

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

Robert M. DeHaven (Part 4 of 5)

Interviewed by: Eugene A. Valencia and others

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 four, DeHaven continues to describe his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot and his time in the South Pacific with the 7th Fighter Squadron of the 49th Fighter Group during World War II. Topics discussed include military life and conditions in the Philippines and Papua New Guinea and stories about the Fat Cat Flight, comprised of DeHaven and fellow fighter aces Richard I. “Dick” Bong, Thomas B. “Tommy” McGuire, and Gerald W. “Jerry” Johnson.

The interview is conducted by an unidentified interviewer and by fellow fighter ace Eugene A. Valencia. Valencia is identified in the transcript whenever possible.

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:

Permission to publish material from the American Fighter Aces Association Oral Interviews must be obtained from The Museum of Flight Archives.

Transcript:

Transcribed by Pioneer Transcription Services

Index:

Life and conditions in the Philippines, part 1	4
Witnessing a kamikaze attack.....	6
Life and conditions in the Philippines, part 2	6
Fat Cat Flight: DeHaven, McGuire, Johnson, and Bong	8
Other mission details.....	10
Working with the Navy.....	11
Life and conditions in the Philippines, part 3	12
Remembering Dick Bong, Jerry Johnson, and Tommy McGuire	15

Robert M. DeHaven (Part 4 of 5)

[START OF INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

[Life and conditions in the Philippines, part 1]

ROBERT M. DE HAVEN: Well, you do such a fine job of cutting on these things and editing. Well, let's see. Tacloban. It occurs to me that we started up there from Biak Island and staged out of the Halmaharas last of October, 27th, 28th. And we were the first then-Army Air Force fighter aircraft into the area. The Navy had been there before us. Not operating off the Tacloban strip as such, but using it as an emergency recovery base when they couldn't get back to their carriers, or when they got back to their carriers, there were no carriers. The strip at Tacloban was located on a little peninsula of land that I would say was roughly a quarter of a mile wide in rough dimension, and perhaps a mile long before it joined the main segment of the island. And it was purely a Marston matting, which was, as you know, the pierced steel planking. And the—as I recall, we got up there about one o'clock in the afternoon and they were just laying the last of the planking then, which accounted in large part for so many wrecks that lined the side of the field. They were Navy aircraft that had used the strip for recovery. And they were stubbing their toe in the mud and running them off the side. And they simply took a bulldozer and pushed them off just as they would deep-six them off the side of a carrier.

EUGENE A. VALENCIA: Bob, what was the weather like that day. Do you recall?

00:01:39

RMD: Yes. We came up. I was supposed to take the 7th Squadron up, and Dick Bong was leading with the 9th. And he had a full complement of 16 airplanes, and to my recollection, I had 11. And we got through picking our way through a front that lay between the Halmaharas and the lower part of the Philippines, the lower part of Leyte. And just the balance of the squadron or the group was to come up—the balance of the squadron I had and the balance of the group was to come up that afternoon. And the weather closed in behind us. So we were there at Leyte with some 27 airplanes between us. These were all P-38s. And we got them all in safely.

00:02:23

RMD: And within an hour after we got there—in fact, I recall vividly—some of the airplanes took off without refueling because the minute we got there, we were under rather continual attack. The Japanese were coming down and strafing us. And I dare say we were almost in as much danger from falling shrapnel from the Navy ack-ack as we were from the strafing Zeros at the time. These air—

EAV: Bob, was it clear that day. Do you recall?

RMD: No, it was scattered clouds all over the area.

EAV: So you vectored in? Did you have any control from the ground when you were...?

RMD: Yes. We had—well, we were obviously dead reckoning on going up because there were no nav-aids of any kind. Our contact in the area, which I remember vividly, was PepsiCola Control, which was a Navy destroyer. And we advised him of our imminent arrival. And he advised us that we were going to be lucky if we could get in the pattern with the rest of the Zeros. Well, in the instance of these airplanes being pushed off to the side, there's a historically humorous anecdote. At the time, it didn't seem very funny to us. There was a—alongside of the perimeter tent which we pitched on the strip, which was presumably to be our operation center, there was a TBF that had been wrecked on landing. And one gear was folded.

00:03:48

RMD: And we had been there about three or four days, something like that. And in one of the infrequent lulls in attacks, there were a couple of us that were going around the thing and looking at it. We had never seen one up close. And the bay was partially open on this TBF. And we looked up inside, and there's a live torpedo. This is like sleeping with a rattlesnake. We managed to get this disposed of. We got some Navy bomb disposal people over.

But as far as the area itself was concerned, it was probably just about as poor a living condition as you could visualize. We had had our share of it, of course, all through the New Guinea and Northern Australia campaigns. But in this particular case, the landing there, at best, was a marginal operation, other than the Navy show. And I can't speak for the tactics and the strategy that were involved there. But the combination of desperation on the part of the Japanese Air Force and the weather, which held down our normal complement of forces so it—which would have been there—put us in a rather unhappy position.

Now, I'll relate this to living conditions in just a minute. Normally, had we had control—air control of the area, it would have given us time to put in some reasonable shape our living quarters. Because we did not have control of the air and we were just fighting for survival, you just simply laid down and went to sleep any place you could and got food when you—when it was available. This, of course, relieved itself later on.

I think indicative of this lack of air superiority at the time—the fourth morning after we landed there, we had—out of the original 27 airplanes we took in, we had seven in commission. And—

00:05:36

EAV: Bob, may I ask, did your ground crews precede you?

RMD: There was an advanced party of both the group and Fifth Fighter Command, as I recall—

EAV: That's correct.

RMD: ...that went in with McArthur. They followed him as he waded up the beach. Or presumably they did. They had set up a field kitchen, had set up perimeter tents. And these were inland off of the Tacloban Peninsula, towards the town. And there is—there was a road which ran from the strip around the crescent of the bay to the campsite. And between the rains and the inability of the engineers to work under air attack, which were almost continuous, within 48 hours, the roads were completely impassable. And the only way to get between the camp and the flight strip was by LCI across the bay.

And as I pointed out to you before, when we would go over in the morning, which normally would be in dark—in the darkness in the early morning hours—this LCI would churn up a phosphorescent wake, which was a perfect target. And because of this incessant intruder tactics which the Japanese were using, what would normally be a 15-minute LCI trip usually took anything from an hour to an hour and a half.

00:06:59

[Witnessing a kamikaze attack]

RMD: And in this regard, I think I was—I think I saw the first intentional kamikaze attack of the war at this point. There was a—we were sitting out in the bay waiting for one of these boys to go by one day. And at dockside—which was some half, maybe three-quarters of a mile from us—I remember it well. There was a ship called the USS *Alpine*. And after this one Japanese fighter strafed the strip and dropped some fragmentary bombs, he had turned left as he came off the strip, heading west back to his base, presumably. And one of the Navy five-inch gunners, a destroyer, hit him and set him on fire. And his actions thereafter were perfectly deliberate. He flew up until he was looking parallel from bow to stern of the USS *Alpine*, made a 90-degree turn and made a split S and dove into the number two hold and blew it up. And I have heard since that this was the first recorded kamikaze attack.

UNIDENTIFIED INTERVIEWER: Killed a hell of a lot of men [unintelligible 00:08:07].

RMD: Yes, the casualties were pretty heavy on this.

[Life and conditions in the Philippines, part 2]

EAV: Bob, how far was the ferry slip from your airstrip operational area?

INTERVIEWER: There wasn't any.

EAV: Well, this is what I'm trying to bring out.

RMD: The ferry slip, you said?

EAV: Well, where you caught the boat, the LCI to go back home.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

00:08:26

RMD: Oh. We just took it off the shore.

EAV: So it—

RMD: [laughs] We went onboard just like infantry troops. And they backed it off and turned it around and started it over towards the tip of the peninsula, right at the end of the strip.

EAV: Well, how far was the boat [unintelligible 00:08:38]?

RMD: Not more than a half a mile. A half to three-quarters of a mile.

EAV: I'm recalling the last incident when you were coming back. The field was under an attack, and you were racing to your aircraft. I was trying to visualize the running from the departure point of the boat to the strip.

RMD: Oh. Well, our op—once again, you'd have to visualize this peninsula of land which the airstrip itself was located on. As I say, it was randomly a quarter of a mile wide. It was perhaps a mile long. And it was the entire strip. All around it, the perimeter of it was all good beach. You could land anywhere. And we simply had two tents. We had one. The night squadron had one where we—our intelligence officer was in there. And usually the flight surgeon and anybody else that thought they could help us. That was about the size of it.

00:09:30

RMD: I will tell you one anecdote that you won't be able to use. At the time of this affair, as I say, I was the acting CO of the squadron. We were taking a terrible pasting. And I don't think any of had had any sleep for two or three days. [coughs] One evening—it was about ten o'clock—it was raining and it was typical South Pacific, Western Pacific rain. You'd get raining like there was no tomorrow for 15 minutes, and all of a sudden it was clear. And when it was clear, then you were under attack. You know, it's one of these things. And literally had Coleman lanterns. There was no generators running and those that were had sunk out of sight in the mud.

It was about ten o'clock one night and I was sitting there having a cup of coffee and a—with some Aussie brandy—and in comes this old crew chief. And he's got tears in his eyes. And he had to have emergency leave. And I said, "Pat," I said, "I don't know how the Christ you think you're going to get out of here." He says, "I got to." He says, "My wife's having a baby." And he'd been overseas for two years. And that was the end of it. I went—I literally did. I went out back, and I vomited. It was just too much. I couldn't get him out of there.

EAV: Bob, what was in the other end—

INTERVIEWER: [overlapping] Good story.

EAV: What was—

INTERVIEWER: I had to do that more than once.

00:10:59

EAV: What was in the other end of the ferries? In other words, why did you take the boat to go to the other side of the bay? Or across the bay?

RMD: Oh. There was a road—as I say, there was a road that went from the strip around the crescent of the bay to where our campsite was. But after a couple of days of operation in all the mud and the rain, since the engineers couldn't get in to even corduroy the roads because we were under incessant attack—and of course, if they saw a cat moving down there, they'd strafe it. So they simply couldn't repair the road. And within a matter of hours, it became a quagmire. You couldn't even get a jeep through there.

EAV: Your fuel, I presume, was all in drums?

RMD: Oh, yeah. Sitting out on the strip. As a matter of fact, we had tankers sitting out in the bay, Navy tankers. We were using Navy fuel.

[Fat Cat Flight: DeHaven, McGuire, Johnson, and Bong]

RMD: Well, at any rate, the second day we were up there, Tommy McGuire joined us. And so did Jerry Johnson [Gerald R. Johnson]. This in the history of the group itself, incidentally, was becoming a very critical time because everybody was shooting for this 500 victories in the air. And as I've pointed out before, we didn't count ground victories or half victories or anything else. We just counted whole airplanes that went down. And after things stabilized a little bit after the first week or so, we had this—what we called then the Fat Cat Flight, which was Bong and McGuire and Jerry Johnson and myself. And as I pointed out before, I had the rather dubious distinction of being Tail End Charlie with this bunch of clowns. And they were good. And we used to roam pretty much all over the islands. We got in a couple of real good scraps. Matter of fact, we got into places we should never have been. We were lucky to get out. And—

00:12:41

INTERVIEWER: Where was that?

RMD: Sir?

INTERVIEWER: Where was that?

RMD: Out of Leyte. Out of Tacloban.

INTERVIEWER: But I mean, what was the scrap you got in?

RMD: Oh. There was one over Ormoc Bay one day. As a matter of fact, we were coming back. We'd gone on down to Mindoro—or Los Negros. And we'd heard there was a fighter concentration down there, that they were accumulating a concentration to make a major strike on Leyte. This is what Intelligence had. So Dick thought it would be a great idea if the four of us went down there and kind of upset the apple cart. And I really didn't know whether I liked this or not. Because the first guy, he usually gets through because he surprises them. And the second guy when, you know—strafing and dive-bombing—he usually is close enough behind they don't draw a bead on him. But when it comes to the fourth man, they got a pretty good angle on this guy, you see? I wasn't too sure of this.

00:13:23

RMD: Well, we got down there. It was pretty clouded—uh, cloudy. And we went down through a hole and went poking around. And we didn't see anything. So we climbed back on top. And it was—the top of the stuff wasn't very high. And we were on our own frequency so that we could communicate with one another, rather than being on the controller frequency back at home base. So we were on top of the overcast going across Ormoc Bay. And Dick called and said he was switching back to controller. And we switched back. There was a damnedest mélange of voices you ever heard. There was a big scrap going on underneath us over Ormoc.

So down we go, boy. We just split S right down through the overcast. And when we broke—I spread out to one side so I wouldn't hit anybody. And when I pulled out—I didn't know who it was at the time—I saw one airplane being chased to my left. And this was Bong on the guy's tail. He got him. And it turned out it was Tommy McGuire. I had lost Jerry going down through the overcast. And Tommy had made a snapshot head-on at a Zero. And I never saw an airplane come to pieces so thoroughly in my life. And he couldn't have fired ten rounds of ammunition. And he just dropped out of the overcast and bang, there it was. He pulled the trigger, and it was all over. And I didn't get one that day. [laughs] I was too busy watching everybody else.

EAV: I bet.

00:14:43

RMD: They were a great bunch of guys. Dick, of course—I came home first on R and R, and Dick came back about two weeks later. As a matter of fact, Dick and I were sitting right up here in the Villanova the night we got the news that Tommy had been killed over there trying to make

a turn into a—an attacking Jack right on the treetops. And he couldn't get rid of his tanks and spun in. Never fired a shot. And then I went back. And when I got back to the Philippines, Jerry Johnson was then the Group Commander. And I hadn't—as a matter of fact, the morning I got there is when I got the news that Dick had been killed in the—one of the old original P-80s out at Burbank when he hit the granite quarry out there or something. He was trying to make it back to the field and couldn't do it.

[Other mission details]

EAV: Bob, recalling the one incident where you were actually and literally blasted into the air—what was the weather that day?

RMD: It was pretty clear. There was some scud along the hills. There was an interesting climax to that story. It so happened that was my last mission before I came home, but I didn't know it. And after I landed, oh, about an hour later, the squadron adjutant got a hold of me and gave me my return orders. And they were dated 11 days previously.

INTERVIEWER: Is that so?

RMD: I'd been flying on my own time for 11 days.

EAV: And of course, this was also the day that you went after that [unintelligible 00:16:11].

RMD: Yeah, no parachute on.

00:16:11

EAV: No parachutes.

RMD: There wasn't anybody to talk to. [laughs]

EAV: Bob, this will be a new cut. Do you recall the Wewak incident?

INTERVIEWER: No, no. Stick to Tacloban.

EAV: I want to tie this into his full story, if I might. And this will only take two minutes.

INTERVIEWER: All right.

RMD: Well, we got all afternoon.

EAV: Nah, that's all right. Let's stick with Tacloban. Go ahead, sir.

[Working with the Navy]

INTERVIEWER: I want to hear a little bit more, if you make it absolutely clear, of how the Navy and you worked together.

RMD: Oh.

00:16:43

INTERVIEWER: If at all. I know that you had a control issue, as you told us.

RMD: Well, as a matter of fact, the—

INTERVIEWER: Back to the beginning.

RMD: [laughs] The Navy had the only intelligent—and I don't mean this in a deprecatory sense to the Army Air Forces—but the Navy was in—essentially, in control of all the Air Forces in the Philippine return, if you wish. Since we were the first Air Force troops in there, we had to use their facilities. Since we were also few in number, we were delighted to see them whenever we got off the ground. And as I've pointed out before, we didn't care what the shape of their wings were, whether they were potbellied or gull-winged. As long as they had Navy markings we were delighted. Because it was very, very frequently that in the midst of a flight takeoff, we would get broken up by strafing Zeros and we'd suddenly find ourselves with a wingman. Or maybe we were all alone. But we were airborne. And so we'd just join up with the nearest friendly neighbors. And there were many patrols that I went on over there and many scraps that I got into with Hellcats and the old Corsairs and so forth.

INTERVIEWER: [overlapping] This is why I wanted to bring it out. This is one of the few times that I knew about where the Navy and Air Force sort of intermingled with—

RMD: [overlapping] We just, uh—

INTERVIEWER: ...as units for the—as single airplanes.

RMD: Well, it was not at all unusual to run a whole patrol with a Hellcat, a Corsair, and a P-38. The only trouble was, both these airplanes were comparatively slow to a P-38, so we automatically assumed top cover to them. And they'd spread out in a typical element formation, and we'd weave over the top of them. The only trouble was that they were a lot more maneuverable with the Zeros than we were.

00:18:37

RMD: Their ground control was superb. It was just great. And as a matter of fact, this is another interesting anecdote in this respect. My roommate in college who literally went to the Naval Academy was the gunnery officer onboard the destroyer which had the controller PepsiCola

Base in Leyte Bay. And we didn't know it until after the war when we got together and we were reminiscing. And he was down there. And he remembered the 38s very well.

[Life and conditions in the Philippines, part 3]

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit more about that continuous attack. How much of it was bombing, how much strafing, how low did they come, what kind of Nips attacked you?

RMD: Apparently, the instructions—or I should say, the strategy of the Japanese were to use all measures to maintain air superiority over the landing forces. That is, the invading forces, which were ourselves. They concentrated, therefore, on—right around the clock. And I mean, I don't care how dark it was. They were coming down usually in flights of three. Sometimes in six. They used the standard three-ship element, as you recall. And sometimes we'd get as many as six of them all in trail. With fighter aircraft, they rarely used larger than a 100-kilogram bomb. And they used the high fragmentation or the daisy cutters—remember these? With the long rod on the nose. So that when the bomb hit and exploded, it simply just cut a path above the ground two or three feet, rather than digging a hole in the ground and going up in a cone shape distribution of shrapnel.

00:20:13

INTERVIEWER: Good personnel—anti-personnel.

RMD: It was good anti-personnel, and it was superb against parked aircraft.

INTERVIEWER: Sure was great.

RMD: We had more oleos stripped out there—airplanes that were intact except for holes through the wing cells. And you couldn't repair them, and so there they sat. You simply took a bulldozer, and you shoved them off to one side. The, uh—

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you a question right there.

RMD: Surely.

INTERVIEWER: Who ran your strip, the Seabees or...?

RMD: The Seabees were in charge. Yes, indeed.

INTERVIEWER: [unintelligible 00:20:41]

RMD: [overlapping] And they did a magnificent job. Well, you have much more—

INTERVIEWER: Would they act as your crew chiefs?

00:20:47

RMD: No. No, sir.

INTERVIEWER: You had really no ground crew. As I remember, they were in that first element that you landed, right?

RMD: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: [unintelligible 00:20:54]

RMD: We had a minimum number of crew chiefs. At one time there, we had one crew chief taking care of two and three airplanes as best he could. There were no replacement parts.

INTERVIEWER: Where did those fellows sleep?

RMD: In the same quarters we did. You'd pitch a tent on the ground and find a dry spot and try to sleep.

INTERVIEWER: Just across the little bay.

RMD: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Anybody sleep on the strip?

00:21:13

RMD: Yes. I slept there many nights.

INTERVIEWER: That's what I wanted to bring that out.

RMD: Oh, surely.

INTERVIEWER: I know lots of fellows did. Had to.

RMD: Well, it was simply a matter that we couldn't get back to camp.

INTERVIEWER: I said it had to be.

RMD: The—well, there were continuously, around the perimeter of the landing—now, I don't know the overall combat picture as far as the infantry is concerned, but to the best of my recollection, they struck out from the beachhead on two spearheads. One went to the south paralleling the mountains, the other one went through the cut toward Ormoc Bay with the idea of enveloping and cutting off the supply line, which was the Ormoc Bay area. This is where the Nips were resupplying.

In making these two spearhead drives, they obviously left large pockets of Japanese. The perimeter—the guarded perimeter, patrolled perimeter—was adjacent to our camp. It couldn't have been a hundred yards away. It was a hundred yards of pretty thick stuff, but it nevertheless was pretty close. And I actually preferred sleeping out at the strip, because in a foxhole I could be pretty comfortable. And I didn't have to worry about these sporadic firefights that were going on.

00:22:23

RMD: This got to be a little nerve-wracking. You'd just get to sleep and all of a sudden, you'd hear an M1 carbine and an old Japanese chopper go off. And then it's a couple of guys out here making noises, you know. And this was a little upsetting. You get out in the end of that peninsula where the strip was, and things were pretty quiet except for the guys dropping bombs and strafing. But as I was saying, in a slit trench, it was reasonably safe. And by the time we finished many of our missions, we just simply couldn't get aback across the bay. And because there were so few of us and we had early missions to get off the ground, we just simply stayed out there.

INTERVIEWER: How many missions did you average a day in those first few days?

RMD: Oh boy. Oh, let's see. The first day we got there, we landed about 1:00. I got off at 2:30. I got one off that afternoon. I think the next day I flew three sorties. One day, I think we flew as many as four. Just fast as we could refuel and rearm and turn around and go back up.

INTERVIEWER: Who refueled, the Seabees or our boys? Or both?

RMD: I think it was a combination of both. You really didn't—everybody looked alike. There was no insignia, and there were no uniforms. And just everybody just pitched in. We were just trying to stay alive. [laughs] I don't mean that to sound melodramatic. You know what the situation was.

00:23:46

INTERVIEWER: [overlapping] Oh, I know exactly what it was.

RMD: And for the first 10 or 12 days, it was pretty touch and go. That picture of, uh—that was in *Time* magazine, which was taken at the time to commemorate the 500th victory, as the text of the article says, of the 49th Fighter Group. It's quite a collection of the fellows there. We had just come down from a mission, and they got us together and lined up. And within the hour, we were all back in the air. It was just a directed lull in the proceedings, so to speak. And this was at the height of it. As a matter of fact, I think that was about the 4th of November, which was just about the peak of the activity there.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever run short of ammunition?

RMD: No, sir, not to my recollection.

INTERVIEWER: No?

RMD: We never ran—we did run short of bombs.

[Remembering Dick Bong, Jerry Johnson, and Tommy McGuire]

INTERVIEWER: When did Dick Bong come home and you come home?

RMD: I came home in December and Dick got here, uh—I think he got here about the first week in January. And of course, he was sent home because they'd figured he'd had enough. They wanted to save him. And he wasn't here—well, he was killed in May.

00:25:03

INTERVIEWER: And General Kenney sent him home because he wanted to save his [unintelligible 00:25:06]...

RMD: [overlapping] That's right.

MALE: ...top scorer. Good. [unintelligible 00:25:09].

RMD: Well, as I say, this has some particularly pungent memories for me because the four of us were pretty good friends. Jerry Johnson and Tommy McGuire came out of the Alaskan Theater. And we were all three of us on the same boat going overseas out of San Francisco. Dick had preceded us by a couple of months down there. We each went, actually, to different outfits. The 431st that Tommy went to. And Dick, of course, was very quickly assigned to Fifth Fighter Command, as you recall. He was sort of a fighter pilot at large and one to evaluate tactics. And his idea of evaluating tactics was to get into the midst of every melee he could. And it was an interesting but a very friendly race between he and Tommy and Jerry for a while there. And of course, he and Dick and Tommy finally pulled away from the rest of the pack. [clears throat] It was unfortunate that all three of these people lost their lives—I wouldn't say needlessly, but in a manner which you normally wouldn't anticipate.

INTERVIEWER: Well, just name how these three were killed.

00:26:31

RMD: Well—

INTERVIEWER: If you know it. I know it, but—

RMD: [overlapping] All right. There—

INTERVIEWER: Because you might probably know it better than I.

RMD: Well, Dick, of course, was the first—well, excuse me, Tommy was the first to go. He was—at that time, it was customary to be carrying 300-gallon external tanks. And they were on a long-range—he and a wingman were on a long-range interdiction mission, if you wish, up north in the Philippines.

INTERVIEWER: Right up to Clark?

RMD: No, I believe they were going up, uh—yes, I think maybe you are right. I think it was almost up to Clark they were going. At any rate, they were down pretty low. And they were spread out. I say low. They were actually right around the treetops. And the way I got the story—and I think it's reasonably authoritative—his wingman called in bogies at about eight o'clock coming in. And they were actually two Zeros in a diving left turn coming in on Tommy's port side. And he apparently tried to trigger the tanks off. And they didn't trigger. And while he was trying to trigger them off, he just racked the airplane into a tight left turn, figuring they were going to come off. And he just stalled out and went in the trees. Never fired a shot.

00:27:49

RMD: As far as Dick was concerned—he was the next one to go, of course—and he was here on the test program—that is, here in the United States—on a test program of the P-80. And in those days, they had what they called an I-16 fuel pump. And this fuel pump was an emergency device which you put on for takeoff and landing. And it was a backup to the normal fuel control system.

Apparently, Dick had a problem on landing. And whether or not he put on the auxiliary pump, I don't think has ever really been determined. But he pulled up and started to make a go-around at Burbank. And he got about a mile from the field when he had the flame-out. And he couldn't have been more than 1,500 feet in the air. And he tried to put it down in a vacant lot to avoid some houses. And this was not too far from Lankershim Boulevard out in North Hollywood. And it was a noble gesture, but he didn't make it.

Then, of course, Jerry Johnson was one of the more tragic of all. It was after the war was over. We were all up in Japan.

INTERVIEWER: Was he Group Commander at the time?

RMD: No. At the time, Clay Tice was Group Commander. Jerry was up in Fighter Command. In fact, I believe he was DO. And Jerry had gone down a routine beer run, so to speak, to Okinawa with a B-25. And he had what—well, the crew chief was responsible for the personal equipment of the people on board, parachutes and so on and so—Mae West and so on.

00:29:27

RMD: When they left Okinawa, Jerry had picked up, apparently, two other passengers just coming back up to the island. And he had a total of seven people on board, and it turns out that

he only had five parachutes. And this wasn't discovered until they ran into an emergency, which happened to be a lot of heavy weather. And it was the typhoon that came into Japan in November of that year, did a tremendous amount of destruction. And Jerry lost his radios. They lost all contact with him. The last message they had when he was bailing the people out, and that he saw a spit of land, he was going to try and belly into it. Needless to say, the crew chief stayed onboard with him and five of them bailed out and they all survived. And two days later when we were able to get search airplanes into the air, I had a T-6 up there that I took over and with a fellow by the name of Watkins who is now a full colonel in the Air Force. Duck-Butt and I went over looking for him and this—

INTERVIEWER: Duck-Butt Watkins?

RMD: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: [unintelligible 00:30:26]

RMD: Yeah. And Duck-Butt and I had this T-6. We went over looking for him at this—presumably at the place that he was going to go into, this spit of land. And it was a delta at the throat of a river. And of course, it was under about four or five feet of muddy, fast running water. And if he did make it down, he was simply swept out to sea. And to my knowledge, there has never been a trace found of him.

00:30:49

RMD: So this kind of broke up the old gang. And I don't suppose anybody in uniform ever really dies needlessly, but it did seem that you would have expected them to go in somewhat more fashionable manner relative to their immediate previous history.

INTERVIEWER: [overlapping] It's really quite remarkable these three top fighting aces, you know, none of them really—

RMD: Killed in combat.

INTERVIEWER: None of them really in real combat. They're not shot down, as you'd say.

RMD: And I think this is indicative—I don't think they would ever have been a shot down. I don't know. Any one of the three of them. They were too smart for that. They were too good.

INTERVIEWER: Well, Dick was almost shot down three times. He was shot to pieces three times. Two of them I was present at. I know. He didn't feel good. This was a litter earlier than—

RMD: I remember, one instant there at Dobodura when he came in with one engine smoking and running and one feathered. And on the final approach, the one that was smoking conked on him. And he had full trim in and described a perfect barrel roll on the final approach and sat that thing down and didn't scratch the paint.

[END OF INTERVIEW]