

Thomas B. Harker

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Thomas B. Harker Pilot in the South Pacific

Today is May 11, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer with Midway Village in Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with a statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village in Rockford, Illinois, interviewing Mr. Thomas B. Harker. Mr. Harker served in a branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

NELSON: Tom, would you please start by introducing yourself to us. Give us your full name, place and date of birth. We would also like to have the names of each one of your parents and did you have any brothers or sisters?

HARKER: Yes. My name is Thomas Bartelt Harker. I was born on August 6th 1919, in Janesville, Wisconsin. I am a twin, a fraternal twin. My brother's name is Charles Bartelt Harker. I have two brothers. The oldest brother was Frederik Daniel Harker and the middle brother; his name was Louis Ernest Harker.

NELSON: Are there any details about your parents and/or your family that you would like to give?

HARKER: Yes. Okay. My father's name was Daniel Clarence Harker. He was born June 29th 1876 in Marion, Ohio. He died April 25th, 1963. He was 87 years old. My mother's name is Ella Caroline Harker. Her maiden name was Bartelt. Her birth date was September 28th, 1881 in Farmington, Wisconsin. She died October 4th, 1959 at the age of 78. Both sides of the family, both father and mother came from farming families where they had large families. Naturally they needed the boys in the family to help take care of the farm.

NELSON: What was life like before the war, especially during 1941?

HARKER: Okay. I graduated from high school in 1937. This was after the depression years. My parents could not afford to send us to college at that time so both my twin brother, Charles, and myself worked in factories in the Geneva, Illinois, area. When Charley and I were a year and a half old, our parents moved from Janesville, Wisconsin, to Geneva, Illinois. After working for three years and I'd saved approximately \$500, I decided if I ever were ever going to start

school, now was the time to do it. So I took my \$500 and went to Cornell College in Mt. Vernon, Iowa. I was 21 there and had to register for the draft naturally. I was there at Cornell College on December 7th, 1941--that's correct, isn't it--and was listening to my radio on a Sunday afternoon when the announcement came over.

NELSON: What was your reaction response of that event?

HARKER: I knew that the war was somewhat imminent but my immediate reaction was I knew I would be involved in it. I knew that I would be a willing volunteer for it but I decided I wanted to decide myself what particular branch of the service I would prefer to be in. Since I'm only 5 foot 6 tall, I decided that trenches weren't for me if I could qualify for something else. So I virtually made up my mind at that time, I was going to head for the U. S. Army Air Corp at that time. It later became the Air Force.

NELSON: Have you formed any prior opinion or developed any feeling about what was taking place in Europe and Asia?

HARKER: Yes. Naturally I was disturbed as much as anybody else of the brutal attacks of the German forces under the leadership, dictatorship of Adolph Hitler. I felt very--a lot of compassion for the people over in England and wasn't exactly eager to go to war but if our country was going to be involved then I was prepared to go.

NELSON: Do you recall reading newspaper accounts of German aggression in Europe?

HARKER: Yes.

NELSON: Do you have any knowledge of Hitler's speeches, ideas or actions?

HARKER: I had, of course, observed some of these in the newsreels and concluded that he was pretty much of a violent person.

NELSON: What events led to your entry into military service? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

HARKER: I was registered for the draft. At that time, if I remember correctly, I think you had to have a prerequisite of two years of college to enter the Air Corp so I sought and obtained deferments until I did get my freshman and sophomore year out of the way. It so happened then that later on that requirement was deleted. So I immediately then volunteered for the Army Air Corp.

NELSON: Was your response in entering military service influenced by family and friends attitudes towards the war a threat to national security or any other consideration.

HARKER: I know that my parents were worried about it but they never ever spoke against it. They were obviously concerned about the disaster that was happening to France and England and I guess that about sums it up.

NELSON: When and where were you inducted?

HARKER: I was inducted in Chicago, Illinois, in the fall of 1942.

NELSON: Do you have any special memories of this event?

HARKER: Yes. There were a large number of us got on a troop train and headed for San Antonio, Texas, where I entered the pre-flight training program for the Army Air Corp.

NELSON: How old were you at the time?

HARKER: 1941 I would be twenty-two years old.

NELSON: What happened after you were inducted? Where were you sent?

HARKER: Okay. I completed my pre-flight that was ground schooling requirements for the Army Air Corp at San Antonio, Texas. I was sent to Hicks Field, in Fort Worth, Texas, for my primary flight training. From there I went to Perrin Field in Sherman, Texas for my basic training. The airplanes used then were both single engine airplanes. We were asked what we would prefer later on in combat, whether it would be fighters or bombers. I chose bombers so therefore I went to twin engine advanced flight school at Houston, Texas, Ellington Field, Houston, Texas, and received my wings there.

NELSON: What did you think of the training?

HARKER: Our training was excellent, I would judge--I didn't know in details what kind of training

people received in other countries but I was very much impressed.

NELSON: Tell us about other training camps you attended if you had more.

HARKER: Okay. After I finished there I was sent to Sebring, Florida, to go into transition training in the B17 bombers. When I completed that, my instructor was impressed with my progress and he had recommended me as a potential instructor, so I was sent from there to the Army Air Force School of Flight Tactics in Orlando, Florida. Their function was to train new cadres of bomb groups that were formed. This was getting later on in the war. The European war, of course, was fully advanced at that time and we didn't have very many cadres coming through. I was able to build up 450 hours of flying time in the B17 program as first pilot so when the B29 program came along I was eligible for the left seat in the B29.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

HARKER: Yes. Let's see. I've got to think about it. I think there was a short leave after I finished advanced flying school before I went into the B17 and also had a short leave in between my completion of duty at Army Air Force School of Applied Tactics and going into B29 Training Program.

NELSON: What do your recall in this period about the places that you were stationed, the friends you made, your association with civilians.

HARKER: My experiences were all good. Fort Worth, Texas, was a fairly good-sized city and there weren't an awful lot of military bases immediately around it so, we as aviation cadets, were very well received by the citizens. We were invited to parties and invited to their homes for dinner and things like that.

NELSON: Okay. This is participation in the conflict. Where did you go after completing your basic military training?

HARKER: Okay. For a pilot you're probably referring to his first overseas in combat.

NELSON: Yes.

HARKER: I might include when I was at Hicks Field in primary flight training--at that time I was dating Bernice Everett. She came down to see me and we became engaged. We said we were going to be

sensible and wait until this war was over before we would consider marriage. When I found out that I was going into the B29 program, I knew I had nine months in the United States before I'd go overseas. We got talking one time on the phone and decided to get married. So I was married and spent my honeymoon really in transit from Orlando, Florida, out to Dalhart, Texas, where I was to start my B29 training.

NELSON: When you were sent overseas, how did you get there?

HARKER: When I finished the B29 training--started in Dalhart, Texas, and ended up in Fairmont, Nebraska, and from there I was sent down to Harrington, Kansas, and I picked up a B29 and ferried it overseas. I flew from Harrington, Kansas to Sacramento, California, from there, overseas. The reason I did this, I was assigned to a bomb squadron. We had 16 crews in it and the table of organization only called for 15. On the legal papers the other 15 crews went overseas in mass. They all flew overseas and of course that squadron wanted me badly in it so I was given this ferrying assignment and I joined them about a week later.

NELSON: What were you assigned to do after arriving?

HARKER: I was naturally airplane commander of my crew. We ran a couple of training flights from our base, which was Tinian in the Marianas and flew a practice mission down to a little island, Truk Island, which was south of Guam. I arrived on Tinian on January 1st of 1945 and probably flew my first mission in early February--my first mission to Japan.

NELSON: What did you think of the nation's war efforts up to this point?

HARKER: I was proud of the fact that we had made so much progress in the South Pacific. It was a long haul after our initial defeat immediately after Pearl Harbor. It was a long haul to establish our bases in the Pacific and this job wasn't completed when I started flying missions. Initially we had to fly non-stop from Tinian to Japan and back. That was a round trip of 3000 miles. The average mission time was 14 ½ to 15 hours. Approximately in March of that year, our forces took Iwo Jima which then enabled us, if we ran into a lot of damage over the target or if we were running low on gasoline, we could come back and land at Iwo Jima, which was half way between Tinian and Japan.

NELSON: You say your first mission was to Japan. Can you remember anything special that happened on that mission?

HARKER: Yes. That first one was to Japan and it was a night mission. We dropped incendiary bombs on the target. I believe, on that first mission, that we burned 16 square miles of Tokyo.

NELSON: Can you list for us in order of occurrence all subsequent combat action in which you were involved?

HARKER: It'll be a long list. I completed 35 missions.

NELSON: Outstanding ones.

HARKER: Outstanding, huh? Well, let's see.

NELSON: From your memory.

HARKER: I can remember one humorous incident. We were scheduled for a night bombing mission to Nagoya, Japan, and the Japanese had a little airplane that was called the Baka. It was a suicide aircraft. It had an explosive charge in it. It was carried by the "Betty" and if they found some B29s, they would try to drop this thing above the B29s and the fellow would steer the controls into it and try to ram you and shoot you down. We were headed on our approach into Nagoya. These were night missions were all single ___?___ formation and my gunners called up and said, "We think there's a Baka following us" because they saw a big glow in the back. My instant reaction was to thrust the throttles forward to the firewall to get some speed. I did a little bit of a turn and looked back and it was kind of cloudy evening and what I saw back there was the glow from the moon coming up on the horizon and that's what it turned out to be.

NELSON: How about casualties that occurred on you missions.

HARKER: We would occasionally receive damage on the airplane from their flak, the firing of their flak, but when you're flying and flak is bursting around you the concussion rattles the aluminum in the airplane. You really can't distinguish between a miss or a hit because of the noise it creates. Sometimes we wouldn't find the point of damage until we got back the next morning and looked the airplane over. On one mission, I had a member of my crew who was wounded. We--It was a night mission. I take it back. It was a daylight mission to Japan and in this mission

we changed our routine. Formerly we used to fly in a loose formation from Tinian at low altitude up to Japan and then we climbed up—I've got to take it back. What I'm describing is the new approach was to fly a loose formation, low to the water, get up near Japan and then climb up to bombing altitude. When we got near Japan and started to climb, we got into a little bit of a frontal situation. Visibility became so bad we had to break the formation apart and then go through a procedure to try to reform up on the top. When we got up to the announced altitude of 27,000 feet, the visibility was still poor and we saw one ___?___ plane element ahead of us put on some speed and tried to catch up with it. Just by a stroke of luck a Japanese fighter came to us on a head on approach and of course the rate of closure was so great that our gunners never ever got a shot fired off. The Japanese aircraft was lucky. They had two shots and we thought they might be as big as 20 mm. One of them hit in the nose of the airplane. It went right through the Plexiglas and would have gone through my stomach except behind the instrument panel we had a quarter to three-eighths thick armor plate. Then from the instrument panel clear to the top of the shape of the airplane we had a Plexiglas sandwiches about two inches thick. The bullet exploded off the armor plate, threw shrapnel. It hit my bombardier in the big vein in his left arm and blood just shot out of there like a geyser. The second bullet hit in the right wing and knocked all the engine instruments off of engines, number 3 and 4, cut the throttle cable on number 4, hit the main hydraulic system. All the pressure went down to zero. My engineer behind me he just hollered, "We we've been hit. We lost two engines." I could tell we did because the airplane did go into a yaw position and I elected under these conditions with a wounded man and the conditions of those two engines that I couldn't go on to the target. I immediately dove down hoping in this poor visibility to be hidden but it seemed like everything kind of cleared up then. We finally got down to a decent altitude. There was a big enough hole in the Plexiglas nose, we were losing cabin pressure, so I got down to the decent altitude and we leveled off and checked everything out thoroughly on the airplane. Called the radio operator who was trained in first aid to come up and take care of Wycoff, the bombardier. Got him bandaged up and gave him a pint of blood plasma and headed on back. Now this is before Iwo Jima so we had to make it all the way back. When we approached Tinian and got into my final landing approach. I had to feather #4 because I had no control over the throttle speed. As far as the loss of the other engine instruments was concerned, I could trim the propeller pitch and the speed of the crank-shaft which is done by adjusting the propeller pitch so I could get

all of them pretty much aligned up. We got on the ground and made a good landing and I used the emergency brakes which was a pair of handles that you tugged down on. You only had for pulls on it. You used all the accumulated pressure but we go out okay and the bombardier got fixed up.

NELSON: Did you put a tourniquet or something on his arm to prevent bleeding then or ...

HARKER: Yes. The radio operator put a tourniquet on there somewhat and put a bandage on it but of course you can't leave a tourniquet on in definitely but he got the bleeding under control.

NELSON: How was your mental attitude as you got into more combat? What did you think of the war so far?

HARKER: The war was ...

NELSON: I don't write these questions.

HARKER: The war was tough but we had a very excellent airplane. The cabin was pressurized. We could develop all the heat in the world we needed inside. It was comfortable. We naturally over the target area wore our oxygen masks in the event you got big enough flak holes and you decompressed that you didn't have to scramble around for an oxygen mask. You were already prepared. We had flak vests that we put on which was flexible armor that covered your chest area and a flak helmet. All these were designed so you could quickly dispense of them. On the flak vest you just pulled one string and the whole thing just popped off. The same thing with the helmet in case you ever thought you were going to have to bail out of the airplane.

NELSON: Did you wear heated suits?

HARKER: Our suits were not heated and we didn't need it up there. Compared to the B17 aircraft that had a heating system—I believe it used ethylene glycol as a heat transfer fluid and they had all kinds of problems with those failing. When you up to altitude they were working in temperatures of fifty below zero. I will honestly admit we didn't have the opposition in the flak and guns on the ground in Japan that they did over in Europe.

NELSON: But you had the water.

HARKER: But if we got in trouble we had an awfully long swim to get back. Fortunately the water

was more reasonable temperature out in the Pacific than it was over in the English Channel.

NELSON: Did you write many letters home?

HARKER: Yes, I did write letters to my wife and to my parents. Of course I was always upbeat in them. I never alluded to the dangers we had to face. I ought to say in this description that my twin brother was a B17 pilot and he went to England with the 8th Air Force. After talking to him I realized that they had a much tougher job in flying against the Germans because they were virtually in the combat zone after they got in over the middle of the English Channel. We flew for 6 ½ hours from Titian before we even got into the combat zone.

NELSON: In fact we would mount our guns at take off—a lot of times from the bases because the Germans knew that our guns were not mounted as we took off. We mounted them after we would fly and some how they found us out so that was a nice time to pick off a bomber when he was unarmed.

HARKER: Oh, oh.

NELSON: Did you receive many letters or packages from home and what type of packets did you get?

HARKER: Yes, we did receive some things at home and it had to be items that could be shipped at room temperature in the line of canned things like maybe olives and, if I remember correctly, maybe be could have some forms of cheese, too. Occasionally we would have a little party in the barracks and we'd have a little beer with cheese and olives and that.

NELSON: Did most of the other men write or receive letters?

HARKER: Yes.

NELSON: Did you forge close bonds of friendship with many or some of your combat companions?

HARKER: Yes, I did and I am in contact with some of them today.

NELSON: Okay, that answers the next question. Some of these questions are more or less for people on the ground I think. Prior to the end of the war were you aware of any civilian concentration camps existing? If so, please explain how you learned about them and how much you knew at that time?

HARKER: This is prior to the end of the war?

NELSON: This is prior to the end of the war.

HARKER: Prior to the end of the war.

NELSON: This is about the German concentration camps unless the Japanese had them. I don't know if they did.

HARKER: Yeah. I guess I didn't know as much about the details of the German concentration camps prior to the end of the war as I did after I got home. As far as the Japanese were concerned, we knew that they hated our guts. I had made up my mind that my last resort would be to have to bail out over Japan. If I had the remotest possibility of safely getting the airplane down in the sea at some reasonable distance south of Japan, I would do that because we had submarine dumbo duty there. We could call them up. We could give them an accurate position where we were going down. I would be more willing to gamble on that than to bail my crew out because—since then, after the war is over, we knew that there were quite a few B29 crews especially the officers, were beheaded in their camps over there.

NELSON: What was the highlight occurrence of your combat experience or any other experiences you remember?

HARKER: Of course, we were all elated when the war ended. I happened to be on [a] mine laying mission that night when the surrender was announced and we completed the mission. When we got home the camp went nuts. The guys were firing their pistols up in the air and everything else. We used to joke and say we were probably safer in the airplane coming back from the mine-laying mission but naturally we were all elated about that. Then we flew a “show of strength” mission up to Japan on the day the surrender was signed on the deck of the Missouri in Tokyo Bay. We took a portion of our forces and made a “race track” circle around Japan so as to make it look like three times as many airplanes but we were still wary. We had every gun loaded with a hundred rounds of ammunition because we flew this in daylight at about 5000 feet. If eventually any die-hards were going to come up and attack us we were at least going to get a hundred shots per gun at them.

NELSON: Tell us what you and the other men did to celebrate America's traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

HARKER: Naturally--Well, let's see. I got overseas on January 1st of '45 and came back about first part of October in '45 so I really missed Thanksgiving

and Christmas overseas. I can tell you one experience. When we were scheduled to fly overseas from Harrington, Kansas, with this airplane we ferried over on the 24th of December, we would have left earlier but Sacramento was completely fogged in so they had delayed our takeoff. The announcement was made that if it didn't clear by three or four o'clock in the afternoon, then we could stay over Christmas. By golly it cleared so we got on board the airplane. Of course, you can imagine me being married that the night before that was disastrous, trying to comfort my wife and tell her I was a good enough pilot I was going to come back home even though I didn't think so or not.

NELSON: (End of tape. Could not make out what Nelson said.)

HARKER: We talked about it. We knew ourselves personally that the immediate arrival of our airplane over there by Christmas wasn't necessarily of that importance since this was a new group going overseas and they weren't going to be operational for about three or four weeks. So we said we'll get her out there and when we run out the engine check, I'll see if I can get the engines to detonate and we'll see if we can--or follow spark plugs--maybe we'll go the other way--too rich. Anyway if we get them to foul out and we don't check out why maybe this might delay us and we get Christmas. Didn't work out. Everything checked out perfectly so we were on our way and we got--approaching Albuquerque. We radioed up ahead. Sacramento was still fogged in so we let down and landed at Albuquerque and that's where we spent Christmas Eve.

NELSON: Did you keep that same airplane?

HARKER: No. That airplane I ferried over and it was delivered to the 73rd Wing which was up on Saipan and then they shuttled us from there over to Tinian. We rejoined our 398 †

NELSON: Were you assigned an airplane then?

HARKER: I shared an airplane then with Captain Guest.

NELSON: Do you remember the name of the airplane?

HARKER: Didn't have a name on it yet. Then he was lost in one of the early missions so the replacement airplane then was assigned to me. My crew and I didn't decide on any name or insignia on

it. That airplane on its 13th mission was flown by a replacement crew which got into trouble over the target, lost an engine and attempted landing in Imo Jim. For some kind of unknown reason they got off the runway and hit a bulldozer. They all got out of the airplane but it burned up. After that I didn't get my own airplane. I was assigned various airplanes available.

NELSON: When and how did you return to the U. S. after the end of the war?

HARKER: After the end of the war since my crew had completed thirty-five missions we were put on shipping status to return to the United States. Now some of the other crews stayed with the B29 airplanes there and flew supplies up to the prisoner of war camps after the end of the war. They shipped us, our crew, out to Saipan awaiting passage on some kind of a seagoing vessel. We spent about two weeks--we'd spend four or five days in one camp and they'd move us over to another one. Pretty soon we got assigned to a Liberty-Kaiser transport ship. It took that ship twenty days to get from Saipan to San Francisco.

NELSON: Please tell us about your military rank and decorations especially you campaign decorations.

HARKER: My rank was, when I was first assigned to the B29 program was 1st Lieutenant. In about the middle of my missions I was promoted to a captaincy and this occurred when I was flying Dumbo duty missions on Iwo Jima. My crew and myself were assigned up there for a week. The purpose of Dumbo is when there are losses on a mission we fly up at about fifteen hundred feet. We search along the coast of Japan where they made land fall and where they made lands end looking for any potential people who might be down in rubber rafts and things like that.

NELSON: Did you find any survivors.

HARKER: We did not find any survivors unfortunately. Oh, the thing I was going to say is when I was up there, one of the replacement Dumbo crews coming up had learned from headquarters that I had been promoted to captaincy. He took off his captain's bar off of his collar and pinned them on mine and we flew back home. Decorations, I received the Distinguished Flying Cross twice, and the air Medal four times and there were some battle stars awarded to us I don't necessarily ...

NELSON: Campaign ribbons?

HARKER: Campaign ribbons. I don't necessarily have all . . .

NELSON: How many missions were you in?

HARKER: Thirty-five.

NELSON: Now this is return to civilian life. How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

HARKER: Excellent. I had the greatest respect from my crew and we had a good functioning crew. We worked together and initially I tried to keep constant contact with them. There were eleven of us on the crew. As time went pretty soon on some of them would drop off on correspondence. Today there are nine of us that still survive. There are two who have succumbed. I have since returning home seen all of them except for one of the gunners.

NELSON: Were there things you would do differently if you could do them once again?

HARKER: Oh maybe. When I mustered out since I had subjected my wife to thirty-five combat missions I debated whether I should attempt to stay in the Air Force or not. I had two years of college under the belt and if I was going to continue training, I decided to become a mechanical engineer. The wife said, "If you would do that I will work to help put you through." That's the decision I made so I became a mechanical engineer and have worked ever since in the electronics military industry. I worked for Bell Telephone laboratories in Whippany, New Jersey, for four years; worked on the [Nike] missile system that was the first anti aircraft missile system program. As a matter of fact that was a life-saver because I had been there maybe a year when the Korean War started up and my wife called me up and I had a telegram "Be in San Antonio in thirty days." They wanted B29 pilots for Korea. I got to go before what was called a delay board and I was a single officer and I had a letter from Bell lab stating how important this Nike missile system program was. Got off of that order so I laid real low in the Reserves after that.

NELSON: What was the most difficult thing you had to do during your period of military service?

HARKER: The most difficult thing.

NELSON: Besides combat.

HARKER: Yeah. Emotionally one of the most difficult things was of course to leave my wife back home when I was assigned overseas.

NELSON: Is there any one thing that stands out as your most successful achievement in the military service?

HARKER: You mean as far as our destruction we did in the bombing missions or maybe my career †

NELSON: Your career probably.

HARKER: In my career when I was sent to Army Air Force School of Applied Tactics. Four of us from my B17 Transition School were sent down there because we had high ratings and they didn't immediately have additional B17s. F-tac had two training squadrons there as part of their __?__. One of them was B24s and one of them was B17s. I was assigned to B17s of course. We had to fly with other first pilots down there for about the first three or four weeks. Then they got two brand new B17Gs on the base. The squadron commander decided to have a fly off contest and he picked a day where we had a real good cross wind. We had a single runway at Brooks Field in [Brooksville], Florida. I just happened to be lucky and grease the airplane in so I got one of the new airplanes. That was a good achievement which kept me in the program long enough so I eventually became eligible for the B29 otherwise I would have been overseas with my brother, Charlie, in the 8th Air Force with B17s.

NELSON: How did you learn about VE Day and what was your reaction to it?

HARKER: That was the surrender in Europe. I guess we learned of it probably via radio news and also I believe I received a letter from my twin brother, Charlie. Of course, we were very highly pleased.

NELSON: How about VJ Day?

HARKER: VJ then—Of course I learned that as I explained previously. I was on a mine laying mission at night when we got a radio message from base that the surrender was imminent.

NELSON: What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was first used against Japanese civilians in August of 1945?

HARKER: I think I'll back our President Truman up a hundred per cent. I know it's a real tragic thing to do to force the death on so many of their civilians but

they were thoroughly beaten. Our B29 raids had severely reduced their industrial capacity to make war material but they just weren't going to give up unless we committed an invasion which was going to kill many of our people. It would have been a very difficult invasion due to the nature of their coast line. So I'll back Truman up. He had no choice. It was either that or we were just going to flog along and lose a lot of people ourselves.

NELSON: Has that opinion changed over the last fifty years?

HARKER: I think not.

NELSON: When and where were you officially distorted from the service?

HARKER: I was officially discharged from the service in Denver, Colorado. I had talked to my wife on the telephone and we elected to meet each other in Denver. Then we went home together from that point.

NELSON: Did you have a disability rating or pension?

HARKER: I did not have any disability rating.

NELSON: Do you have any opinions or feelings about our nation's military status or its policies?

HARKER: I'm very proud of our military status during the Persian Gulf War. Thoroughly pleased. That was a potentially dangerous conflict. We only lost a hundred people and that was because we went into it in a prepared fashion. I realized that wasn't possible of course during the—partially during the Korean War and especially during the Vietnam War because of the fact that we allowed ourselves to degrade military preparations.

NELSON: Do you have any contact with the Veterans' Administration?

HARKER: No. Don't need to other than I maintain my insurance.

NELSON: Do you have an opinion of the VA?

HARKER: Yes. I think it's important for the people who need their services that are available. The people who need the hospitalization care and the ones that are eligible I guess for disability help, disability pensions. I'm sure they need that help.

NELSON: Have you ever gone to the VA hospital for medical services?

HARKER: No.

NELSON: Would you like to tell us how your family supported during your military life?

HARKER: Very well. Both families—my wife's family and my own family—my father-in-law was very proud of me that I went through flying school. In fact he was so proud he was a tool and die maker by trade and then later on he eventually owned his own business and manufacturing radio speakers. Before I went overseas, he went into the shop and made a machete for me out of tool steel, with a leather handle and the whole works. He says, "Tom I want you to take that along with you in case you have to jump out." In honor of that I actually strapped it around my legs a couple of times. I think, maybe if I had to parachute out I might cut it off so it wouldn't slop around and cut my leg off. He was especially proud of me.

NELSON: Over subsequent years, what has this support meant to you?

HARKER: Very much. Very much. Both my wife and myself were fortunate to have grown up in families that were close knit. Parents who believed in you do unto others as you'd like for them to do unto you. They're honest. During the depression years, my dad could have been eligible to receive some of the welfare type help at that time but he was too proud. He was a salesman in auto accessories that went down hill during the war. He sold vacuum cleaners door to door—extracts and things like that. He was just too proud to take a hand out as long as he was capable of working. Same thing would be true of my father-in-law.

NELSON: It was a real fine interview, Tom. Is there anything else you'd like to add to that?

HARKER: I was awfully proud of my twin brother, Charlie, who went with the 8th Air Force over in England. To be perfectly honest, I'll admit that he faced a much tougher challenge than I did. I hand it to him.

HARKER: I couldn't say much because we weren't allowed to say much but I tried to give him a little advice in my letters.

NELSON: Well, thank you fellows. That is really great.