The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
Seattle, Washington

Robert M. DeHaven (Part 1 of 5)

Interviewed by: Eugene A. Valencia

Interview Date: circa 1960s

Abstract:

In this five-part oral history, fighter ace Robert M. DeHaven is interviewed about his military service with the United States Army Air Forces. In part one, DeHaven describes his experiences as a fighter pilot, including his time in the South Pacific with the 7th Fighter Squadron of the 49th Fighter Group during World War II. He also touches on his postwar involvement with the Bendix Trophy aeronautical races. Other topics discussed include DeHaven's early interest in aviation, his training and service history, and anecdotes about fellow pilots and fighter aces.

The interview is conducted by fellow fighter ace Eugene A. Valencia.

Biography:

Robert M. DeHaven was born on January 13, 1922 in San Diego, California. He joined the United States Army Air Forces in 1942 and graduated from flight training the following year. DeHaven served with the 7th Fighter Squadron of the 49th Fighter Group during World War II, flying missions in the Philippines and Papua New Guinea. He later became Group Operations Officer of the 49th Fighter Group. DeHaven remained in the military after the war, representing the Air National Guard as their acceptance test pilot for the Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star. He transferred to the Air Force Reserve in 1950 and retired as a colonel in 1965. In his civilian life, he worked for the Hughes Aircraft Company as a test pilot and executive and as the personal pilot for Howard Hughes. He also served as president of the American Fighter Aces Association. DeHaven passed away in 2008.

Biographical information courtesy of: Boyce, Ward J., ed., American fighter aces album. *Mesa, Ariz: American Fighter Aces Association, 1996.*

Restrictions:

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Transcript:

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Robert M. DeHaven (Part 1 of 5)

[START OF INTERVIEW]

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[*The Bendix Trophy and other flight records*]

EUGENE A. VALENCIA: Colonel Robert M. DeHaven, the manager of flight test, Hughes Aircraft. Also, I think we most recently recall your last triumph as the winner of the Bendix Jet Trophy Race in '48. And Bob, it's certainly gratifying to see that you're not only still active, but keeping your spurs in the Reserve program.

ROBERT M. DEHAVEN: Old fighter pilots never die. They don't even fade away. They just keep trying.

EAV: Say, Bob, speaking about the Bendix, can you enlighten us a bit on that, please?

00:00:35

RMD: Yeah. I sure can. It was the—it was an all-military affair in the days immediately after the war, as you recall. And in 1947, it was the Air Force's turn and they ran it exclusively. In 1948, it was the Navy's turn and I thought we were going to be invited to participate, but we weren't and I was all set to go. As a matter of fact, I designed a set of tanks which permitted me to go nonstop to Cleveland. And at the last minute, we were denied entry in competition with the Navy. So we filed for a routine cross-country. And the cross-country was approved, and so we went down with a lineup on one bright Friday morning, as I recall—or a Thursday morning at Long Beach and took our turn in the lineup and took off and were officially clocked. And I was briefed the night before on the weather patterns by Paul Mantz, who won the reciprocating engine section, I think, for about the third time. Paul has been very good to me, a very good friend.

At any rate, we got to—over Chicago and decided we weren't going to have enough fuel to get into—I say "we." The airplane and I decided we weren't going to have enough fuel to get into Cleveland. And at this time, the Navy jets, the FJ-1s, were screaming that they were out of fuel. As a matter of fact, I think they landed a couple of them in Indiana and one flamed out on the end of the runway. And, oh, there was a number of this.

00:01:57

RMD: Any rate, so I got over Cleveland at 45,000. This was an old P-80 before they reclassified them Fs. And shut the engine off, and I had so little fuel I couldn't read it. And split-S over the field and called on my way down. I asked them to clock me as I went by the tower, and I pulled out of this screaming dive with a dead engine, went across, got my clocking, pulled up, started

the engine, and came around and landed. And taxied back and I had measured nine gallons of fuel in the airplane when I shut down. But we made it.

EAV: How about the one record you established some time ago between San Francisco and Los Angeles, which was certainly monumental in those days?

RMD: Well, that was back in '48. Armistice Day, '48. I was in a P-80. And from brake release to crossing the tower at Los Angeles International was an officially timed 36 minutes and nine seconds, which in those days was pretty good. As a matter of fact, as I recall, that record stood up for about ten years until he finally got—I believe it was an 86F that finally broke it and a Navy pilot.

[*Personal background and early interest in aviation*]

EAV: Bob, where were you born?

RMD: San Diego, California. Native son of California, which is real—a little unusual these days. I've always—

EAV: It is today. And you lived there through your—

RMD: No. Moved to Los Angeles when I was very young and my family: mother, father, and my sister. And I went to grade school out here and attended high school in North Hollywood. Went to college back in Virginia at Washington and Lee University. And don't ask me the contradiction there between being a native son and how I got back to Virginia. It's a very long story.

00:03:41

EAV: Well, Bob, what hobbies did you have while you were going to school?

RMD: Oh, I guess the predominant hobby was model airplanes, like most kids in those days that later took up aviation as a career. Seems to me in those days, living in San Fernando Valley there, was so much acreage out there that wasn't occupied that it was especially a free-flight model. Something you never hear of today. We used to design and build our own. So—

EAV: That's very interesting.

RMD: That was—that and then the usual run of sports in high school was pretty much my extracurricular activity out of school.

EAV: So aviation began to rub off you—off on you at that time?

RMD: As a matter of fact, it started earlier than that. You see, my father was a pilot in World War I, so I grew up hearing the wonderful old stories of the chivalry of air combat, if you will excuse that term, with my father's old cronies that used to come by the house. And I used to sit enthralled by the hour as a kid.

00:04:36

RMD: Just sitting and listening to some of these old airmail jockeys and old ex-World War I fighter pilots. And they re-fought the war by the hour, so I grew up in this atmosphere.

EAV: What organizations—any particular clubs or organizations in high school, Bob?

RMD: No. Not particularly. The High Y, of course. I was active in Student Body activities. I was vice president of the Student Body at North Hollywood High my senior year.

EAV: I heard that.

RMD: And the Letterman's Club. Boy Scouts. I was a member of the Boy Scouts. Unfortunately, I was never able to really get by that 14-mile hike, so I didn't go very far in that.

EAV: Bob, when was your first definite feeling you did want to become a pilot?

RMD: [laughs] Well, I actually don't believe there was ever a time when I didn't think I was going to be. As a matter of fact, it's rather interesting. In the yearbook, in my high school graduating class, they had three categories alongside the individual's picture and it said, "Interests, plans, and ultimate objectives." And my interests say: "Aviation." Plans: "West Point of the Air." Ultimate objective: "Airline pilot." And in those days, of course, pre-war—the prerequisite for West Point of the Air—or Randolph Field, as it was then, of course—was two years of college. And this was the natural stepping stone into the airline operation. So even as a kid of 15, 16, 17, this was foremost in my mind.

00:06:11

EAV: Were you employed actively before going military?

RMD: Not in the commonly accepted sense of the term, no. I came out from college just shortly after Pearl Harbor and made my desires known to the military at Hamilton Field. And this was in January of '42. And I had a delay of about two months, something like that, where before they called me as an aviation cadet. And during that time I worked with Union Oil Company, but it was just a stop-gap affair.

EAV: Bob, do you recall any close childhood friends you were particularly close with during this time?

RMD: Oh, yeah. We were—there were several of us. All of us aviation-minded. In fact, there was an unholy group of five of us. Two of them are now dead. Both were killed over in Europe during the war flying airplanes, incidentally. Both fighter pilots. One is still in the Marine Corps. He's due to retire here in a little while. And a couple of them just kind of disappeared. I don't know where they are now

EAV: Do you recall your first aerial flight?

RMD: Yeah, I sure do.

EAV: What was it?

00:07:21

RMD: As best I can recall, it was around May or June of 1936 and I paid three dollars for 15 minutes in an Alexander Eaglerock with a Curtiss OX-5. [laughs] And this was out in the valley, a little airport that has now long since been lost to sub-dividers. But there was an old-timer out there, and he was going the three-dollar-per-30-minute route. And landing in the cow pasture. And oddly enough, the flight after mine, one of my friends who was in this little group went up with him next and he stubbed his toe on landing and stood up on his nose. Didn't hurt anybody, but that was the end of the operation for several weeks.

EAV: But it didn't let the Unholy Five lose any of its enthusiasm.

RMD: Oh, no. No.

EAV: Bob, do you recall any particularly interesting or humorous experiences during your youth?

RMD: As related to the interest in aviation, I guess probably the most exciting thing I ever did—and this was kind of an oddball, impetuous act. I hopped freight trains from here to Cleveland, Ohio in 1938 and again in 1939, just to see the National Air Races. In the first year I went, I went back with a kid by the name of Dale Rankin, who was a good friend of mine. We went to school together. And his father was the famed Tex Rankin, who was World's International Aerobatic Champion at the time. And Dale had rather poor grades in school, and so his father refused to take him back to the air races. And I just didn't have any other way to get there, so we connived together and literally hopped freight trains all the way. Made it in eight days right to the air races.

00:09:06

[*Joining the United States Army Air Forces*]

EAV: And you first entered the service?

RMD: The actual swearing in date was the 27th of March, '42.

EAV: And where did you take your training?

RMD: Primary in Visalia, California. Basic in Merced. Advanced at Luke Field, Arizona.

EAV: How about during that training sequence? Do you recall any humorous events?

RMD: Well, I don't know whether they were humorous or not. They didn't seem very funny to me at the time, but they—in retrospect now, they seem rather humorous. I came within an ace of being washed out for being unable to fly in primary. I took the longest of any student in my class to solo some 13-odd hours, simply because I couldn't keep that cut and bare going straight on the ground. Well, as it turned out, for an infraction of the rules, I actually was washed back a class in primary. And there was a girl involved over a weekend. I came in late. Instead of going across the fence as everybody else was doing, I was honest and walked through the gate and signed in.

EAV: Well, I can't think of a better reason, actually.

00:10:00

RMD: [laughs] Well, they decided to make an example of myself and the other two kids that were involved, and we finally—they were going to wash us out completely. And we pleaded our case rather emotionally and they elected to let us stay but washed us back a class, which as it turned out, was rather fortunate because the class preceding my actual graduation, the one I would have been with, were assigned almost exclusively to the Air Training Command or the Air Transport Command. And as the vicissitudes of war are apt to show, if you're in the right place at the right time, the more desirable thing occurs. And when I graduated, they needed fighter jockeys and they needed them badly down in the Pacific. So I—when I got out of advanced, I actually had my choice of equipment and choice of theaters and I got both.

[*Combat experiences*]

EAV: Well, good for you. How many hours did you have, Bob, before you actually went into combat?

RMD: The first time I ever pulled a trigger in anger, I had, as I recall, 14 hours and ten minutes in the P-40.

EAV: The P-40. I'll be darn. And where was that?

RMD: That was in New Guinea. A place called Buna.

EAV: Oh, yes. Know it well. Bob, staying in the realm of combat, what was your most interesting experience?

00:11:17

RMD: Surviving. [laughs] Getting shot up is no fun. That happened to me a couple of times, although I got back to base in both instances. I think actually the most interesting experience that I had had nothing to do with flying at all. We had kind of a lull period over there in the Markham Valley at one time, and so I went on the ground patrol with the 18th Aussie Infantry Battalion. And this lasted for five days. And it was kind of a crazy thing to do. We had an invitation to see how they lived, but we didn't expect that we would get an M1 carbine strapped on us and we were expected to participate in the action. And this got pretty exciting from time to time.

EAV: I imagine it would.

RMD: You got to—certainly the outcome of it—the old saying in combat, that it's 99% percent boredom and 1% acute fear. This doesn't really hold true for the ground forces in my limited experience with them. I lived in about 50% of acute fear all the time. This was just fantastic the way these guys operated.

[*Romantic interests and a prank with Gloria DeHaven*]

EAV: May I ask a new question? Did you have any interesting romantic intrigues during this time? You'd be surprised what some of our other members have come up with, all the way from Mata Haris to—

RMD: Well, you want to hear about the Chinese girl in Hawaii or the actress in Sydney? The—there was a school teacher in Brisbane. A bootlegger in Manila.

00:12:43

EAV: Is that right?

RMD: Yeah. There was a geisha. A real, honest-to-god geisha in Japan. There was a young Hollywood star that won me a month's pay, as a matter of fact.

EAV: How about a little go on that?

RMD: [laughs] Well, we had a little—it was kind of a running gag in the squadron because my hometown was Hollywood, née Los Angeles. The immediate question that everybody asked me, was I any relation to Gloria [Gloria DeHaven], who was pretty popular during World War II and a real cute girl. And out of this evolved the automatic exception that she was my sister. So—

because I did have a sister. And most of the squadron was in on this. It was just a running gag, and everybody knew that she wasn't. But we had a boy come into the squadron just shortly before I came home, and he was pretty enthused about this whole thing. And of course, when he finally discovered that she wasn't my sister, he got, oh, just a little bit snotty about the whole thing.

And this finally worked itself into an argument where he bet me a month's pay that I couldn't even meet her. So when I came back to the States, I called her and explained the situation to her. And we had more or less known each other since we were kids, since we were the only DeHavens in Hollywood at one time, back in the 20s and early 30s. [coughs] Excuse me. And so I went down to MGM, and we had a series of pictures taken together. And some of them were rather—I wouldn't call them intimate, but it was obvious that we were more than just casual acquaintances, you see? And this was the object of the game, of course. So I had these pictures, got them in typical 9 by 12, 8-and-a-half by 12 size, sent them back to the squadron. And sure enough, I got a check in the mail for a month's pay of the first lieutenant, which helped me out considerably. And sometime thereafter, I went back overseas and rejoined the squadron after being in the hospital here for a while. And when I got back into Lingayen at the officer's club there, when I walk in, what do you know? Here they've taken this picture and blown it up about three times, and it's sitting in back of the bar as a quiet reminder to all new members to the squadron. Don't doubt the older boys.

00:14:55

EAV: Don't bet with Bob.

RMD: Don't bet with the boys, you know. She was a fine person.

[*Thoughts on the Lockheed P-38 and Curtiss P-40*]

EAV: Bob, staying again in combat, you flew the P-38, too, didn't you?

RMD: Yes. Later in the war, we got 38s.

EAV: What is your opinion of the 40 and 38, if you can do any comparison between the two? I know they were specifically designed for different maintenance. One high altitude, as I understand it, and—

RMD: By and large, this was true. Comparing the 40 and the 38 would be like comparing apples and oranges, really. The P-40 was a good aircraft. It was outclassed, but fortunately it was sturdy. Certainly in the latter stages of the New Guinea campaign, when the quality of the enemy

pilots commenced to drop off through attrition, we were able to do a very credible job in holding our own with the—with this—with the old Kittyhawk.

00:15:48

RMD: The P-38, of course, particularly the version we had with the speed brakes on it—or the dive brakes, as they called them in those days—which permitted you to make extremely tight turns. The P-38 could only be classed as a—just an excellent weapon. It was really quite enchanting to those of us that had flown the P-40, where especially you had converging gunfire and therefore your—the apex of a max kill was a point in space only, which in lead shooting particularly was a little difficult to calculate with the particular gunsights we had. Which were pretty primitive, of course. With a P-38, where you had parallel gunfire up in those, you could shoot at extreme ranges. You could gauge lead shooting with a very high degree of accuracy.

EAV: Bob, you used the 50-caliber most of the time, didn't you? Or the 38 or the [overlapping voices/unintelligible 00:16:48].

RMD: Oh, that 20-millimeter. Yeah.

EAV: You had 30s on the 40s—or 50s on the—

RMD: Yeah. Six 50s on the P-40. Four 50s and the 20-millimeter canon on the 38. So, oh, no. And of course, with the additional speed and the additional altitude capability, it was just overall a much better machine.

EAV: Bob, did you use gun camera film?

00:17:09

RMD: Yes, we did. Whenever the opportunity and—I should say more accurately, whenever the weather conditions would permit this in the jungle down there. And this was, of course, well known. In a gun camera installation like the P-40, which was an exposed installation up in the wheel well knee on the wing, you put a—pack a camera in there and overnight it would mildew in that humidity. So the total amount of usable gun camera film that came out of the Pacific Theater was only a fragment of what came out of the European Theater, for instance. But some of the film—I have a couple of clips that I managed to appropriate from the Air Force when I left it—and some of it is fairly good.

[*Airplane markings*]

EAV: I'd sure like to see some of those sometime. Bob, did you have your own plane in the squadron?

RMD: Yes, I did.

EAV: What was the number?

RMD: 13.

EAV: You had your own crew? Ground crew?

RMD: Yeah. I sure did. A very fine boy was with me throughout the entire war, as a matter of fact.

00:18:06

EAV: Do you recall his name?

RMD: Oh, yes. [unintelligible 00:18:08].

EAV: Is he still in the…?

RMD: Oh, golly. I don't know where he is now. The last I heard, well, he was back in Wisconsin. He was an old sweet—not old. He was a young fellow, but he was a hell of a good crew chief.

EAV: And you carried this number throughout on your mark. Did your plane have any other particular markings on it?

RMD: Yes. It had one unique—but incidentally, this number 13 I chose myself. I was born on Friday the 13th. I have 13 letters in my name.

EAV: So was I.

RMD: Really?

EAV: Yeah.

RMD: [laughs] Thirteen seems to be my lucky number. I got my 13th victory on the 13th day of the month. I missed my first victory by one day. It was the 14th rather than the 13th. As far as the markings on the airplane, as you know, everybody else—well, almost everybody had names or girls or something like this. And mine was a big pastel orchid.

00:18:57

EAV: A pastel orchid?

RMD: A tremendous thing. It covered the whole front of the nose. Beautiful thing. And it is, to do this day, on my helmet that I use at the company, still has the orchid.

EAV: I'll ask the question. Why?

RMD: It's too long and complicated a story.

EAV: Bob, knowing you and knowing your background and the people that know you and think so much of you, there must be a story on this.

RMD: Oh, there's a story, of course, and it involves a girl. But it's a long time ago.

[*Aerial combat tactics*]

EAV: What type of tactics did you use, Bob? For the most part. Standard?

RMD: With the P-40, yes. They were typically standard tactics without theater. And that was a hit-and-run tactic. As you've heard a thousand times, and I certainly couldn't refute the issue, you simply could not, on any basis of equality, combat any equipment that the Japanese had. They could turn circles inside of you. You couldn't do the traditional Lufbery circles. You couldn't do even a reasonable chandelle in a firing turn, which has happened to me—had happened to me on a couple of occasions. You just couldn't do it.

00:20:03

RMD: So the object to the game there was to try and hit at least co-altitude—or preferably slightly above if he hadn't run on through—maintain your speed, climb, and if you got an opportunity, turn back and make a second pass. But never tangle with them.

EAV: Right.

RMD: Well, the P-38 was a slightly different situation. And I qualify these remarks because early in the game we had P-38s flying side-by-side with us and we can actually out-turn them. And these were the early, oh, J models. And I believe they had D models over there very early. But when the Gs, which we flew, came out with these speed brakes, in a comparative sense they would almost turn on a dime. And as a matter of fact, the first combat that we had with our machines was in the Philippines at Leyte, right after the landing. And I'm sure that we surprised a number of Zero pilots by, instead of driving on through and going away and then coming back, we turned and came right back into them.

EAV: I'll be darned. Dick Bong was up there at that time, wasn't he?

RMD: Yes. Dick and I and Tommy McGuire and Jerry Johnson had what we called Fat Cat Flight up there for a while. The four of us flew together. I had the unique honor of being Tail End Charlie, which was no fun with that gang—[unintelligible 00:21:22] these guys were good.

And we used to roam the islands up there in the early days. We went places where nobody else ever got to, and we had a lot of fun.

00:21:31

[*Competition for 500 air-to-air victories*]

EAV: Say, Bob, one of the most impressive pictures that I have ever seen is the one that appeared in *Time*. Dick Bong; Tommy McGuire; yourself, of course; Jerry Johnson. Can you give us a little background on it?

RMD: That was the issue of *Time* that actually came out in—was the January 1 edition, '45. The picture was taken in November.

EAV: I see.

RMD: There was a race, if you want to call it that, between the fighter organizations—fighter groups—in the various theaters, to be the first to score 500 air-to-air kills. Now, I emphasize this to differentiate between the manner in which kills were counted in various theaters. We did not count half kills. We did not count kills on the ground. Just purely air-to-air. That was all.

EAV: Well, Bob, on the halves. Say two planes were flying and the plane went down. You did not divide it? You flip a coin?

RMD: We flipped a coin. I lost two that way.

EAV: That's very interesting. That's the first time this has ever been brought up.

00:22:38

RMD: Yeah. We—there were some organizations—I believe in the Fourteenth Air Force—they counted half kills, and it's a perfectly legitimate way of doing it. We just never did it in Fifth Fighter Command. And as I say, somebody got it and somebody didn't.

EAV: And you lost two this way?

RMD: I lost two that way. But it's all part of the game. In any event, the motivating factors behind this picture was simply that we had accomplished the 500th kill in the air, which made the 49th the highest scoring fighter group in the history of the Army Air Forces, as they were called then, of course. And there was several international news photo people interviewing and taking pictures. And this line-up happened to be the—I wouldn't say key people, but certainly some of the better known people in the 49th who were operating in the theater and contributed to that 500 very substantially. Dick Bong, of course, with his 40, and McGuire with his 38. Jerry

Johnson, I believe, is—had 24 and an Australian Boomerang: 25. [laughs] And that Aussie flag he carried proudly on the nose of his airplane.

EAV: What's that story, Bob?

RMD: [laughs] He made a head-on pass at what he thought was a Zero one day and shot it down. It turned out to be an Australian Boomerang. The pilot fortunately survived.

EAV: But he did carry the flag?

00:24:00

RMD: Oh, yes. Yes. Carried it very proudly. I've got a picture of him with it. So at any rate, they took this picture. And to the best of my recollection, this picture was taken at the height of the activity over there and most of us had just landed from the morning mission. And I recall very well, within an hour after this picture was taken, we were all off the ground on another mission.

[*Combat missions in the South Pacific*]

EAV: Well, Bob, what enemy aircraft caused you the most concern?

RMD: They all did. [laughs] The one that was behind me caused me the greatest concern.

EAV: Very good. But did you hit any Jacks or Georges about that time of the—

RMD: Yes. I had seen the Jack before, briefly. At least I thought I had. I don't think any Jack fighters saw service south of the Halmaheras. I think they ran a couple of fighter strikes down there where the Jack was involved. But the first that we encountered were in the Philippines, and I think it was the second day I was up there. I saw one go by and went after him. As a matter of fact, here's the piece of the map he carried in his cockpit. He blew up in front of me. I picked it up in my oil [unintelligible 00:25:08].

EAV: I'll be darned.

00:25:10

RMD: As a matter of fact, Dick Bong was the one that escorted me home. I had oil all over the windshield and couldn't see out this machine, and he escorted me home and talked me down on the strip there at Leyte.

EAV: I'll be darned.

RMD: And it was a Class 26 airplane, incidentally. It was just full of holes.

EAV: Bob, that is terrific.

RMD: So I saved that. We sent it to Intelligence. It's a—well, it didn't confirm anything. We suspected they were coming out of bases on the South China coast, and that is a piece of the map depicting the South China coast. A typical navigation map. But apparently, he was carrying this in his cockpit. And when he blew up, it was a typical kind of explosion that you would expect hitting oxygen tanks, for instance.

EAV: This is certainly a [unintelligible 00:25:52] memento. Bob, were you ever shot down?

RMD: No, I was not. I was shot up over Madang one day, rather badly. Crash landed but fortunately back at my home base, which was only about 20 miles away. Madang was just across the Finisterre Range from a base called Gusap up in the Markham Valley. And this is when we were doing the leap-frogging gesture up the coast of New Guinea. And we tangled under an overcast there one day with—oh, there were eight of us. And as I recall, we counted 23 in the first gaggle, and the others I didn't see. And when I said a moment ago about being concerned about the one that was behind me, I didn't see this one. And the first thing I knew, I made a firing pass with my wingman and I had gotten the guy. And one of the cardinal mistakes of combat, you never look to see what happened to him. And it so happened he was cutting across in front of me, and it was a front-quartering shot. And he immediately caught fire.

00:26:53

RMD: So I pulled up on top and was holding top rudder. And all of a sudden, I wasn't holding any rudder. I looked up in the rear view mirror, and here was a Tony sitting here just taking potshots at me. So he got the rudder control on the first burst, and I started down doing wing rolls, trying to get away from him. And the Tony, as far as the P-40 was concerned, this was the only thing in the theater the Japanese had that could stay with a P-40 in a dive. And he was—well, he may have been a green youngster, but to my recollection he was an excellent pilot.

[*Thoughts on enemy pilots*]

EAV: Bob, we were talking about the Japanese pilots. What was your overall evaluation?

RMD: It was directly a function of time that we encountered them. Early in the campaign in New Guinea, we did not have a distinct advantage, either in personnel or equipment. The Japanese pilots that we encountered in the Buna campaign and on up the coast at Wewak—early in Wewak—I would class good to excellent. Particularly some of their flight leaders—as we later learned and we then suspected—were old Navy fighter pilots and had a vast amount of experience both in Manchuria, China, and, uh—and they then were brought down there to teach the kids how to do it. And once in a while, we would encounter one of the old—not too famous,

but we thought very highly of them—called Cherry Blossom Boys. And they carried a big cherry blossom on the nose of the airplane and they were—this was much in the same order of the Richthofen Boys and the Checker Noses over in—I believe they call them Checker Noses. Whatever they were over in Europe.

00:28:47

RMD: And these guys were good. There was no question about it. They knew their equipment, they knew how to get the best out of it, and you could play with them all afternoon and you just never get a shot at them. In contrast to that, of course, as the war went along and they were sent—their rate of losses were simply such that they could not replace it with truly qualified people. In some instances, you ran into kids that just sat there and waited to be shot down. And this was especially true up in the Philippine campaign. They had large quantities of aircraft, but some of their tactics could only be described as cold turkey. They just didn't know what to do with the machines they had.

This one particular instance of the Jack fighter, this guy didn't even make a shooting pass at me. Went over my canopy and he couldn't have been 500 feet above me and all he was interested in was getting home. And I simply turned behind him, and it took me a long while to catch him because this thing would go like hell. It was a very high performance machine for its time. But he never made a move. He just sat there and waited for me to shoot him down. And in point of fact, I sat there and I put one wingman slightly high on one side and one slightly low on the other and one slightly below me. So the guy, no matter which way he broke, he was going to get shot down. But he never broke. So in the sense of caliber of pilots, some of them were just—it was almost pathetic. But this was very late in the war. From time to time, we'd encounter one that was obviously superior in skill to anything else that we normally encountered.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]