ... restoring ... democracies, and not be under single ... control of dictators. America's—

Patton: So, even though you think it's awful, you think it's worthwhile.

Ericksen: Absolutely.

Patton: Under certain circumstances.

Ericksen: Korean War, in my opinion, was absolutely worthwhile.

Patton: Do you ever have any reaction to the fact that the Korean War was sort of ignored by so much of the public?

Ericksen: To a lesser degree than the Vietnam War. That was quite a difference in intensity of civilian feelings about the Vietnam War. I didn't feel that in the Korean War, back home or what have you.

Patton: Do you have occasion now to talk about your experiences, other than with your family or something like this?

Ericksen: I give talks on it, yeah. I have given several.

Patton: And what is the reaction?

Ericksen: Of interest. I bring things up that, unless you'd been there, you wouldn't realize. Some of the things you saw and experienced.

Patton: Like what?

Ericksen: ... Leaving your family behind and going into service, going into hazardous duty where you may not come back. (coughs) And your feeling about whether or not you personally feel that it's worthwhile, having done it, after it's over.

Patton: What lessons could we learn today from your experience?

Ericksen: That's a powerful question. My personal opinion (coughs) is that when we face… the danger of ... losing our freedoms by infiltrated people who are intent on destroying democracy, I feel very emotional about that happening. I feel anything we have to do to fight it, it's worthwhile.

Patton: Is there some wisdom that you would pass on to future generations? If your grandchildren, for example, were called up to the Service, would you urge them to go?

Ericksen: Oh, absolutely. And ... to use a common expression, freedom is not free. And anything that— Well, let me back up. My parents left Norway, came to the United States as immigrants, because Norway was becoming, at that point, almost totally socialistic, where you had no freedoms, or lesser freedoms. America was the free country, and job opportunities you could chose yourself. So my father and his three brothers came here, and all were successful. I think that's a testimony to what freedom does for you.

Patton: How do you like that commercial that the man and his father go to Norway, and then they find out that they're Swedish? Have you seen that commercial?

Ericksen: No!

Patton: It's just funny. I can't even remember what it's for. American Express or something.

Ericksen: Is that recently?

Patton: Yeah, it's just, it's a commercial they show on TV, where the guy is—they take a special trip to Norway, and they do all these things, and buy sweaters and all that, and then they go to the records office and find out they were Swedish. (laughs)

Ericksen: No, I had not seen that.

Patton: It's just funny

Ericksen: That would be cute, yes.

Patton: Is there anything else that I should ask you, or anything you want to say about this whole *Veterans Remember* project?

Ericksen: Can I make a political comment about—

Patton: You can say anything you want to.

Ericksen: I find it was a tragedy in what happened by the people that objected to the Vietnam War. Without naming names, but some well known and high level Hollywood actors and

actresses, and the things they did against people serving, it just bothers me. I'll never get over it. When we sacrifice our civilian life to whatever degree to go into the military and fight for the freedom of this country, and then the poor guys that came back and faced the wrath of radicals that want to criticize them for going into war, I just hope we continue to meet that ... attitude.

Patton: Do you think about your experiences in the war very much? Do you remember a lot? You have a lot of mementos around and I know you're very proud of it. Do you think about that experience very much?

Ericksen: Only because I give several talks now and it brings it back, but I enjoy reminiscing with it. And then our correspondence—I get at least two e-mails a week on my old relationship in the Korean War, so...

Patton: You really were life-long friends.

Ericksen: Yes. Yes. And somebody just keeps up contacting all of us, in a shrinking group.

Patton: I think I forgot to ask you: you were not injured in any way?

Ericksen: No.

Patton: Or anything like that?

Ericksen: No, thank goodness.

Patton: Is there anything else I should ask you?

Ericksen: ... I don't—think I could add, offer any—I think we've covered my experience.

Patton: Well, I've certainly enjoyed hearing about it. I appreciate your conversation, and your memories, and well—

Ericksen: I will add one thing. Regardless of however it disrupted my civilian life and my career path, I never regretted having been called in for the Korean War, and felt, still to this day, that it was worth the effort to save democracy in Korea.

Patton: Well, I think I speak for a lot of people. Thank you for doing that.

End of Interview