

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Veterans

China-Burma-India Theatre

O. H. 287

JOHN W. LEESON

Interviewed

by

Jeffrey Scott Suchanek

on

March 21, 1981

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SUBJECT: China-Burma-India Theatre
DATE: March 21, 1981

S: This is an interview with John W. Leeson for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, China-Burma-India Theatre project, by Jeffrey Scott Suchanek. This interview is being conducted at Mr. Leeson's business at 5095 Market Street, Boardman, Ohio, on March 21, 1981, at 10:15 a.m.

Mr. Leeson, let's begin with some information about your background. When and where were you born, tell me something about your family, while you were growing up, and tell me something about your education.

L: Well, I was born in the state of Ohio, Washingtonville, Ohio, on the 29th of March, 1919. We moved from Washingtonville, Ohio to Youngstown, Ohio in 1928. I have been a resident of Boardman, Ohio since 1928. As far as my childhood, what can I say, it was a normal boy's childhood. Unfortunately, we grew up through a Depression and didn't have too much at times, so we made our own games and such and survived. I went through three years of parochial school. I graduated from Boardman High School in 1937, and attended what was then Youngstown College in 1938, 1939, and part of 1940 until the war broke. Then I enlisted in the Air Force in 1941. I spent five and a half years in the Air Force. I came back and went back into the automobile repair business until presently, and then went back to--I didn't graduate from YSU--but I did go back in 1962 and 1963 and picked up some more hours, but I still don't have a degree.

S: Tell us a little bit about your family. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

L: Yes, I had two brothers and one sister. Three of us served in the armed services. We all graduated from Boardman High School. I had a brother that was a Marine Air Corps pilot. He went through World War II and stayed in the reserves and was called back in the Korean War and was shot down on his fifth mission. We have no details on that. We had a normal childhood life

S: Tell me something about your neighborhood while you were growing up. What was the ethnic make-up of the neighborhood? Were there any businesses in your neighborhood, or was it a close-knit kind of neighborhood?

L: Yes, living in the suburbs, fortunately it was mostly like middle-class. It was suburban, well, not what we would call suburbia today, but it was out in the suburbs. We knew everyone, which made it kind of nice. It was just sort of a middle-class neighborhood.

S: Was there any distinct ethnic make-up of it?

L: No, it wasn't ethnic in that it was German or Italian or anything like that. It was a good mixture of all, French, German, some Italians, but mostly I would say English and I don't know how else to describe it.

S: What kind of activities did you participate in, either in your neighborhood as you were growing or maybe in school? Were you on the football team or anything of that nature?

L: Yes, we were athletically inclined. I played in high school particularly where I was on the track team, the basketball team, and the football team, and participated in all the sports. In fact, all of my brothers did. My sister was the baby and at that time there was not too much for girls to do, so she was just the lady of the house. You asked me about my own children? I had my own children, I have three girls and a boy. In fact, here last November, I became a great-grandfather, so I am quite proud of that. Two of my daughters live in Boulder, Colorado, and my granddaughter lives in Evergreen, Colorado and I still have two children here at home. It is unusual, I still have a girl who is a sophomore in high school and I have a boy who is a graduating senior. He will graduate this June.

S: What do you remember about the Depression?

L: Well, when I look back on the Depression I am amazed that my father could keep the family together, but somehow we survived. It was tough, and as I always said, I can remember putting my socks on from either end. We sometimes sat down to a one-dish meal. I can remember my father bringing home hundred pound sacks of flour and fortunately mother was a good baker. Twice a week she used to bake eight huge loaves of bread. This is basically our survival diet. We made it and we were fortunate in that respect, but it was tough

S: Did you have your own garden?

L: Unfortunately, no. Where we lived we never had much room for a garden. At that time vegetables were so cheap. Dad had a slight income. He started in business right in the middle of the Depression, and right at the hardest time, because he was laid off his job. He started working in the garage out back and brought us through. We have to give dad a lot of credit because when you look back on it he had four children and he just bought a house about two or three months before the crash hit. There he was hung with the mortgage and everything else. But somehow, thank the good Lord, we survived. It did not hurt us, I think it was a good lesson!

S: You said your dad got laid off. Where did he work previously?

L: At that time, I think, it was for F. D. Smith or Durell, who at that time ran an autobody repair shop. That is what made dad go into his own business in 1930. We have been in business for 51 years now as a family.

S: Mr. Leeson, let's begin now to discuss your military career. Were you drafted or did you enlist?

L: No, I was at the Youngstown University at that time and the draft was getting close. I had applied for Air Force cadet training, but at those times it took six to nine months until paperwork caught up with one, but the draft was getting close. I definitely wanted to get into the Air Force, so what I did was enlist in August of 1941. I was sent to Shepard Field, Texas. Then in April of 1942 my papers had finally caught

up with me. I had gone into Air Force cadet training to be a pilot. Prior to this I had been a pilot. I had taken lessons on my own and I had paid for Flight Instruction. Youngstown College had a CPT program that was government funded. That was at the University. I went through their first CPT flight training program and then I flew for about a year or so just locally after that. I bought a share in a plane and flew as much as I could to give me some experience and hoped that I would get into the cadets at some time. We went into the cadet program in April of 1942 and graduated December 13, 1942.

S: How did your parents feel about you enlisting?

L: Like most mothers they do not like to see their sons go off to war. Dad did not show any expression either way. Of course, mothers being mothers are always a little more concerned I think than men are. Men seem to understand this is part of masculine heredity or something.

S: Would you say your reasons for enlisting then were because the draft was getting close?

L: Well I had applied for cadet training, and the fact that the draft was getting close I did not want to be sent to the Army, Navy or some other branch of service. I definitely want to go Air Corps. This was to guarantee or cement that I would be in the Air Corps in some capacity.

S: At the end of your military career what rank did you hold?

L: I was a major. It is funny when you look back on it in today's pay scale. When I enlisted in the Air Force we got \$21 a month. They took out something like \$3.50 for insurance. . . . know what was odd, at the end of the month you still had a \$5 bill in your pocket if you were half-way conservative. It was a good lesson. Even as a corporal, I think I got \$60 a month. As buck sergeant I got \$74 a month and then when I got into the cadet program I think we got \$75 a month as our pay. When you got your commission all of a sudden you got this nice big flight pay and officer's pay. It was an interesting experience.

- S: Prior to enlisting did you ever participate in any of the Civilian Conservation Corps or the civilian military training type of program?
- L: No, other than that Civilian Pilot Training Program at the University, that the college had at that time.
- S: Upon entering the military service, where were you sent for training? You were sent to Shepard field, Texas.
- L: Shepardfield first, Shepardfield, Texas.
- S: How did you get there?
- L: How do you mean?
- S: By train?
- L: By train, yes.
- S: Do you remember your first reaction when you stepped off of that train, and you saw the camp? What was your reaction to it? Can you visualize that?
- L: Yes, because the camp, I think at the time, when I arrived, it was being built. I was number 560. From that time in August of 1941, until I left in April of 1942, it had grown from that 560 when I arrived to something like 54,000. It really started to grow.
- S: Do you remember what it looked like, the camp? Were there trees around? Were. . . .
- L: No, in Texas there were no trees. There were just barracks after barracks after barracks. It was just like a tremendous housing project. In fact, I don't think at that time we even had running water. The toilets were outside and there was no plumbing. It was just starting to be constructed. It was a tremendous construction project.
- S: December 7, 1941, can you remember what you were doing when you heard the news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?
- L: Yes, I was in camp at the time. It struck all of us, we were surprised. It kind of awed some of us. It was

hard to believe at the time. Of course, when it did happen all of a sudden security and everything else tightened up. We became aware of it then that we were at war. As far as the reaction, you just took it in stride. It happened and there was no great emotional outburst from anyone as I can remember. We were just surprised and you just accepted it.

S: Was there a feeling before December 7th that we would eventually get involved in the war?

L: Yes, when you saw the preparations that were going on and the building and the construction and schools. Everything was planned towards that. You could almost sense that something was coming.

S: Describe a typical day of training that you went through. What type of aircraft were you trained in?

L: When I left Shepardsfield, Texas and Kelly Field, when the papers caught up with me to go to San Antonio for pre-flight training and screening. That is what they call pre-flight training. You went there, you got a change of uniforms, and you became an aviation cadet. It was primarily ground school, sort of brushing up on everything such as math. Then we started the things we would be working with like navigation aircraft identification, things that pertain to military aviation. I think that I was there six weeks and in June 1942 we were sent to Tulsa, Oklahoma at Spartan Aviation for a primary training, which were in PT 19, two-place, low-wing aircraft. I will never forget the first day we were there, the Commandant of Cadets called us all in the hanger and had a meeting explaining what we were expected to do and so on. The first thing he said was, "I want each of you to take a good look at the man next to you, because in thirty days one of you is not going to be here." Now this was true, because we had a starting class of 128 and at the end of 30 days there were 65 of us left. The washout rate was at least 50%.

S: Was it hard to get washed out?

L: Well, a lot of the fellows had no aviation background. No, it was not hard to get washed out. Time was the primary factor. You can teach almost anybody to fly, but they had to do it within a month, primarily to see if the man would have made a military pilot. If students didn't show fast enough progress within a 30 day period . . .

This is why the washout rate was 50%. We were at Spartan Flight School two months and finished primary training. Then we were sent to Randolph Field, Texas which was the West Point of the air at the time. That was for basic training. We went from a 200 horsepower primary aircraft to a BT 14, which is a 450 horsepower trainer. There again it was what they called secondary training, basic training and a heavier aircraft. Then another two months at Randolph, which was a beautiful experience. The one thing that sticks in my mind as the greatest experience was the honor system. The instructor comes in at test time, passes out the test, and leaves the room, and you can hear a pin drop. Basically this teaches you accuracy, honesty, integrity and dependency. If you don't have them ingrained when you are up in the air and need them you are only cheating yourself. If you cheat you are only cheating yourself, because you endanger the whole aircraft, the entire crew and if you miss something, the time comes when you may need that information and if you don't have it in your head you've cheated yourself and maybe ten of your crew members. One of the greatest experiences that anybody can go through is to go through a training program where the honor system is. It is a voluntary honor enforced system and everybody adheres to it and it makes everybody dependent. This eliminates politics or anything else. It is your own personal integrity and this is the one thing stressed.

S: What was the hardest part of training? Was it the headwork or was it the actual flying?

L: I had been building model airplanes for years. I can remember my first airplane when I was a child, it flew over Washingtonville, Ohio, and this intrigued me to no end. I will never forget this experience. I was still living in Washingtonville, . . . I was somewhere between zero and ten years of age. I was in school, somewhere in the first three grades. An airplane had made an emergency landing at one of the farms and I heard about it. Once school was out I just ran out as fast as I could but the man had gotten gas and had taken off. This was a big disappointment to me, that I did not get to see this airplane. I remember one or two of them ever flying over. I was always intrigued by aviation. As a boy I had two heroes, Knute Rockne and Charles Lindbergh. One of my ambitions was to become a military pilot, ever since I was a youngster.

The other one was to play football for Notre Dame, but I never did. So that's over. I had the greatest admiration for Knute Rockne, as a man and a coach. I think I told you I played my football at YSU. I was on the first team they ever had in 1938. I had no trouble with class work in the military because I had a good basic background building model airplanes, which helped me tremendously. It gave me a tremendous background when it came to ground school.

S: How so? How would building model airplanes help you?

L: Well you knew all the nomenclature, you knew all the parts and you understood aerodynamics. I know we had some West Point boys in our class and of course they were pretty sharp mentally, and I got to be friends with several of them. They said, "Gee, how can you get those good grades?" Well, it was natural, and I think my interest from the time I was a child, in aviation gave me a good background. I had no trouble going through military training at all. Not to brag, but years later I had gotten back into an outfit with my primary instructor and I ran into him one day when we were stationed up at Romulus A. A. B., Michigan flying B-24's out of Willow Run. My instructor got assigned there also. Of course, knowing him from primary is like knowing your high school coach and you don't forget him. He told me, "You were the only cadet that never got a pink slip." A pink slip meant a bad ride. I think it was my own personal enthusiasm and interest in flying, and wanting it so bad.

S: Did you find that there was a great difference between the planes as you progressed through your training?

L: Oh, yes. It's a big jump, one step up, like going from a sports car into a two-ton truck and then the next step is into advanced flight training, which happens to be twin engine. It would be like going into a semi. It's a whole different program, that's why they had primary, basic, and advanced flight schools, to work you up. Two months of basic and then we went to Kelly Field for advanced. Fortunately, that was one of the fields I always wanted to graduate from, because Colonel Lindbergh was my hero, and he had graduated from Kelly Field. We were the last class to graduate from Kelly Field twin engine advanced training, then they closed it down, the training program and made it

a sub-depot for supplies for aircraft. The engines and anything that pertained to aviation supply and mechanical parts, they eventually made a sub-depot out of it.

S: What type of twin engine planes did you train in?

L: As I recall they were called AT-10's. The AT meant "Advanced Trainer." BT, which is a BT-14 we had in basic, was "Basic Trainer" and PT meant "Primary Trainer." That's what those initials mean. The PT-19 was our Primary Trainer, the BT-14 was a Basic Trainer, and the AT was the Advanced Trainer. When we got to basic flight we had 65 of the original class and I think only 15 students washed out of Basic. We had no one who washed out of advanced because by then you were well enough along and they had the money invested in you and instructors knew you were going to make it. I'll have to say that one of the greatest thrills in my life was to graduate and receive my Air Force wings. That was one of the greatest moments of my life. It was an accumulation of everything I had done up to that point, from the time that I was a youngster and my enthusiasm about flying until I made it through the Air Force Training Program.

S: How many hours did you say you flew during training before you were qualified as a pilot?

L: Each program was about 60 to 65 hours, so by the time you graduated from advanced you had 200 hours.

S: Was there any different type of training that a fighter pilot would go through?

L: Oh yes. I went to twin engine training in advance. Now the ones that went to single engine advanced got more of a pursuit type training, because they had just a single engine and they received gunnery practice, which we didn't get. The advanced program was just a little bit different, it was in single engine AT-6's and then they would go to Harlingen, Texas, which was a gunnery practice before they graduated.

S: Were you given any choice as to which course you wanted to go? Did you have a preference?

L: No, because when you finished basic they just follow the alphabet, A and B's went to one field. They had

a lot of advanced fields I think they just went down the roster and assigned people to an airfield. One thing that happened was--I'm not sure because she never admits it--that the general's wife asked me one time where I'd like to go for advanced. I told her, "I'd like to graduate from Kelly Field." Well, when you go down the roster there was one L that seemed to be pulled out that went to Kelly, but the other L's in my quadrant went to different stations. I think she had a little bit of influence. She was the wife of General Robins, who was killed in the early part of the war. She ran the cadet club in San Antonio. We got to be friends and even today we correspond. I saw her this last October when I went through Texas, for the first time since 1942, almost 39 years. She is still the lady she always was. There are so many nice relationships you make in the service that are lasting. On Valentines Day or Easter I'll send her a corsage or a flower arrangement just to keep up. I think she did a lot for me when I was there. I think she was influential to see that I got to Kelly, because of the fact that I wanted so bad to graduate from Kelly.

S: When would a typical day start for you during basic training?

L: At 5:30 in the morning. The first thing you did was get up and run two miles. You'd throw on your flight coveralls and you'd jog for two miles. Then you came back and made up your bed and shaved and got cleaned up and got in your uniform and then went off to breakfast. Then you'd come back from breakfast. You were either scheduled for four hours of class or four hours of flight training each day. It alternated, one week we might go to class for four hours and then we would fly in the afternoon. The next week we would fly in the morning and then go to class in the afternoon. We rotated every other week. That was the routine until we got to advanced. Since we had the twin engine advance training, and it would have been air transport command and transport training, we did a lot of cross country and we were up all night sometimes. We weren't pressured too much. Classes were just about over and they didn't bother you; if you were flying in the afternoon you could sleep in the morning, because you may have been up real late the night before. We would go to operations and they'd have a cross country flight scheduled. We may leave in the afternoon and not get

back until ten or eleven o'clock at night. The last month was kind of a relaxing type of flying, a lot of night flying, and night formation. That was a typical day, a full day. We always had an hour or two of physical training. This I think was very important to get your mind completely relaxed. We played touch football, volleyball, softball or whatever. They kept us in really good physical shape and you needed that physical refreshment, because of the pressure on you. For an hour or two you can completely forget and then go back to work. It was a very enjoyable program for a boy. I think it was just absolutely wonderful, a wonderful experience.

S: Were there many accidents that you can remember?

L: Unfortunately, in the advanced training our squadron was all lined up, we had about fifteen planes in the line, and about the third or fourth plane took off and for some reason took off with the controls locked. It crashed right in the middle of the runway. However, you did not stop. We had to take right off over the wreck, this is part of the training. That was the only accident we had in the training program I was in. Well, we had a little minor wing tip "binge" or something like that, but that was the only one and two classmates were killed. They took off, the plane climbed up and stalled and it just fell right in the middle of the runway, of course with the nose down. It killed them both. We'd take right off over it, and didn't stop the program at all.

S: Was that probably mechanical failure?

L: I would have to say. It looked to me as though they took off with their controls locked. You have a lock on the controls because of the wind banging them around the rudder pedals and the elevator. I think what they did is they forgot to release the locks and when they took off it was too late. When on take off a plane climbs steeply and before they realized what was happening they couldn't get them unlocked and crashed. That was the only accident. It doesn't stop anything, you take off right over it. Boy I tell you, sometimes that can give you some second thoughts when you look down after taking off and you're climbing and there they are {crashed on the runway}. In combat flying over in India, the first day I was there, a B-25 took off and pulled his gear up too fast. The plane settled on the

runway and of course caught the props banked off to the side, blew up and then caught on fire. My first flight from India over to China was a take off over a burning aircraft that had crashed on the end of the runway. Like they always say, if a pilot crashes the first thing they do is get him up in an airplane again --if he survives it--so he doesn't get buck fever, which can easily happen.

S: Did you have any choice in going to the CBI [China, Burma-India] theatre?

L: No, once you graduate and become a military pilot you go where they send you.

S: Where were you stationed in India?

L: When I first went to India for the first two weeks I was in Kurmatola which was near the town of Dacca, and then about two or three weeks later I was sent up to Tezpur, which was on the Brahmaputra River, just as it bends and comes out of the north. It comes out of the Himalayas, runs west and then it bends south and right on that bend is where the town of Tezpur was.

S: Describe your route as you got to Dacca?

L: Dacca, or Tezpur if you want to call it, whichever you want it from, I was only there a couple of weeks. Most of my time was flown out of Tezpur.

S: Describe Tezpur for us. The first time you saw it, what were the people like? What was the terrain like?

L: The terrain was pretty level, surrounded by tea plantations. It was mostly tea country. The people were strictly natives. It was a little village surrounded by tea plantations. A lot of tea was grown there on beautiful manicured tea plantations. Of course, our air base was sitting in the middle of one. Our living quarters were about a mile or two away from the air base because of a bombardment raid or something: you don't keep your personnel right on the airstrip. We would take off and then climb up the Brahmaputra Valley and over what we called the first ridge, which was the Naga Hills. It went up to about 10,000 feet and then the mountains. . . progressively kept getting higher and higher from then on.

S: What was the attitude of the native population towards you?

L: The natives were very, very friendly. Of course, we were coming in there with all kinds of money and things to give them, and of course this was what they were expecting. Each one of us had a personal bearer, a boy I forget what we paid them, ten rupees or something a month. He took care of our clothes because of the dampness in the jungle, and the humidity. Our uniforms had to be hung out everyday, just more or less to dry out in the sun. They heated water for us when we shaved and shined our shoes. We each had a personal bearer, which was nice, . . . one of the rare things and privileges that we had that you don't have any more. They would almost worship you. There were three of us in the barracks, a little cabin, what they call a basha. Each of us had a bearer and we didn't have to do any of our personal work, but this was to help them because they had nothing. Of course, the merchants and so on in the villages tried to sell you everything. We went downtown once in a while to eat in the restaurant, but we never ate any raw food. We always had everything cooked and we had some pretty good food over there. You never ate anything raw because of dysentery and so. They were very friendly, we had no problems with the natives.

S: Were there any strange customs or anything that they went through that seemed strange to you? Was it a totally different culture?

L: Yes, the only thing that bothered us, and we couldn't understand was why the Hindus and the Moslems never got together. They were miles apart and they hated each other. It was hard to understand, knowing the Indian Philosophy. The Hindus and Moslems had no use for each other at all. I think I had a Hindu bearer and my roommate had a Moslem bearer and they wouldn't talk, they wouldn't cooperate and they wouldn't do anything together. That was the one thing I did notice. They were very servile and were good. They didn't have to work hard, because we really didn't have much for them to do. All they did was little things for us, like shine our shoes or boots, take care of our clothes, and they took our laundry and brought it back and so on.

S: The runway at your second air base there, what was that made of? Was that just a dirt runway. . . .

- L: No, it was macadam, it was paved. The ones in China weren't, they were all just crushed stone. They were good runways, very solid.
- S: Was this base strictly an American run operation?
- L: Oh yes.
- S: American planes and personnel?
- L: American planes, yes.
- S: Were there fighters stationed there also?
- L: No, we had no fighters. In our area there were no fighter planes at all, fighters were stationed in China. This was mostly air transport command; we were hauling gasoline, bombs, personnel, cargo, anything.
- S: What year was this?
- L: I arrived there in November of 1944, just at the start of the monsoon season.
- S: Describe your route getting to India. Did you stop anywhere to refuel on your way from the United States to . . .
- L: We left Florida and went to Puerto Rico; from Puerto Rico to Trinidad; Trinidad to Georgetown in Guiana; then to Natal, Brazil; that was a hopping-off place to go across the South Atlantic. We spent a couple of days there, got to go swimming in the ocean and rest a little bit while we checked over our plane for the ocean haul. Then we would leave Natal, Brazil about 11 o'clock at night and fly over to Ascension Island, which is in the middle of the South Atlantic, land there, spend the night and then we either went to Dakar or the Gold Coast of Accra. Then we went up to Kano, across Central Africa to Khartoum down to the Red Sea, around Arabia; we were not allowed to fly over Arabia at that time. We were warned if we ever had to ditch, "don't land on the land, land in the water because if they got to you they would just rob and kill you." We weren't allowed to fly straight across we had to fly around Arabia up to Misara Island and then from there to Karachi. That was our first landing point

in India. From Karachi we got orders to go to Calcutta. Hastings Mills was the major theater headquarters. . . from there they assigned us to the different bases up in the Assam Valley, which was northeast part of India and jumping off place to China.

S: How many days would this journey have taken you, about a week?

L: No, about two weeks. They had a good beach at Accra and we'd say we had pilot fatigue and the operations officer would say, "Well, what do you need?" "Ah, let us have a couple of days to recuperate." They were good in that respect. They had a beautiful beach we loved to swim in, palm trees and everything. We'd say, "Well the crew is kind of tired," and they would give us an extra day or two before we flew across Central Africa. You could take a little bit of time off, they knew it, everybody did it, it was no problem.

S: It reminds me of some of those Willie and Joe cartoons.

L: Right, Willie and Joe cartoons.

S: Before you went overseas, were you told you would be flying over the Himalayas?

L: Oh no, no. When you left the States you had sealed orders. We weren't allowed to open them until you had flown at least 500 miles off the coast. Then you opened your orders and that's the first you knew where you were going. Actually some of the orders were only partial. Our orders had assigned us to Karachi and that was as far as we knew. They used to cut them into sections so no one really knew exactly where they were going. You opened your orders after you were about 500 miles out and then it showed where you were going, you were assigned to such and such airbase and

S: Once you found out that you'd be flying over the Himalayas, what was your reaction to that?

L: No reaction, it was just part of your job I guess. No, I can't recall any reaction. You were used to taking orders and being assigned to different operations, and you just accepted it. This is where we are going, it's going to be rough but. . . . In fact, we didn't know how rough it was until we actually had gotten into it.

S: What kind of intelligence or briefing were you given once you got to your bases in India?

L: Well, the only thing we were briefed on was if we were forced down in the jungles of Burma, [we were told] to stay down on the rivers or waters and follow the rivers. We had a survival kit on our parachute that consisted of a machete, fishing hooks, mosquito repellent, atabrine tablets, and a fish line. The only thing we carried for arms was our .45 (caliber) pistol on our side. That's all we had to protect ourselves with. We were told, if you were forced down, to contact the natives. We used to carry a little bag of salt with us that we could bargain with, and they would eventually bring you to a mission or village. A few of the fellows were fortunate enough to work their way out. The Burma jungle is very, very dense. The first ridge had Naga tribes on it, at that time they were quite acquainted with the Americans and weren't a problem. Our big problem was if we were forced down in western China, particularly northwestern China, in the high mountain country where they had the robber bands. They told us, "If you have watches or anything, throw it away, and if you're forced down there, stay in the valley." They were vicious and they'd just as soon kill you as look at you. They said, "Stay down, don't stay up in the mountains, get down in the valley." These people were hill people and were the only ones we were afraid of. If we were forced down in Northwest China, chances for survival were pretty slim. Central China, and primarily Burma where we flew were safe areas. In the Kuming area also. Of course we had Chinese flags on our jackets and we carried a device that when opened up it read "This is an American pilot, if you will help him and get him back to the base you will be rewarded." This was all in Chinese, this was in a native language. This happened to a lot of men; a lot of men were brought out that way. We couldn't speak Chinese and this was to let them know that you were not an enemy, because the Japs were over in that area at that time. We had these flags on our back or sewed inside our jacket. These were about the only things we were briefed on as far as survival and if anything had happened to force us down. Then of course we were briefed on the terrain and so on. Being experienced pilots we didn't need too much technical advice as far as the flying end was concerned. Except as screened about Able route, which was the highest (20,000 feet) route, which we had to fly early 1944

because the Japanese were pushing up into Burma and Southern India. We had to stay way north where the mountains were really high. Then as we gradually pushed the Japs back into Southern Burma we kept coming down to lower routes. Then the mountains kept getting lower. Many of the mountains are uncharted as far as height was concerned, parts of our map were just blank and didn't show any elevations. It just said uncharted north of our Abel route.

S: Okay Mr. Leeson, what types of planes did you fly over the "hump?"

L: They were converted B-24's that were converted into transports. Four-engine B-24's, they took the turrets and guns out and converted them into transports. They had another 24 that was called a 109, the same plane, a B-24, but it was a tanker. It just had bombay tanks that held gas, 2400 gallons. Most of the cargo was gasoline to supply the B-29's that were in Western China, and bombs and so on--pretty hairy cargo!

S: That's mostly cargo which you carried? What other kind of cargo might you carry on any particular trip?

L: One time we were curious as to what our cargo was, and out of curiosity we went into the back and opened one of the crates. At first we couldn't figure out what it was, but it was Chinese money, just carton after carton of it. The inflation rate over there was \$1200 to \$1. For \$1 of our money you can get \$1200 of Chinese money. This was the one time we had a whole plane load of money. Do you know where it was printed--in Philadelphia. This was a big surprise to us. We looked at those notes and my God, it was printed in Philadelphia. We're busting our tails hauling that stuff over to Hong Kong. Our loads could be engines, or bombs, but primarily gasoline, because the B-29's in China consumed so much gasoline. It was a dangerous load in that it was in 55 gallon drums in the C-87's. At high altitude sometimes the drums started to leak. We were always afraid to throw any electrical switch, because you never knew when you had fumes on board that would cause an explosion. What really got to us a little bit was that in the nose of the C-87 plane were four 55-gallon barrels of gas that you couldn't get to. They were sitting right in front of you in the nose compartment of the aircraft. These

were the ones that we were concerned about. Sometimes some of the crews would have to throw them out somewhere over the hump because they sprung leaks in these 55-gallon drums. If they got into trouble or the plane got into trouble, get rid of your cargo--lighten your load--that's the first thing that you do. It was pretty hairy cargo to be carrying gasoline all the time. We were always aware of fumes, and extra sensitive to any fumes so that you didn't smoke or . . .

S: How much could you haul at one time?

L: In our bombay tanks in 109 we carried two, four or five six hundred gallon tanks, about twenty-four hundred gallons of gasoline. Now, this does not include the wing tanks, another 2600 gallons on the airplane itself. This was the cargo of gasoline.

S: What was your outfit and who was your commander?

L: It was the 1335th airbase unit. Who the commander was, I can't recall. I can't recall his name, it's Colonel something.

S: Do you always fly the same aircraft?

L: No, you never flew the same aircraft twice it seemed. When you came back the plane was checked over, re-gassed, reloaded, and given another crew. It was a twenty-four hour operation day and night. In fact, the last three months, I never saw the hump. In all of my six-hundred and fifty hours flying time over the hump, I think I only saw it six times. The last three months I was a check pilot, we used to check the new boys coming in because there was always a new rotation going on. As check pilot, I would leave at dusk for India and fly all night long over to China and come on back. We'd arrive back at dawn the next day. It was strictly all night flying. The last three months was all night flying for me on that hump.

S: During this night flying over those high mountains, was it mainly instrument flying?

L: Yes, because it was black out there. It was really dark. You just flew mostly instruments and when you reached the stage that we had, as far as pilot experience, you'd rather fly instruments, because it was

easier. When you left the runway lights in India you never saw any lights until you saw the runway lights at the base in China, because of the Jap patrols. We used to fly even with our aircraft lights switched off. We flew pitch black and I tell you it was really black out there. There were no horizon lights like we have around here and most of the time you're in the clouds or on top of the clouds. Most of the let downs in China were instrument let downs. You saw very little of anything.

S: Did you always fly with the same crewmen?

L: No. We'd figured they (new pilots) could find their way over and back in the daytime so we did all our new pilot checking at night because of the difficulty in navigation and the weather and so forth. I would fly with a pilot maybe, three trips or four trips, and I'd say, "Well, I'm not ready to check you out, you still need some experience." Then I would pass him on to another check pilot if there was any doubt in my mind whether he was qualified at that particular point or not. Then I would take another student and this was our checkout procedure. Sometimes I would get a student or another pilot that someone else was checking out. He had taken three rides over and his instructor wasn't satisfied so he'd say, "Okay, you take him for the next three." We would do that until we'd feel that he was safe. This was strict, because the flying was so demanding. The co-pilots gradually moved up to 1st pilot, but we wanted to make sure that the pilot himself could handle the plane, the weather, and the navigation, because of the safety factor. Even then we lost a lot of people. Our particular base had the C-87's, but there were DC-3's that did food drop to the Chinese troops at low altitude. They mostly flew out of Ledo and Chabua. They used DC-3's because they couldn't get up too high. They weren't on the hump too much, mostly in Burma. Then we had the C-46's, which was called the "dumbos", they could get up a little higher because of a two stage turbo blower. We were fortunate in our aircraft to have had the turbo super charges, which allowed us to fly higher than any particular plane at that time.

S: Did you have confidence in your plane?

- L: Definitely, yes. Because one of the incidences, when we ran into a storm one night coming back, we lost complete control of the aircraft in a thunderstorm, and got kicked all over the sky. We hit a thunderstorm at 18,000 feet and finally got kicked out at 26,000 feet. The throttles were closed on all four engines going up 4,000 feet a minute and air speed 200 m.p.h. That was the one night I thought: this is it! You're so busy trying to keep the aircraft [stable] but you couldn't keep it right side up, it was all over the sky. When we were literally kicked out on top at 26,000 feet, then I knew the airplane was built! From then on I never had any trouble, it was the roughest ride I ever had. We smacked this thunderstorm at 18,000 feet, flew blindly right into it and it was vicious! We laughed about it afterwards. Aircraft cockpits are fairly tight, but this was so violent; we could make snowballs in the cockpit at 26,000 feet. What made the weather so severe on the "hump" was the fact that warm, moist air coming off the Indian Ocean was gradually pushed up. If you push warmer air into colder air it automatically accelerates because the hot moist keeps rising and rising, and with this comes monsoon weather. This air was warm and moisture laden, this is what made Himalayan weather so severe. It would come off the Indian Ocean and then gradually start up the first ridge at the Naga hills and then the thunderstorms would build up.
- S: What was the ceiling on your plane, the highest you could go?
- L: Well we could have probably gone up to about 32,000 feet, not loaded. Fortunately we were unloaded coming back from China the night we got hit. We could get up comfortably 26,000 or 27,000 feet, which was just enough to clear our major route, our highest routes.
- S: Were you provided with any kind of oxygen supply?
- L: Yes. You had to be on oxygen. You start oxygen at 14,000 feet. All the way over and all the way back we were on oxygen all the time. Yes, that was a must.
- S: Would you say the worst storms that you hit would be coming back into India as the warm air was rising?
- L: Well, sometimes we'd take off and you could see the thunderstorms building up ahead of you, and before you

could get to them they were way above you. They would come up so fast. The worst was when you left India, going into China, over Burma and the first ridge of the Chinese mountains. The thunderstorms took off and from then on it just kept increasing in violence and so on.

S: Was there any way to go on top of them or were they just too high?

L: Well you really couldn't, they were too high. Some of those thunderstorms didn't start until 10,000, 13,000, or 12,000 feet, the bottoms of them, and the thunderstorm would go up to 30,000, 40,000 feet. There were many of them we could never have gotten on top. The only thing I wish we had at that time was what they have now on planes, airborne radar, so that we could have picked the storms out and moved through them instead of flying blindly into them. That's why we lost so many airplanes. At night the boys would just fly right into one of these vicious thunderstorms and that's something that a pilot never does if he can possibly avoid it. The first thing you are ever taught in aviation weather, never fly into a thunderstorm because you can have hail as big as baseballs inside. Inner wind currents pick these raindrops up and builds up and drops; builds up into hail. In our own country you have hail the size of golfballs. Well imagine flying into a bunch of those at 180 miles an hour, they just smash your plane completely.

S: You never flew with a fighter escort then?

L: No, no. The fighters were over in China, primarily. They had some in India, but we never saw much of them. We had no fighter escort at all and this is why so much of the flying is done at night and it helped. This was a 24 hour operation and planes were going back and forth across that hump continuously.

S: Were you ever personally in danger of being intercepted by a Zero?

L: Yes. Once coming back we were running short of gas because of the head winds. It was just dawn; it was dark on the ground, but it was just getting daylight at altitude. We landed at Myitkyina air base in Burma just as it became dawn. It was daylight enough that you could see. We landed at Myitkyiha and everything was in a turmoil. We couldn't figure out what happened, the oper-

ations officer and some of the personnel in operations said, "Didn't you see them?" I said, "See who?" He said, "Those five Zeros that just shot us up." Had we been five minutes earlier I think we would have been a gone goose, because we'd have been in the landing configuration and we would have been a sitting duck. Usually when enemy planes are approaching they call it a "one ball" alert. When they know they are coming towards your base or in your direction they call it a "two ball alert." Well, a "three ball alert" means that they are over the field. We were starting take off one night at Myitkyiha when all of a sudden the operations tower comes on and says, "We've got a three ball alert." I'm just starting my take-off run, well we just threw all the lights and all the switches off and I just turned the airplane off the runway and stopped, threw open the bombay doors and we just got out of there. Fortunately, nothing happened. Whether they overflew us or what I don't know. Those were the two incidents. We had some planes that were landing in the Kunming area where the Jap Betties would come in alongside of you. They weren't picked up because they would try to fly formation with us. Well, then you wouldn't see them at night. Then when the tower would throw the runway lights on, the Japs would come in and bomb the heck out of the place and take off. You never knew whether you had anybody on your wing or not at night.

- S: Now when you fly over the hump, would it just be one plane at a time or would you fly in maybe a three-plane formation?
- L: No, it was always one plane at a time. Because when your plane was loaded and ready to go it went. There was no delay. Continuous operation, as soon as it was loaded we'd come back, land it, they would gas it up, check it over, load the plane, and then have another crew that would start back over. We'd bring it back, say early morning and then that day it would be gone. Once in a while we'd get the same plane, but not too often. Planes would come back, be loaded, and we'd have it that night.
- S: What was your longest flight in hours and miles, did you estimate? Where did you fly to?
- L: Well the longest trip we had was from our base to the upper northwest China, up at Chengtu. They had five airbases at Chengtu. We supplied cargo, fuel, bombs,

whatever. That was the longest haul and that was the highest route. That was the Able route. Actually, to go over, by the time they unloaded our ship, we'd grab something to eat and come back. We were gone about twelve hours altogether. Figure that at 180 miles an hour and you could come up with roughly the miles we covered. We very seldom went over and back in less than twelve hours. As I said, when I was a check pilot we left at dusk and then I would get back at dawn. We rode over that "Hump" all night long. We landed, while they were unloading the fuel or whatever cargo it was; we'd go grab a bite to eat, get a clearance and then start back. We didn't stay in China, we came back the same night.

- S: What kind of equipment did they use to unload your plane once you landed?
- L: Well in China we had a bunch of coolies. Then of course they had gas trucks that pumped the bombay tanks, those had to be unloaded differently. They had gas trucks that had to pump the gas out of the bombay tanks. Then they would pump the gas out of our wing tank down to a minimum to get us back to India. They would take all the gas that they possibly could, because this is what your mission really was. Whatever you had in your wing tanks, they would drain those down to give you a minimum amount of gas to get back to India, so you'd go back to India with practically empty tanks. The longest flight I ever had was to the Chengtu area one time and I got in snow static, of course you don't leave your altitude unless you get a clearance because you don't know who is underneath you. I couldn't get connection, I couldn't get any communication with the air traffic control at Chengtu. So we said, "Well we can't fool around too much because we're gonna start getting low on fuel, we then flew all the way down to Kunming. We had left India, flew all night, went to Chengtu, and couldn't get a clearance to get down. In fact, we were reported missing. We had gone up into the Chengtu area, these are very high rugged hills, and this is where the Chin tribes were that we had to stay away from if we were forced down there. When we arrived at Kunming we were very low on fuel, so we called for an emergency landing procedure, and shot an instrument approach, they cleared us right down. I think when they measured our fuel, we had something like 48 gallons of gas for the four engines, which may have made one trip around the field, that's

that's how close it was, all because we were in snow static, and our radio was useless. They had reported us missing, because when you are dispatched from India they know you are coming to a particular airbase and look for your arrival. Well, if you don't show up, they figure, they've gone down. That was the only time I was ever reported missing. We unloaded our cargo at Kunming and went back to India, and that was probably the most gruesome and tiresome trip I ever had; we were dead tired due to the tension and so on. In fact, we wanted to stay at Kunming and sleep, but they wouldn't let us. We had been up 36 hours by the time we arrived at our home base.

S: What was the aluminum trail?

L: They call that the aluminum trail because of the number of aircraft that crashed going across the hump. That's why they call it the aluminum trail, there is almost a trail of crashed airplanes across the hump.

S: Do you have any idea how many planes were lost during this air lift?

L: The statistics say 930, actual 1983 statistics. Very few, very few of the crews walked out, ever got out, because you crashed and that was usually final; you saw some of those crashes in that book (China Airlift "The Hump", Vol. II). You saw that there were very few survivors at that altitude. Those that were fortunate enough to bail out, even if you bailed out in 120 mile an hour surface wind, when you hit the ground it would kill you. It would be like stepping off a truck at 120 miles an hour, you didn't have much chance. If you land in a valley, that would be the only chance, to avoid that wind. That average wind, at the monsoon season, was 120 miles an hour. We had never realized it at the time, but we were flying the jet stream and it wasn't called that at that time.

S: Was that a disheartening sight to look down and see all that wreckage?

L: Well, yes it was. We wouldn't see too many of them. I had a very close friend that crashed seven miles off the end of the runway at Shingbuiyang. This base was in Burma. I knew where the plane was and I circled the jungle, and circled it and I couldn't see a thing.

The Burma jungle was so dense it just swallowed everything up. It took Search and Rescue three months to get in to get the dead out. They had a search and rescue crew, and of course, your graves registration, they have to get in and verify the crew. The pilot was a good friend of mine from Illinois, later I learned it took three months to get in, identify, and get the crew out.

S: What was the attitude of the Chinese people? Did you have close contact with the Chinese people?

L: We never had much contact, although there were times when we would be around the plane of course, they always put Chinese guards on our planes when we landed-- and I had a book that had the Chinese language, and I'll never forget the one time while I was waiting, until my plane was unloaded, I pulled this book out and I started to read some Chinese to the soldiers, next thing I know, I had a group around me and the odd thing about it, I suddenly realized as they kept coming in on me, I had been pushed about two or three hundred yards from my airplane. They laughed and giggled; I would call one an ox man, and I was going through this Chinese book, you know, I guess it's the way I pronounced some of the things. I had maybe twenty or thirty in the crowd and the thing I hadn't realized, they had gradually worked me away from my airplane. All of a sudden, I realized, "Gee, I'm two-hundred yards from my plane." Doing this and getting interested in it and they were laughing and hee hawing, you know, I'd say a word and maybe one of the soldiers would give me the correct pronunciation, I was calling them different things, like soldier, whatever, you know. I was really entertaining them, I don't know whether I was entertaining them or they were entertaining me.

S: Do you think you were in any danger?

L: I don't think so, no. The natives are friendly, I think, very friendly. I don't think they had any feelings either way. We were there, and of course, we were supplying. You saw in the books how many people worked on those runways, little, small children breaking small stones, the women carrying on their heads those baskets of stones and so on. That's why I gave you the book for background, to give you an idea what we experienced.

S: Were most of the runways in China of the dirt nature?

- L: Yes. They were almost like concrete; they started with big rocks and as you saw they were breaking them down to smaller and smaller size. They had sort of a mud on top of them that hardened. They were beautiful runways. They were smooth and long. They had to be especially long because of the altitude. Most of those fields were five or six thousand feet, some of them seven thousand feet high. At that altitude you need a longer runway.
- S: What was the honest opinion of not only you personally, but the men you were associated with, towards the Chinese people? Did you feel what you were doing was helping them? Did you feel you were making a major contribution to the war effort?
- L: Oh, yes. Definitely. What we were trying to do was to get the 29's to hit Japan from the back door. Basically that is what the military plan was.
- S: Did you have any feelings towards the Chinese people? I mean the reason I ask is because out of Korea and Vietnam you get terms like gooks and things like that. Was there any type of that feeling at all or did you consider them a bonafide allie?
- L: No, I guess we considered them a bonafide allie. There were some problems, getting them to the fight, you know with Stillwell and what's his name, Chiang Kai-shek. A lot of equipment, material supplies, armament we hauled over was never given to the soldiers. It was put into Chiang Kai-shek's warehouses, and he was afraid of these other warlords taking over and then chasing him out, which they eventually did. All the material that we hauled over was never given to the Chinese troops to fight with. This is why General Stillwell was so darn upset and mad, he had absolutely no use for Chiang Kai-shek.
- S: Did you know at the time that Chiang Kai-shek was hoarding this material?
- L: We heard rumors that a lot of it was going on the black market, that a lot of it was disappearing to the black market. Of course, their gasoline supply, this they couldn't very well do. We had heard a lot of trucks, jeeps and so on that were going into the black market and Chiang Kai-shek was hoarding and so on, which he did. He came out later and had a fantastic amount of material that was finally taken away from him.

- S: How much did you know or how much were you told about the power struggle between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung?
- L: Very little, very little. We really were getting very little political and geopolitics. You don't learn that until afterwards. You're in there and you're busy and you are so busy doing your job that you don't seem to get involved. They would put out dispatches, but nothing concrete. We knew from previous experiences and what you read about Stillwell and Chiang Kai-shek being at odds. Chiang Kai-shek was more of a figurehead, he wasn't the military leader. For example, Stillwell was, and he got kicked out of Burma. With the march back to India on foot the Japs kept pushing. It was hard for Stillwell to get anything done. We had to do it mostly by air. Lack of cooperation by Chiang Kai-shek caused Stillwell much grief, plus loss of military personnel.
- S: Did you know anybody who was shot down or had to make a crash landing and then had to rely on the Chinese or Burmese people to get back?
- L: Yes, one boy from our outfit, he and his crew bailed out and fortunately got back. They bailed out over in China and they made it back. This is funny, he was a Jewish boy and he got circumcised the next day back on base so he didn't have to fly anymore. We laughed about that. He was off duty flying for two or three weeks. We made a big joke about that, that's the way to get off the duty roster. That was an experience for him and I guess he thought he'd better become an Orthodox Jew. That was the one crew from our base; there were others, but very few ever returned.
- S: Were you ever told that it was better to get help from the Chinese Nationalists rather than the Chinese Communists? Was there any difference? Would they both help equally as far as you know?
- L: As far as I know, yes. I can't say for certain, we never ran into that problem knowingly and it was never brought up or discussed. If we went down in China, you just did the best you could. Take for example when Doolittle's Raid collapsed and went haywire on him. A lot of the boys from that Doolittle B-25 raid crashed in China, the people didn't say whether they were

Nationalists or not, walked them out and gave them help. I think it is just a natural feeling that the Chinese are a gentle people, you know, they don't like to kill. In fact, one of their quirks, the Chinese will surround you, and they surrounded many pockets of Japanese, but they always give you an escape route. You take it, because they give this, this is called saving face. They won't just go in and slaughter you. They'll surround you until they have you entrapped; they'll always give an avenue of escape. Now, if you don't know enough to get out of there, well, then you'll take the consequences. But they do this. Remember I said they pushed me back to my plane and they kept coming in closer and I kept backing up and they'd come closer and I'd back up. This is what they would do. The philosophy of the Chinese warrior it seems, is not to be a merciless killer. They have respect for life and they'll defeat you, but they'll give you, save face. They did this in Burma; they trapped many Japs and they left them an avenue of escape, and let them go back, and just kept pushing them back. I think this had its merit, rather than just a slaughter.

S: In other words, you accomplish your objectives but you don't need to annihilate them?

L: No, he doesn't need to annihilate people. Just wantingly. This is a credit. I think Chinese are very gentle. I think, whether they were Nationalists or whatever, they would help you, because I say, we had the flags and information to identify ourselves to them.

S. Did you ever fly any military personnel either to or from China or Burma, or was it all cargo that you flew?

L: I am glad you asked that. We would fly into China, unload, and our plane was a C-87; we brought Chinese troops back to Northern India and would place them off at Chabua and Ledo to train. They were further trained in India. We would bring back 50-60 at a time. Oh, I felt sorry for them, because all they wore were their thin cotton clothes coming back at that high altitude, -40° without heat in that ship. Oh, 50 or 60 of them, just Chinese, not troops, but they were in the service and they were brought back into India for training. Sometimes we took some to Western China, landed some at Yunnanyi, which was a training ground in Western China for Chinese troops. These were the recruits and we would fly. . .

S: Do you know how to spell that?

L: Yunnanyi, yes. Let's see, if I can find it on the map. This was one of the high mountain areas that we had to contend with. But it was simple spelling, just like Chinese, Yunnanyi, you would almost pronounce it phonetically. I can't see it on the map, and they may have changed it a little bit. We brought some troops back to Yunnanyi that they trained, to help Stillwell.

S: Now were they already in uniform or were they civilians that were just. . . .

L: No, they were in uniform, you'd get a bunch of recruits and you'd give them their first uniform. Then they were brought to India, Yunnanyi and places . . .

S: You mentioned that you felt sorry for them because they didn't have you know, warm enough clothes. Were the CBI hump pilots given special clothing that maybe the European pilots did not get, warmer clothing, and warmer flight jackets possibly?

L: No, no. That was one of the things we had to contend with, we used to have heated suits but they were like an electric blanket, they were wool and they were awkward. In India it was hot and humid and you're sweating anyway just in a khaki uniform. You couldn't put this heated suit thing on and then you're climbing up the altitude, where it got to say 40 below zero. We used to once in a while, take them, but we preferred our leather jackets and our regular flight suits and of course, our fur-lined boots. But what happened after you get so cold, those boots became an insulation. We had silk gloves, wool gloves and then leather gloves. About the time you were half way back from China you were so cold that these gloves and boots became like insulators. Even today my hands are frostbitten and I can't stand the cold in my hands or feet. Your feet would get cold and you just couldn't wait to get those boots off so you could start warming up your feet. I had both of those frostbitten. Even in India when we would go to the outdoor theatre at night with a temperature of 87^o, I'd have to put gloves on because my hands would get so cold. I still suffer from that today. We were very uncomfortable.

S: How long did you spend overseas then, in that CBI area?

- L: In that area, I was over there from, I'd say about five and a half months. Then I had gone back later on, after I had come back to the states. Once they closed our base at Karachi, but that was a year or two later. This was in 1944 or 1945. I had gone over there in November 1944 and came home in May of 1945, which was roughly six months.
- S: From your description then, the weather caused you pilots the most trouble rather than the Japanese?
- L: Yes, the weather and the fields over there were like landing in a bowl because of the mountains. They called for real, real precision flying, especially on your instrument let downs. The proximation of the mountains to the field, it was like landing in a bowl, landing in a bowl with an airstrip on the bottom of the bowl.
- S: Would you have any problems with ice on the wings or anything of that nature that you ever experienced?
- L: I had some, but nothing you couldn't handle. A lot of pilots would have flown into a lot of ice. The only thing we had was prop de-icers to keep the ice off of the propellers. We had the de-icer boots on the front of the wing that were made out of rubber, well when that tropical sun deteriorated them, there were no replacements. We didn't have the icer boots to knock the ice off the wings. We tried to avoid it as much as possible. Fortunately, it wasn't a problem to me at least; now some of the others might have had it, but we were fortunate. I was fortunate that I didn't run into a lot of conditions. At 40° a plane won't ice up.
- S: It seems to me that the CBI theatre was really the back door operation of the war. Did you ever experience or have any frustration over lack of parts, the lack of supplies, that type of thing?
- L: Yes, definitely, because we were at the very end of the supply line. The CBI was the last area to receive supplies. We weren't short of anything that was really critical. I have to give the highest

regard to the maintenance crews. I have seen boys work on those engines, work twelve hours on an engine, start it up, and it just wouldn't run properly. They were dedicated, I mean the mechanics and the ground crewmen were really dedicated men: They were working in hot tropical sun, the steam of the jungle, and the high humidity, would work another twelve hours on an engine, think they have it, and they would start the engine up and it would run rough or misfire, then they would have to take it all apart again. I would say the ground crews were absolutely excellent, and the conditions they had to work under were intolerable. We were at the end of the maintenance supply line, those boys did an excellent job, a commendable job, and were really dedicated. I only lost one engine on a four engine aircraft over the hump. I think it was number two engine. You count from left to right on an aircraft. It was a broken fuel line. Fortunately, it didn't catch on fire, but when it quit we shut it down. We shut off all the pumps and fuel to that engine. That was the only maintenance problem I ever had during the time I flew the hump. Those men did a commendable job, they should be commended highly, the crew chiefs and the mechanics and so on. They did a commendable job of maintenance.

S: Was it common practice for them to cannibalize wrecks?

L: Yes. Yes, you had to, that's where a lot of their spare supplies came from.

S: How many trips over the hump did you personally make?

L: Well, each one was called a mission, so all right, we'll take the 650 hours and divide them by roughly twelve and that would give us what, roughly about 55.

S: Was there a certain number you had to fly before you were ready for rotation?

L: Yes, you had to fly 650 hours. Your time was kept by the number of hours you would fly. When you got your 650 hours in, you would be rotated.

- S: Did you ever get any leave while you were there?
Where did you go if you.
- L: No, I regret that I didn't. It seems when you are overseas you want to get your time in and go home. Looking back on it, I wish now I would have stayed even if I had stayed another six months, especially up in the northern parts. I should have visited different parts of India while I was there. They had rest camps and recreation areas, but when you have a three month old daughter waiting for you at home that you hadn't seen, you get your time in and come home. I think, when I finished my time, 650 hours, I received my orders in a day or two. I went down to Calcutta and picked up a C-54 that was a war "weary" (in need of complete overhaul) and flew it to Miami, Florida for maintenance. We brought one of these old airplanes back and we couldn't get home fast enough. I regret that I didn't stay and learn more of India and visit, especially the northern part, where all the culture is and so on. I look back on it and I would have loved to have a jeep and driven that Ledo and Burma road into China, because we flew over it and saw it. That would have been a tremendous experience.
- S: Once that road was complete did your, did that relieve a little bit of the pressure on the
- L: No, not on us. In fact, we kept increasing our loads over the hump, tonnage increased dramatically over the hump, it just kept accelerating.
- S: I read in one of those books you gave me that there used to be kind of a rivalry between air groups on who could
- L: Well, the tonnage race and so on, they made it sort of competitive, but we didn't pay much attention. That was for the wheels up in the headquarters. They are the ones who do that, you know. The pilots, we had our job and we did it.
- S: As the war progressed and the war in Europe came to an end, did the supply situation get better for you. Did you notice any difference in the cargo you were transporting?

- L: No, it was primarily the same. You see, the Japanese war accelerated and they accelerated the tonnage and so on. Nothing changed as far as what we were hauling.
- S: Did you have fairly good intelligence as far as how the war was going?
- L: No, not really, no. Outside of the little newspapers that were published, what did they call them. I even forget. We would get the news from home and the ball scores and stuff like that. As far as what was going on in the war, very little. They would publish one sheet memorandums. We had taken Rabaul, and had gone into Iwo Jima on the eastern part, but very little of what we were doing in our theatre, very little was published.
- S: You were kept pretty much in the dark then as far as . . .
- L: Yes.
- S: Did you have a map, where you could say, well here's Iwo Jima, the war is coming pretty close to being over?
- L: Yes, we had a map down in operations, a wall map, that showed the fronts where the Japs were, you know, how far the Japs had pushed up and where they were at that particular time. It showed the front lines, diagrams: it was a big wall map such as you would take this map and search out and mark this off, now the Japanese have control of this, so we had that in operations, but we didn't pay too much attention. Towards the end of my time when I was finishing up, we had gradually pushed the Japs into Burma. When I left India, we could fly the low routes where the mountains weren't more than 10,000 feet over Bhamo and areas south. The Japs were pretty well whipped in that area as we were concentrating more on their homeland. They were pulling back, because they knew they blew the campaign for the invasion of India. In 1944 and 1945 there was a big push, I think they once got as far as Imphal, India. We had bulletins posted on the board emphasizing that one may be asked to defend this base and so on. Particularly in China, we didn't know whether the Japs had it when we landed or not. It got that close for a while and then as the war progressed, all of a sudden the Japanese push just

kind of collapsed. The Chinese were driving them out of Burma. When we were there in India they were real close to our bases. They had gotten as far as Imphal and that seemed to be the peak. In fact, in Mytikynia, I had landed a day or two after we had recaptured the air base at Mytikynia. We flew in while they were stationed just across the river, and that was the major portion of the Japanese campaign. They had deaccelerated and were pulling back because I think they suddenly realized that the homeland was really in peril.

S: When you flew down into Burma to Mytikynia, what kind of supplies were you taking down there? Did you evacuate any wounded or anything like that?

L: No. That was a combat cargo group. The boys in the combat cargo group dropped rice and supplies to the Chinese. DC combat cargo boys flew DC-3's that supplied the Chinese and Merrill's Marauders because those planes couldn't get to high altitudes. They used DC's for parachuting rice, parachuting ammunition and medical supplies to the American and Chinese troops in the Burma hills. They did most of the evacuating.

S: How often did you get mail?

L: Mail was pretty good. Oh, I would say an average of once a week I heard from my wife. I was married at the time. I think that is one of the reasons why you hurry back. Had I been single, now I know a lot of the fellows and their buddies that were saying, "Well, I am going to go to rest camp for a month before I go home." I had a daughter three months old that I was anxious to come back to see and my wife. These things had a bearing, but had I been single I know I would have stayed in India longer if no more than to get into the grass roots and meet more of the people and see more of the natives. This is what a soldier should do, he should more or less get into the grass roots, that's where you get to know the people, culture and so on. There is a lot of culture in India, and I am sorry I missed out.

S: As a hump pilot, did you ever feel frustrated that you couldn't see your enemy or was it just mainly more of a businesslike attitude that this was your job?

- L: No. I think it was more of a businesslike and professional attitude, because survival in that territory is critical; what you were doing is important, flying this airplane, getting it over and getting it back. It was more of a business; of course, no one wants to see his enemies if he can help it. We were then on a cargo plane unarmed; we didn't want to, hopefully ever, run into any, that one incident had I been five minutes earlier and been in the landing pattern I probably wouldn't be here today, because those five zeros would have just. . . well, we were sitting ducks. We wondered why we couldn't contact the tower: they should have warned us, but there was absolutely no warning. We were just flying oblivion. They had abandoned the tower. They were getting shot up, and you don't sit up in a tower being strafed and shot at, you are going to get down pronto. Actually there was no warning and this is what is kind of disturbing. They could have at least warned us if they knew zeros were around. No, it was pretty much a business thing. It took the highest flying skill ever demanded of a pilot to fly that hump.
- S: In your opinion, would you say that the pilots like yourself that flew over the hump were maybe the finest pilots that this country ever produced? Now, with all the sophisticated instrumentation the aircraft just about flies itself.
- L: Yes, definitely. You were right on the razor's edge. It demanded the highest skills you could have as a pilot. Everything was terrain, weather, enemy, navigation equipment, et cetera, against you. The next duty was flying DC-4's across the Atlantic. I have about 95 crossings on the Atlantic bringing litter patients back from Europe. That was sort of a reward for flying the hump. That was easy duty compared to what we had been through.
- S: How long would a flight like that take?
- L: Our schedule was to pick up a load at La Guardia in New York, then fly to Bermuda. We would leave the plane to another crew that would fly to the Azore Islands because we didn't have the range at that time. Some of those flights were fourteen to sixteen hours and that was just about the maximum range of a DC-4.

Then the next day when the scheduled plane came from La Guardia to Bermuda and landed at noon or twelve o'clock, I would take it from there to the Azore Island of Santa Maria. I would leave that plane and another crew would either take it to Paris or to Casablanca. We worked our way over and worked our way back, it took about a week. The flying time would average about twenty-five hours flying time over, and maybe another twenty-five or thirty coming back. Roughly a round trip took us about a week. It was about a sixty hour round trip and now today they are doing it in 6-8 hours.

- S: Would these planes be outfitted in any way to take care of these patients, or were they pretty much walking?
- L: These were litter patients. They were solely litter patients on that plane. We'd pick them up at Orly Field in Paris. They had nurses and everything on board. We would fly from Orly to Azore Islands, and that for refueling and checking the plane over. These litter patients were taken to a hospital on that island and their wounds were dressed. They were fed, changed their clothes, and put back on the plane and we would take them from there to Newfoundland. We had flight nurses on board at all times. Then at Newfoundland the same routine, and then they were flown to New York to Mitchell Field, where they were put in a hospital. That was pretty much the routine. The only thing we worried about was if we had to ditch or encounter mechanical problems. I don't know what we would have done with those boys, because our survival time in the winter in the North Atlantic was twenty-three minutes. Even if you got out of the plane, got into a dingy or a raft, you didn't have much of a chance for survival.
- S: Now with the nurses on board, the survival rate for these patients was pretty high?
- L: Oh, yes, yes.
- S: Were you aware that any of them expired on the way?
- L: No, no.
- S: The last question I have for you Mr. Leeson was, how much did you get paid in China?

- L: Oh dear, I even forget what our pay was. I think as a flying Captain, I think our pay was something like \$450 a month, as I recall. Our base pay plus flying pay, I am going to say, maybe stretch it and say maybe \$500. I don't really recall, I didn't pay that much attention to it. Most of the pay you had allotted back home, and you could allot everything but your flying pay. The \$150 or whatever it was for flying pay, we would keep and gamble with it or buy supplies from the PX or something. The rest was allotted, so it went to your wife at home, or a bank, or whatever the other fellows had. Base pay was around \$450 or \$460 a month, compared to what they pay now is a drop in the bucket.
- S: Why did you get out of the flying business? Could you have been a commercial pilot?
- L: Yes, I sometimes regret that I didn't go to commercial airlines. Of course, after the war, pilots were a dime a dozen. We had the only four engine experience time being in the airtransport command, we had the tops. We could have gone to the airlines without any problems. I think the five and a half years that I was in, I flew so much, did so much flying. I was physically and mentally tired. No one loved to fly as much as I did. From the time I was a little boy, I told you, right on off flying was sort of my game, but I had reached a saturation point. A commercial pilot only flies 80 hours a month. We were flying 120 hours a month. I think, when you go say from a primary to a basic, you advance, when you go from a basic to advanced training you advance. When you get out of advanced training you only have 200 hours. You really don't know how to fly, you think you do, but you are just learning. I never learned how to fly until I graduated from air transports school. That was some two years later. Then you really became a finished pilot. From advanced I went into fighters, through them, then into twin engines. Then you go into four engine. For about the last two years I had been up on the top, and just flying, flying at 120 hours a month, and I think I reached a saturation point where I was actually tired. We rotated at 650 hours. It doesn't seem like much, but when you were home, and witnessed your buddies coming back the next month or two, you'd say, "My God, was I like that?" Kind of wild, you weren't wild but you

were up on the razor's edge so much that you didn't recognize what the flight surgeon knew. How do you describe something like that? When you saw your buddies coming back you'd say, "My God, was I like that when I came back?" You were, but you didn't realize it. You were younger, high-strung and you were right up there, you know, the peak of physical, what do you want to call it, yes . . .

S: Alertness?

L: Yes, I would say that, as sharp as you can possibly be. Then you could realize why they rotated you at 650 hours, because from then on you might have, well you would have had, well I won't say a nervous breakdown, but you can see that they understood you were drained. You were actually battle fatigued. You don't realize it because you were up on this plateau so high that you can't realize it yourself. I have a friend now flying for Delta Airlines: He and I were buddies together over on the hump. He has been a pilot for Delta Airlines since 1948. He retires now. Sixty is mandatory, he retires this June. The first week in June he gets one flight, and he is not even allowed to fly on his birthday, the midnight before his birthday, because of the FAA rules. The minute he is almost 60, he's finished. If he is out on a flight he has to ride back as a passenger. He's not allowed to fly on his birthday. I thought that's odd because I was telling him, I said, "Captain Kelly, at least on your birthday they ought to give you one last trip." He said, "No, the midnight of my birthday that is it."

S: Right in mid-flight he would have to transfer control of the airplane?

L: Well, he wouldn't be in mid-flight. They would stop him. Even before they would say, "Well George, when you get to Frisco, that is it." Then you have a dead head back. They'd have another crew, another pilot. I went to our Air Force reunion this October with him, and me being a pilot and he'd been flying all these years, he could fly upside down, backwards. He was a beautiful pilot. I could see why they are retiring him at 60. He has worked under tension many years and it manifests at times. See, they know. The doctors and the flight surgeons know. See unbeknown to a lot

of people, I shouldn't even tell you this, because it's never publicized, the airlines have five or six coronary cases of pilots each year.

S: Is that right?

L: When you are 60 anything can happen. This is why they retire you at 60, and you can see why.

S: You don't realize it maybe yourself?

L: That's it. It is the same effect we got when we came out of combat flying. You say, "Well gee, 650 hours, I'm all right." But you are not, you just think you are. I can see George, I can see why they retired him in the airlines at sixty. The pilot is ready for it. For the safety of everyone, I know if I owned an airplane like a 747, you have what, 300 or 400 people on board, I would think a pilot should take a physical before he takes off. It seems commercially they ought to take one every six months. You have that many people, and you have a pilot that is say 59 years old, as an owner, I'd be concerned, yes. I'd say, "Well, make sure he goes to the doctors and gets a physical, at least a heart check or something before he takes off." You don't hear these problems that they have up in the air. Once in a while they make a note of it, but

S: Does the pilot actually feel the responsibility when he is flying with so many people depending on him?

L: Oh yes, yes. I don't know why I don't have gray hair, because when I flew that Atlantic for the last year bringing those litter patients back, my big concern was my God, what would happen if we'd catch on fire and have to ditch, or if something happened, what are we going to do with those kids? You are very much concerned. When you are hauling passengers you are very concerned. Especially when we used to haul passengers over and take them back along with litter patients. You were really concerned about the people in the back, and you really can't help it. These pilots, when they have three or four hundred people on board, have to be concerned. One safety policy I always liked about the American pilots, I would say over any other country's policy, for example, I'll give you this for an example: My pilot friend

was on vacation, he's been flying for Delta since 1948, so when he came back off of vacation whether it is three weeks or whatever, he had to go on that flight simulator and take a five hour check flight. The company doesn't know whether he could have had a stroke or could have been injured or whatever while he was on vacation. Now he has been flying for so many years, he's been a pilot for 40 years.

S: And then to be tested?

L: Yes. Then he has to be-- they put him in a five hour steady flight check. You'd say, "Well gee, George has been flying with us for so many years, let him go." When he comes off of vacation he has to go through that flight check because of possibly little strokes, a little injury, or gosh knows what had happened, it will show up. This is why I always feel safe flying with American pilots, because they are so stringent and strict on their rules and regulations and capabilities. One little incident, when I was flying the Atlantic, we were going in on instruments right into soup going from the Azores into Paris. We were coming over Brest into Paris. I radioed for approach control. We were right in the soup. It was one of those wet, rainy days and everything was right down on the ground. I think I came in around seven thousand feet and had asked for a clearance for an instrument approach, what the traffic was, and they reported, "Negative, we have traffic at every thousand feet, maintain seven thousand feet. Well, then you hold over the radio range station, you hold in a pattern back and forth, you go out three minutes, make a procedure turn, come back over the station, go out three minutes, et cetera. While I am holding at seven thousand feet Air France comes up from Marseilles, and this is right after the war. "Air France," I heard him check in, and call approach control. They said, "Roger maintaining" at eight thousand feet. He said, "Maintain eight thousand feet, we have traffic below," and everything you know hold until further advised. The next thing, he comes on the radio and he's now at seven thousand feet, well that is my altitude. You don't know whether he is on top of you, behind you, ahead of you, coming at you, or what. He was supposed to be at eight thousand feet, so immediately all you do is dive down, five hundred

feet and go out forty-five degrees out to the right. That's standard air emergency procedure! Any two planes coming ahead, you immediately make a right turn and you are out of each other's road. Immediately I just took this big four engine aircraft and dumped the nose and went out at a forty-five degree angle and dropped down to sixty-five hundred feet see, that gave us a five hundred range clearance. I immediately called and told approach control that I was going out on a forty-five degree angle, what heading I was on, and that I was at sixty-five hundred feet. They come back "Roger." They got my message and said, "In five minutes you turn to the station, in the meantime go ahead and drop down to six thousand feet." They had cleared the next lower down. You are staggered. They cleared the next one off. Then they told Air France to maintain seven thousand. Well the next time he gets on the radio he says, "Roger, this is Air France, I am now at eight thousand feet." Well, suppose somebody else was coming in at eight thousand. If the pilots obey air traffic controllers and would stick by the rules you would have no problem in the traffic control. That is the closest I think I ever came to any kind of accident, because I didn't know where that pilot was, he could have been coming right at me or over top of me, or behind me. You talk about your heart jumping in your mouth. That was the one incident I probably will never forget, the one on the hump and then one up at St. Paul. In all my military flying, I only had one mechanical problem and that was on the hump one time, losing an engine. I have to give the maintenance people and the aircraft manufacturers tremendous, whatever you call it, accreditation, for the work they did because we flew under the worst conditions, but the worst, our airplanes over there were really beat up, junkers really. The maintenance boys in India did a tremendous job. It was a tremendous experience.

S: Can you think of anything we haven't covered?

L: Well, you are doing this for history. I want to make sure and cover the information you want, the points that you stressed. You pretty well covered my career in the China, Burma, India theatres and experience of flying the Himalyas.

S: Okay, I want to thank you for the information.

L: Well, I appreciate it, and being an alumni of YSU, I am glad to have contributed something to the history department.

S: Well, you certainly have.

L: I hope it answered a lot of your questions to be used in the future.

END OF INTERVIEW