

Howard Levinson Oral History Interview

January 28, 2014

Interviewed by Jerrod Howe

HOWE: Today is Tuesday, January 28, 2014. I am here with Captain Howard D. Levinson. My name is Jerrod Howe. We are here to conduct a story of service interview. How are you today, sir?

LEVINSON: Say that again?

HOWE: How are you today?

LEVINSON: I am fantastic, except my voice is slipping.

HOWE: We've got water, we've got hot chocolate. If there is anything else you need just let us know. We can take a break.

LEVINSON: I am fine.

HOWE: I guess the best place to start is at the beginning. Why don't you tell me when and where were you born?

LEVINSON: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, June 22, 1923 in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Chicago.

HOWE: And that is on the Southside? Northside?

LEVINSON: Northwest.

HOWE: Okay. What was it like growing up in Chicago in the 20s and 30s?

LEVINSON: My family was on the poor side of poor so... it was always eating meals late at night. My father made just a dollar a day. He would bring the money home. We would go shopping and have dinner. It always hand to mouth. I went to six grade schools. When the rent was due, we moved.

HOWE: Oh wow. Wow. What did your dad do for a living?

LEVINSON: He was a jack of all trades. He worked a number of things. As a landscape gardener, as a trader going to Michigan, buying peaches, bringing them back, trading the peaches for chickens, and then selling the chickens. He was in the elevator construction game. He could not get in the union because he was Jewish. Bear in mind that he was born in Chicago, I was born in Chicago. But, we

still had the fact that we were Jewish. For some reason, people didn't like me. I don't know why.

HOWE: Did you have any siblings?

LEVINSON: I have a sister that is 6 years younger.

HOWE: Alright. Can you describe your neighborhood?

LEVINSON: The neighborhoods? Sure, I can do that. I lived at Kimble and Hirsch. Prior to that, I lived with the Lafayette kindergarten. Kimble and Hirsch for the...Lafayette...Lowell Grade school. From there I went to Marion Lion which was on the northwest side. Then I went to the Loch. Then I went to Darwin. Then I went to Mont Stubin grade school. And I went to Roosevelt High School.

HOWE: These are all mostly on the northside, correct?

LEVINSON: North, northwest.

HOWE: Okay. How was it for you jumping around like that?

LEVINSON: It was not very good because I never really developed any study habits. I never really got, had a lot of friends because I would change mid-semester. I never really developed long-term friendships. It was not the greatest thing being that poor. I mean I remember putting cardboard in my shoes to go to school. I found a nickel, I go to the dime store and I'd buy rubber. Patches to put on my the bottom of my shoes.

HOWE: Wow. What did your mother do?

LEVINSON: She was just a housewife.

HOWE: Okay. So dad is doing everything he can to bring money in for you and your sister?

LEVINSON: Correct.

HOWE: Alright. What was the longest period of time were you in one place, growing up?

LEVINSON: I'd say maybe, maybe a year.

HOWE: Wow.

LEVINSON: A year, year and a half. It is very difficult to go back in time. But, it didn't seem like...we moved a lot of different times even though I didn't always change schools.

HOWE: Okay. And did you go to just one high school?

LEVINSON: I just went to one high school. That was Roosevelt. Now, jumping ahead, Roosevelt High School in the book, *The Greatest Generation*, it's mentioned because it had so many brilliant studies. I was not one of them. I happened to be in the bottom 3rd of my class. I never studied.

HOWE: So during this time, studies weren't your strongest suit. What were you interested in?

LEVINSON: I guess girls. [Laughs] As most young people were in high school. But, I really was always interested in flying. Starting with the Graf Zeppelin, we lived at Division and Sacramento. I remember seeing the Graf Zeppelin flying downtown and seeing a couple of pursuit planes. And thinking, "Wow that was really great. Someday I'd like to be a pilot." But, it never happened until the war broke out. I do recollect that my uncle had...three uncles and four aunts on my mother's side. One of the uncles had a garage at Grand Ave. near Harlem. In that garage he had an open cockpit airplane. The wings off, lying up against the wall. I used to get in that airplane at maybe 5-years-old and make believe I was flying. That could have been my introduction to flight, I don't know. But, something grew from that point. I really always wanted to fly.

HOWE: Did anyone in your family encourage that?

LEVINSON: No, no, no. My father wouldn't fly with me even after I became a qualified pilot, he wouldn't fly with me. It seems like there—I had some friends who are college professors who are brilliant, their whole family is brilliant. But, in reading some of the things about these people, they always were taught to get smart, to learn. It was never really a strong suit with my family. I would bring books home from school, put them on the table with my homework, and then carry back the next day without ever opening the books. So I never really ever studied. Then when the war broke out—maybe we are jumping around, if that's alright?

HOWE: That's alright.

LEVINSON: When the war broke out and I was at Wright Junior College at the time... It was before Wright. I then felt that there was maybe an opportunity for me to get into the cadets. Then I studied. Then I did reasonably well in the college courses I took, such as, Trigonometry and Speech and Algebra. All the subjects I thought would be important. And also the Sciences. I then became very interested in learning because I thought I may need that. I did reasonably well, considering I had no background for studying.

HOWE: Sure. So, you mentioned cadet training. So, before we get to that. You are in high school. Did the draft affect you at all?

LEVINSON: No, I don't think I ever received a draft number. Because when the war broke out, I enlisted before the draft would even touch me.

HOWE: Okay, so you went to the Army recruiter? Navy recruiter?

LEVINSON: No, no, no. Here's how it happened. As I told you, I was not a student. But on Jefferson Street, they had a cadet recruiter and you'd go there and take a test. If you passed the test, you could become a candidate to become a cadet. I went down the first time, and I told you I was not the brightest tack in the box so, I didn't pass. But, I had perseverance. So I went back a second time, I didn't pass. I went back a third time, and I passed. So, I was now a candidate to be a cadet.

HOWE: Okay.

LEVINSON: When they finally did call me. I think it was November of '42. I went to Stillwater, Oklahoma...to Oklahoma A&M. I had a one semester: I took Physics, English, Public Speaking, Math. Went well, because I had a desire to learn.

HOWE: Being able to fly motivated you...

LEVINSON: I wasn't flying, I was nowhere near. Just the idea that I could maybe, possibly...it was like an impossible dream that I tried and persevered and I won.

HOWE: Nice. Was college a part of cadet training?

LEVINSON: That was pre-cadet. I only had a year and a half. This gave me two years of college. Successfully passed two years of college. So, from that point, we went to Wichita...no, we went to San Antonio, Texas. Where we went into a pre-flight program. Pre-flight program consisted of the basic training and doing everything from KP to taking intelligence tests. So, we learned to march, we learned the Army way. I took my, as I remember, I took my IQ test. And I had a 102 fever but I was afraid if I didn't do everything according to the book, that I would be washed out. So I did everything to keep myself in a position that I would not be washed out. So, apparently passed the IQ test. And then, they gave us a psychomotor test which, part of it I remember, it was putting round objects in round holes and putting square objects in square holes. And they had a stylus type of thing on a universal joint thing. You had to follow the pointer around on this irregular path by having this on there and every time the pointer came off of the copper contact, it would flash lights and ring bells. So, that they tried to see if you had the concentration to keep on even though something is going wrong. This was actually toward the end of the cadet program. Not the end, but towards the end. They pretty well knew what tests to give you to qualify you. So, I took that test and I apparently passed. We had to go before a psychiatrist.

So I knew this psychiatrist because of scuttlebutt. Scuttlebutt was the talk before the fact...

HOWE: Rumors.

LEVINSON: Rumors. And the scuttlebutt was that they psychologist always looked at your finger nails to make sure you didn't bite them. So I made sure my shoes were shined, and made sure my nails were cleaned and polished, not bitten. So I put them on the table, and thought, "That is kind of silly." So I put them back after I am sure he saw my nails. And he said to me, "Cadet, are you married?" And I said, "No, sir." Listen, I was 20-years-old. He said, "You have a girlfriend?" And I said, "Yes, sir, I do." He says, "Well, what does she think about flying?" And I said, "Well, she's okay with it." And he said, "What if she didn't like you to fly." I said, "Sir, well, I'd get a new girlfriend." Well, that girlfriend is still my wife. We are celebrating our 70th wedding anniversary in November. So, I guess she didn't care if I flew or not.

HOWE: Nice. Congratulations. So how long was training in San Antonio?

LEVINSON: San Antonio was about 3 months. 2-3 months. So 2-3 months in Stillwater, Oklahoma. 2-3 months at San Antonio. From San Antonio...I skipped something here...Wichita Falls, Texas was where we really took our basic training. That was the 2 month stint where we did the KP and where we did all of the...getting used to the Army.

HOWE: And that was before San Antonio?

LEVINSON: Before San Antonio. I misspoke.

HOWE: What do you remember from Wichita Falls?

LEVINSON: It was either very hot or very cold. All of that in 10 minutes. You could be walking with a big overcoat, marching, and 10 minutes, the coat was shed and it was 85 degrees. Temperature changes were extremely radical there.

HOWE: Okay. And it was probably in the winter months?

LEVINSON: I believe it was February. I would have to go to my writer, which I could tell you.

HOWE: That's quite alright. Anything stand out in your mind from basic training?

LEVINSON: I found that the Texans, in basic training, were very segregated in their thoughts. I was shocked the find that there were water fountains for whites and blacks. There were just a lot of things that I was not accustomed...being raised in the North.

HOWE: These kinds of lines of separation didn't exist in Chicago when you were growing up?

LEVINSON: Oh, there was anti-Semitism in Chicago. But, there was more so to the South. There was just—they would make comments like—Saturday night we would get in our cars. I had a bicycle before they had cars. But, they would get in their cars and go Saturday night, and they'd say, "We are gonna go out and see if we can hit a nigger." And I...just blew my mind.

HOWE: Wow. This is while you were in basic training.

LEVINSON: Basic training.

HOWE: So were you at basic training with people from different rates, different jobs?

LEVINSON: Oh yes, they were from all over. They were—In basic training, they were probably less bright than I was. And I wasn't the brightest.

HOWE: Sure. Were they training..?

LEVINSON: They were training to be a soldier at that point.

HOWE: Sure. Enlisted as well as drafted at the same time?

LEVINSON: No, as far as I know, they were all enlisted people.

HOWE: Okay. Alright. These are all folks signing up and saying here...

LEVINSON: Right.

HOWE: So then, Wichita Falls...you go to San Antonio, do 2-3 months there.

LEVINSON: Correct.

HOWE: And you are forwarded on. You're a cadet now.

LEVINSON: Actually, no. I remember taking tests and I am going to elude to many of the times I could have washed out. And one of the tests was simple addition, multiplication, and division. Simple. And here I had taken Trigonometry. But the columns were 6 across and 8 deep. And division was very long, long division. And the subtraction...everything was long. And, I remember that I only made right out of the 4 of them. They always gave you a second chance. So I was more careful the second time and I passed. Then, there was another test on code. You had to learn the Morse code at that time. You had to have 40 characters in a row. I took the test, and I failed the first time. I took it again, and I did the best I could. And after the test, I looked, and there were blanks. I had maybe 38 blank that I missed then I would go on. Then have 37 and blank. I went and sat there

and thought about where I missed the blanks and I filled in the blanks. And I passed the test. So I didn't get washed out. We studied meteorology, we studied a lot of things. And people were washing out. The highest wash out rate in cadets, in the cadet program, was meteorology. Strange as it may seem.

HOWE: It was that curriculum...

LEVINSON: It was tough.

HOWE: Okay. How did you find you were able to surpass that? That challenge.

LEVINSON: Just persistence. And strong desire. Never ever thought that I would become a lieutenant. Never ever thought that I would be qualified as a cadet. Never thought it would happen. But, I did not give up. At that time, I didn't have a good self-esteem. I guess growing up so poor and not being a great student, didn't empower me to have a good feeling about myself. But, I had persistence. I really wanted it. Desperately.

HOWE: Do you think that made an impression on the folks that were training you?

LEVINSON: It could very well have been. I know that when I was in grade school, I had a teacher that I'll never forget. Her name was Mrs. Matthews. And I was I think in 2nd grade. And I lived in a neighborhood where I was probably the only Jewish kid in the school. So she had me stand up one day, she says, "Howard, stand up." I stood up. The only one in the class. She says, "What are you?" I said, "Well, I am part German, part Russian, and part English." She says, "You're a liar! You are a Jew! Sit down." This was when I was 7-years-old. It left an impression. Here I am, 90, and I still remember it. So, that had an effect upon me in dealing with people at that age. I remember one more incident that happened, probably had a bearing on the way my thought processes were. I was walking across the schoolyard and there was a can in the schoolyard. I was walking along and kicked it. And a big kid, about 6 feet tall, and I was about 4 and a half feet tall, came up to me and said, "That was my can you kicked!" And all I was gonna say was: "It was just sitting there", and he punched me in the eye. And I learned at that early age that I could be wrong. That it was really his can. So I never, I tried not to be wrong too many times in my life.

HOWE: Did you have any similar experiences during your training in the Army?

LEVINSON: Yes, I did. I had anti-Semitism. I remember one guy, for some reason, picked a fight with me. I said, "Alright, I'll fight with you, only if we put the gloves on because I don't want to be kicked out of cadets." So we fought until he couldn't raise his hands anymore. And he never touched me. It was just funny. And that was the end of it. But, things did happen.

HOWE: Sure. How did after this bout, after this challenge, how did he relate to you after that?

LEVINSON: I don't even remember that. After that, was nothing. Nothing.

HOWE: Sure.

LEVINSON: He never touched or raised a glove on me. I do remember one other thing that was kind of amazing. In qualification for the pistol-45. There were 6,000 cadets at the San Antonio. Maybe bombardiers or navigators or pilots. But we all had to qualify with 45s. So we had one day of dry runs. I never held a 45 before that day. Of the 6,000 cadets, there were 6 people that received an expert in the 45 and I was one of them. Maybe I attribute that to the fact that I was an archer in high school. And I have the steadiness for archery. I don't know. But, that was one of the things that I look back and say that was really amazing.

HOWE: You didn't mention you were an archer in high school previously?

LEVINSON: Pardon me?

HOWE: You didn't mention previously that you were an archer.

LEVINSON: No, I know. I just thought of it as a result of how I probably did well with the 45.

HOWE: Yeah. The being able to calm yourself, steady yourself.

LEVINSON: Yes, correct.

HOWE: Anything else from San Antonio?

LEVINSON: Not really. We had open house...it was a country hotel. I think it was another Roosevelt Hotel for cadets. There was not too much I really remember about...other than the testing that they gave us...psychomotor, physical testing, mental testing...and one of the tests I took prior to getting in, one of the reasons I failed the first test before being qualified as a cadet. We took this test and one of the questions, I remember, "What is the top light on the stop and go light?" Red, amber, then green. That was an easy one. Well, they wanted to know what you would do if you were in Army truck, driving the truck with 40 soldiers in the back. Driving down this mountain road, and you had the brakes failed, and in front of you was a child, what would you do? Would you hit the child, or go off the mountain? So you had to decide right then and there what you would do. And obviously the right answer would hit the child. You couldn't sacrifice 40 soldiers. I do remember that.

HOWE: Do you remember at the time having any difficulty answering that question?

LEVINSON: Sure, sure. After all I was just, you know, 18-years-old at the time.

HOWE: They like to ask tricky questions like that.

LEVINSON: Yes.

HOWE: So then, once you become a cadet, you leave San Antonio and go on to your basic flight training?

LEVINSON: Yes, I went to primary training in Hicks Field in Fort Worth, Texas. Now, some of the things I specifically remember about Fort Worth, Texas...up until that time, I didn't have one gig. A gig is like a demerit. You get 6 demerits, you have to walk an hour with a rifle on Saturday. I didn't have one. I was thinking, I better get one. I better not be too good. Because they will look at it as not being risky or whatever. But, I was determined to have one gig. So...I was thinking we had to make our beds every morning and it had to be tightly made and you should be able to toss a coin on it and the coin would flip over. Everything had to be done. Your shoes had to be polished. Everything had to be perfect. So when we came back in, there was a clothes brush on my bed. Horsehair clothes brush, leather, that I had for many years. But, as a result of that, I got a number of demerits. So I managed to get one more demerit so I could walk a tour of duty next Saturday before I went over post. I tried to play every angle to be sure I was qualified.

HOWE: No wash outs.

LEVINSON: In cadets? No, I didn't want to get washed out. That was the last thing I wanted to do.

HOWE: The punishment for your gigs...so you said you had to do tours?

LEVINSON: Well, a tour was walk one hour with a rifle up and back. That was your punishment for getting too many gigs.

HOWE: How many of your classmates, of your cadets, joined you in that endeavor?

LEVINSON: I have no idea, I don't know.

HOWE: But, you weren't alone.

LEVINSON: No, all I know is that I wanted to do one.

HOWE: [Laughs] Nice.

LEVINSON: Now, I can tell you the next time I almost washed out. On the first flight in a PT-19, which is a single-engine, open cockpit, 225 horsepower airplane. I went up, I was thrilled. This was my first flight and I was introduced to the instructor who

was civilian instructor. He was Mr. Johnson. And went up and we go to about 3500 feet or so, and we had hearing, we had earphones, we could hear him. He said, "Is your safety belt on tight?" And I shook my head, "Yes." With that, he turned the airplane, he turned the airplane upside down. When he turned the airplane upside down, my butt fell off the seat about that far, about 6 inches as I hung by the safety belt. And if I would have fallen out of the plane, I would have been washed out. But, he straightened it up, then I really tightened it up. Never had any problems with flying after that.

HOWE: And has that practice stuck with you?

LEVINSON: Today, when I fly out people and I am still flying, I always am sure that there seat belt is tight even though mine is already tightened, I always tighten theirs. "What are you doing?" "Tightening your seat belt."

HOWE: Give it an extra little tug.

LEVINSON: Extra little tug. Make sure it's tight.

HOWE: Nice. So you flew the PT-19. That was the first plane you flew?

LEVINSON: First plane that I flew.

HOWE: Okay. How did that process work?

LEVINSON: Well, I loved it. I just enjoyed every minute of it. One incident that I can tell that didn't relate to me. One of the cadets took off and as he took off, a wheel bounced off of his plane. The instructor went up after him, and went across with takeoff. It was the first time I saw it happen. I didn't think it was possible. He just jumped in a plane and took off after him. He went up and he pointed for him to go down. But, the guy didn't know the wheel was off. He made a perfect 2-point landing. I watched him land. He just landed and then didn't do any damage to the airplane. The fire engine roared out after him to be sure everything was alright. And he ran over the wing and shred the airplane [Laughs].

HOWE: This was a cadet?

LEVINSON: The cadet's wheel fell off.

HOWE: So he's got the same level of skill...

LEVINSON: As I did, yeah.

HOWE: Wow. What was the next air frame after the PT-19?

LEVINSON: It was the BT-13. That was at Waco, Texas. In Waco, Texas...now, I tried to be as un-intrusive as possible. I didn't want anybody to notice me. I wanted to slip through the cracks. I didn't want anybody to take notice of how hard I wanted to get my wings and go on my merry way. So, we were just assigned our barracks and I had a friend and I went to visit this friend in the next barracks. After I put my things away, made my cot up and everything, and I started to open the door to his barracks. And I hear, "Attention!" And I open the door a little bit, and I see this officer walk in. He started chewing them up because they all didn't pop to until he had to yell, "Attention!" himself. So I closed the door and went back to our barracks. And I was three-quarters the way down with my cot, and when he opened the door, I yelled "Attention!" and everybody jumped up to attention and now he walks by everybody and walks up to me. He said, "Cadet, have you ever been a cadet officer?" I said, "No, sir!" He said, "Well, you are now. You are the squadron commander." I said, "No, sir!" [Laughs]. He said, "Yes, you are the squadron commander." Well, I was not un-intrusive from that point on. I was marching to the classes, I was doing all of the things that I did not want to do. But, I faired okay. But, that was really something funny. [Laughs].

HOWE: Here you go trying to stay below the radar.

LEVINSON: Yeah! I didn't want to cause any waves, I just wanted to do my thing and graduate. Which I didn't think was humanly possible. And then I thought I certainly would be a flight officer because I was Jewish. I thought certainly they will just make me a flight officer.

HOWE: So what happened?

LEVINSON: From there? The next thing I remember, it was rather interesting, is that I went on my long cross country. Two things happened: I went along cross country and coming back on this last leg, I looked down and there is a town. It's not on my chart. And I look at the town again and it's not on my chart. So, I circle down around the water tower and get the name. And I go back up to altitude and it's still not on my chart. I don't know what possessed me, but I opened up the chart and there it was right on the crease. It was just over the line. I was probably only a half mile off course. But, it was underneath and if I would have not have found that, if I wouldn't have gotten lost, I would have been washed out. The other time, we were doing our night landings with no lights on the landing or on the airport. I landed and I landed and I landed. And wham! I banged on the ground. The tower told me to come report. They wanted to check the landing gear to be sure the landing gear didn't go through the wing. It didn't, so I was not washed out.

HOWE: Was this still in the BT-13?

LEVINSON: Correct. That was the BT-13 which was a 450 horsepower, single-engine airplane.

HOWE: Now, both of these airplanes, are they single-seat? Or is there one behind the pilot?

LEVINSON: Both of them have 2 seats.

HOWE: Okay.

LEVINSON: One in front, one in back. Now, I requested, at that time, I thought the A-20. Which is a multi-engine hot airplane would be the plane to get into. So I put in for multi-engine. Well, lo and behold I went through multi-engine training. I went into the AT-11 and the AT-17 training. And one more time I had an opportunity to wash out. Went through all of the training and had no real problems flying. But, one night, about a week before graduation, we were flying formation. The instructor was the lead plane, I was on the right wing, there was another plane on the left wing. At night, we were flying around, following him. I had no idea where we were. I was following him. We took off in formation, we did not land at night in formation. So, excuse me....

HOWE: While you sip...this is just before you are graduating so, this is multi-engine training?

LEVINSON: Multi-engine.

HOWE: In the A-11?

LEVINSON: AT-11. Advanced trainer 11 and 17, I think it was. It was made by Cessna called the Bamboo Bomber.

HOWE: Okay. And these were still out of Waco or was this a different..?

LEVINSON: No, that was out of Waco. I was in Brady, Hicks Field, Brady, and then Waco for my multi-engine training.

HOWE: Okay. So you're in formation, flying at night. And the instructor...

LEVINSON: The instructor says, "Peel off and land." I look down and see the runway. I make a 3-ship formation, I am on the right wing, make a turn to the right, come around and I land. Well, we are in the squad room, he puts me in a brace. If you don't know what a brace is, it's stand attention, gut in, chest out, put your gun in, puts your chin down. And he says, "You realized you almost killed me?" "There is no excuse, sir." I learned to say "No excuse, sir." To this day, I had no

idea what he was talking about. I could not have...if he's in front of me and I make a turn out, there is no way I could cause him any harm. What I think happened, is that the guy on the left wing, may have cut in front of him. That is the only thing I could think of happened. To this day, I regret, after getting my wings which I finally did get, in the commission that I finally did get...that I didn't go back to him. Search him out and figure out why he was chewing me out. Here I am, 70 years later, I still don't know why.

HOWE: That would be interesting to find out what happened.

LEVINSON: Too late.

HOWE: That's fair. Before we go on, I do want to touch on this one thing. Just to get a sense of the context of the environment. You mentioned, every step of the way, you're doing everything you can not to get washed out. Did you get a sense that they were trying to find reasons to kick people out of the program?

LEVINSON: No. I never really felt that. I think they wanted to get as many pilots as they could. Because of all the pre-testing they gave, there were not a lot of wash outs. There were a few but, not many. Interesting fact, the highest attrition rate were bomber crews, that was number 1. Number 2, the highest loss rate, was the training command for pilots. Hard to believe. In my class, we never lost a pilot. Because I think of all the pre-testing that they went through. They learned what to look for. See if you are qualified.

HOWE: The highest loss rate was in the training command?

LEVINSON: Yes.

HOWE: They lost pilots?

LEVINSON: Yes. Training to be pilots. But, this was prior to me. It was all taken into consideration. My class...I never lost a crew, a pilot, or a cadet.

HOWE: And you are saying these are washouts? Not fatalities?

LEVINSON: Oh, fatalities. I am talking about fatalities. The highest fatalities were the bomber, the 2nd was the pilot training command.

HOWE: Why would you say that? Why do you think that's true?

LEVINSON: I don't think that's true. That is just statistics.

HOWE: Oh, okay. What do you think they would attribute that to?

LEVINSON: Well, training people who are not qualified, number one. And the loss rate was high compared to the infantry. They had losses, a lot of losses. But, percentage-

wise, it was not as high as the cadet program. You can verify that by some way. But, that's a fact.

HOWE: So, what about flying the B-24 was hazardous in combat situations?

LEVINSON: After that, I was assigned to B-24 training in Liberal, Kansas .

HOWE: And how old were you at the time?

LEVINSON: Exactly 21. I graduated from that training without any incident, obviously. As an airplane commander with an MOS of a 1092.

HOWE: That was out of Kansas?

LEVINSON: That was out of Liberal, Kansas. I went home on leave. Got married. And my wife...I am in Liberal, Kansas. The next step is to become a B-24 bomber pilot. So, I went from Liberal, Kansas to Pueblo, Colorado. But, I had a week leave and I got married in Chicago. Took my wife back with me. A constellation to Lincoln, Nebraska where I got my crew. I was in a—never got sick in an airplane. I remember being in this connie in the back of—it was hot. And I almost got sick. Here was our brand new uniform, our brand new wings, and a brand new wife. I almost got sick, but I didn't. But, I was getting nauseous because of the yaw of the plane and the warm...wasn't like today's airplanes. So we got to Lincoln, Nebraska. I picked up my crew. We were there for about a couple of weeks, I guess. And from there, we went to, well they sent us to Tucson, Arizona and I got a ride with a buddy. He and his wife and my wife and I. We drove from Lincoln, NE and went to Tucson. And we sat there for a couple of weeks, waiting for the troop train to come. It never came. They changed our orders and instead of going to Davis Mountain Field for training, they sent us to Pueblo, Colorado. So that took us another couple of weeks. So we had a month there before we went into training. So it was a great honeymoon.

HOWE: Did the entire time, the Army knew where you were?

LEVINSON: Yes. We were on orders. Orders were cut and we were given the opportunity to get a ticket to a train or drive. Now I got to Pueblo, Colorado. We were there about a week with my crew and it was brought to my attention, because I was a Jew, I would take the last drop of water. And they didn't want me as their pilot. They wanted my co-pilot to be the pilot and me to step down. The squadron commander said, "No, this is not gonna happen. You don't have to fly with anybody. You could go into the pool if you want." They decided they did not want to do that because two of them were brother-in-laws and they didn't want to be separated at that time. So they stuck with me. And I went on to prove that I was not a coward. I didn't do it to prove it but it happened.

HOWE: Before we get to that crucible moment. Can you elaborate at all on how that came to light? I mean, that's a pretty serious conflict.

LEVINSON: Well, it was. It just came to light because I heard about it. I just wrote it off as "it's not happening". I still...I was kind of proud of my crew. I had spirit du corps. I was ready all for them. And I have a couple of—a letter from one of my crew members written about 50 years later that I can allude to.

HOWE: Certainly

LEVINSON: And my response to him. If you want me to get that letter and read it. I think you might find it interesting.

HOWE: Well, tell us about the experience. And how did you prove them wrong?

LEVINSON: Well, we had a long range mission that was supposed to fly from Oklahoma City out over the Gulf of Mexico, back up to New Orleans, up to Tennessee and back to Oklahoma City. Supposed to be 12 and a half hours. We got in the airplane probably at 6:00 in the morning. I lived off the base. I was married. So I probably got up at 3:00 in the morning. Got out to the field. Did my pre-flight, check the weather, and we went to the airplane. And went to the airplane. Checked the airplane. Did our pre-flight. And we lined up for takeoff. And the tower requested some flight of some B-25s take off in front of us. I said, "Okay." Then, we were ready to go. And they said, "Well, a P-38 needs to take off in front of you." I said, "Okay." So we were cleared. And I have a habit of always putting the tail of the plane over the backend of the runway, so I have as much runway as possible.

HOWE: Was this a qualifying flight?

LEVINSON: This was a training flight. I was already a B-24 airplane commander. This was a training flight. You know, I skipped ahead. I am sorry. Can I go back?

HOWE: Certainly.

LEVINSON: I'm gonna leave you right there.

HOWE: Leaving us on the edge.

LEVINSON: Leaving you on the edge. When we were in Pueblo, about a week from being shipped to Europe. My co-pilot was there living on the base. And I came in at 6:00 in the morning.

HOWE: So you had already qualified as a B-24 pilot?

LEVINSON:

I was the airplane commander. He says, "We wanna go on this photo mission." I said, "You know I am not going to volunteer on any photo mission." He said, "Yeah, yeah we wanna go on this photo mission." I said, "I don't know what you are talking about." The squadron commander came in and we all popped to. He said at ease. Sat down. He said, "Who wants to go on this photo mission." My arm went up. My co-pilot put my arm up. He did a lot of things to almost kill me but, that day when I look back, I forgive him. Because instead of going to Europe with the attrition rate at that time was 50%, we were sent to Oklahoma City and at Oklahoma City is where we were on the runway. That was another 2 and a half months in Oklahoma City. Training to be photo recon pilots with the rear bomb bay was set up with big cameras for taking photos. The front bomb bay was all fuel tanks to really make it long-range. So, now we are setting up at the end. This long-range training flight of 12 and a half hours. So, now I gave it power. We are fully loaded. We got full fuel for this 12 and a half hour mission. And we are going down the runway, and we are going and going and going and I see the end of the runway coming up. And I give it full military power which you are only supposed to do for 5 minutes. Pushing manual pressure to 40 something to 50 something. And we get off the ground and there is no adverse yaw. And I thought—I felt like I lost an engine but there was no adverse yaw. And I couldn't take off on 2 engines. I look out. While we were sitting, waiting for the other planes to take off. My co-pilot, unbeknownst to me, opened up the call-flaps. And the call-flaps on the B-24 came out and they were like a big ping pong table on 4 engines sitting out there. And I looked out, and I pushed for full military power and went down to close the call-flaps. He started reducing the power, I jammed the power up again. And we were just hovering above the ground, with ground effect. Just barely, staying up in float. Staying in a flight condition. And I pushed his hand away and pushed the military power again. And I close the call-flaps and then we took off. The tower calls whatever my number was. They go, "Is everything okay?" I say, "Everything is fine." So that was the beginning of that flight. We flew out over the Gulf. 6:00 in the morning, 7:00 in the morning maybe. Takeoff. Flew out over the Gulf, came back over New Orleans, came up to Tennessee and then turned West toward Oklahoma City. I saw a flash of lightening. I said, "Smitty, did you see that flash of lightening?" He says, "Oh that was just heat lightening." So, I turn to my radio operator and I say, "Check the weather in Oklahoma City." He comes back and he hands me the report. They are having thunderstorms and lightening, and with that, I get hit, my lightening and all of my radios, low-frequency navigation radios go out.

HOWE:

At that exact moment?

LEVINSON: At that exact moment. All happened. And you know, looking back, I don't remember them ever even telling us what a 180 is. Being a civilian pilot now, being an instructor and doing all those things now, doing a 180 is when you go when things are bad, you turn around and go back. They didn't teach us that. If I had known that, I would have turned around and gone back into the clear. Instead, I went right into these storms. So, I was in those storms and I tried to climb up and my navigator left his sextants at home in the barracks. Couldn't tell from going up or down. Tried to get down and saw a triangle. He says, "Land! Land!" I didn't see any rotating beacon, so I didn't think it was an airport so I didn't land. I didn't know how high the land was there. Went back up. And I turned the airplane over to him. I wanted to look at my chart to see—at least I could tell the elevation that we were flying in that proximity.

HOWE: Sure, at this point you are flying on 3 out of 4 engines?

LEVINSON: No, 4 engines. I didn't lose an engine. I had the power. But, I was in thunderstorms. Clouds, raining, it was really miserable light. So I turn the plane over to him and I look at that chart and I see all my gages and dials spinning. He puts us in a dead spiral. I said, "I got the plane." I take over. Straighten the plane up, go back to altitude. And I said, "Just keep this steady! Keep this altitude! I wanna look at the chart." I look at it again. I look up. Everything is spinning.

HOWE: To look at the chart, you had to get up out of your seat?

LEVINSON: No, no, no. Just handed me the chart. To look at it. So I turn the plane over to him to fly it. So I could try to orientate myself to see what the altitude of the land was so I could go down lower. If you go below this stuff. But I couldn't do that. So, I had to take over and fly the airplane. So, we flew for about...we were about 14 hours on a 13 hour mission. We decided, well, we are wandering around the sky, can't find any opening. I am just gonna go South. I was a young pilot. I had maybe 400 hours at the time. Today I fly out pilots that have 800-1,000 hours and they try to kill me. So here I am, 400 hours, true, I had an instrument ticket, was qualified. But, try to fly a B-24 and look at charts. It was a 2-man airplane. It was kind of a task. So, I took up a heading of South. And not realizing today that the smartest thing would have been to go East. Because East, I would have gone into the clear out, been able to beat the storm. But, I was not that knowledgeable at that time. So, I went South. And finally, my engineer comes up and says, "What should I do about the fuel? Let the first engine die?" And I said, "No! Keep all 4 engines running as long as you can. Keep the fuel balanced." This was at about 14 hours. In the air. I was sitting there 14 hours. No auto-pilot. Okay. Next thing I said was, "Pause the crew." When the first engine goes, I have 10 men on board. That's a sign to bail out. With that, my co-pilot snapped on his parachute and goes down the bomb bay, waiting for

the engine to die. There's the lesson that I was the coward. Now, do I forgive him? Yes. Because he really saved my life. By raising my hand. Possibly. I wouldn't be telling this story if he hadn't raised my hand. So they changed my life. Should I be angry with them? No. That was life.

HOWE: Because he is responsible for getting you into photo recon.

LEVINSON: Correct. He prevented from going to England and bombing Germany or wherever at that time. So, one hand will wash the other. And I met him 50 years later, at a reunion. And he said to me, "You know, I really owe you an apology. I want bygones to be bygones." This was 50 years later. And he says, "If you ever get up to Pittsburgh. If you don't stop to see me, I will never talk to you again." [laughs] I never went there.

HOWE: Understood. So you said that he went down...

LEVINSON: To the bomb bay. So that if the engine died, he could just open the bomb bay, fall out, pull the chute, and land.

HOWE: And your decision to...?

LEVINSON: That was at 11:00 at night. We finally landed. By flying, we broke out and saw the rotating beacon of white light with a red light. That was the way you flew at night. Visual flight rules at that time. You flew visually. You see a light and 20 miles further, another one. They have these every 20 miles. I saw a red one. I followed that one. I saw another red one. That was 40 miles. I saw another flashing light with a green. Now, I had a high frequency radio without navigation. I was able to talk to Major's Air Force Base. And I was talking to them. Prior to that, I was talking to other people too on higher-freq. They sent up 2 Black Widow, night fighters. They had radar. To see if they could find me. They couldn't find me. That was to no avail. So, when I finally saw that flashing green. I said, "I see a flashing green!" I was talking to them. They said, "We will flash our lights on and off." I said, "I don't see any flashing lights." And they said, "Well, that's probably Sulfur Springs, Texas." I said, "I am going to try to make it then." So I went there and I said...it was a triangle. Dirt triangle field. And I decided to land there. I didn't know how long the field was. I didn't know anything about it. But it was a field. And I landed and my crew members said that I took branches of the trees, landing because I wanted to be sure I had plenty of room to land. When I landed I didn't have to use any brakes. They rain had been so hard, that the wheels sunk into the ground. All 3 wheels sunk into the ground, almost to about a foot. It was that much mud and dirt. You know mud and water from the rain that had just passed through.

HOWE: Wow.

LEVINSON: And the plane sat there for maybe 3 or 4 months after that happened because it had to dry out. The plane stayed there and somehow I got my crew into a hotel in Sulfur Springs, Texas. From that time, to the time I was standing before my squadron commander, back at Oklahoma City, I have no recollection of what happened. I was in the air for 17 hours and 15 minutes. I was up three hours before that. I did not leave the controls for 17 hours in that airplane. So, I was completely wiped out and I don't know how they got me back. I was told that they picked me up in a bus. And drove back to Sulfur Springs, Texas and then flew me back to Oklahoma City.

HOWE: Wow.

LEVINSON: And the report for my wife was that the squadron commander called her and said, "We are bringing your husband home in the morning." And she said, "What do you mean?" "He landed..." Next thing I remember, standing before him and thanking me for saving the crew and saving the airplane. And said he could hear me talking for hours as we were flying around.

HOWE: Your squadron commander was listening to the high-freqs?

LEVINSON: Yes, he could hear me.

HOWE: Wow. What was the attitude of your crew after that?

LEVINSON: Yeah, turns out the crew was never really bad toward me. It was just the one incident. My co-pilot was not the sharpest guy on the block because he too was washed out between our training. He didn't make it. And he was not the eager person I was. Like, if we were going out on a practice bombing mission, I'd go in—into the squad room and check the weather and to get the briefing and everything. I would come out and they would all be sitting around. The bombs would be standing there waiting for him to load. We were always the last one to start the engines. We were always tail-end Charlie. So finally one day—and I was younger. I was not as smart and didn't use my psychology. I chewed him out for not getting the bombs loaded and waiting for me to come and say load the bombs. I shouldn't have done that. You know, I was 20-years-old. No, I was 21.

HOWE: You add to your leadership tool box as the years progress.

LEVINSON: Absolutely. Yes.

HOWE: Anything else you recall about Oklahoma City or other instances with training?

LEVINSON: I have a little quick. There was a bulldog that took a liking to me. I used to take the bulldog home and feed him. In the morning, he would always go back out to the field. He always met me at the airplane. For weeks. He was always near the

airplane. At night, he'd be out and he'd come back all bloody. He was fighting with the other dogs. And one day he just didn't show up. It was just an interesting case I remember about that dog.

HOWE: Kind of a mascot of sorts?

LEVINSON: Yeah. I picked him as a mascot. Anything else about Oklahoma City? Not really. A lot of things happened but, not noteworthy. Oh! We were flying over Amarillo, Texas and the report came in. We just landed in Amarillo. As we started back to Oklahoma City, I saw this big thunderhead ahead of us. So, I started—I checked the weather again. They said the weather passed through Oklahoma City. But, they did have a tornado in Oklahoma City. The airplanes that were there were moved in different locations to avoid where the tornado was.

HOWE: Try and protect...

LEVINSON: No, they just moved themselves.

HOWE: Oh wow. It was the storm...the storm was that bad.

LEVINSON: It was a tornado.

HOWE: Wow. Any damage?

LEVINSON: Not too much as far as I know. Another thing that happened at Oklahoma City. I was officer of the day in a Jeep. And a P-38 was coming in on one engine. These were all young pilots and he came in and I was in this Jeep and I saw him coming in. He was coming in high and fast on one engine. And I said, "Slow down!" I couldn't communicate with him. "Slow down! Slow down!" And he just kept on coming. He got halfway down the runway and he was going too fast. He gave power to the one engine. He flipped over on his back and did a split...he slammed to the ground to not kill himself. But, I was in the Jeep and I got there just as the plane crashed. But, I didn't know how to open up the cockpit. I didn't know how to open it up. So I had to wait until the fire department to come. They were right behind me. So, they opened it up and they got him out. He had a broken back, but he survived. That was one of the things I remember.

HOWE: Did you think he was continued on or he probably washed out because of his injuries?

LEVINSON: Oh yeah, he never flew again.

HOWE: Oh, man.

LEVINSON: That is part of the attrition rate.

HOWE: Okay. So, how do we get to the South Pacific?

LEVINSON: Okay, we had to go to Savannah, GA, where I was to pick up a new B-24. So, I went ...

HOWE: What year is this?

LEVINSON: Pardon me?

HOWE: I apologize, what year is this?

LEVINSON: 1945. So, I got on a trip train. My wife and a few other women were on the trip train. And poker was being played. I was having a good time. And we went to Savannah, GA. We were there for a few days. And my wife went home. And I picked up a B-24 and it was a new B-24. Flew across the United States. Went to Sacramento. From Sacramento, we flew to Hawaii. And from Hawaii, we flew...island-hopped. Canton, Chihuahua, and ended up in New Guinea. That was rather uneventful flight. It was about 50 some hours.

HOWE: Breaks in between?

LEVINSON: Well, yeah, each landing.

HOWE: Okay. So, in New Guinea, what's your mission?

LEVINSON: In New Guinea, we just were waiting to be—now replacement crews for the 2nd photo recon squad are in the Philippines. So we waited there about a month. One of my most memorable thing about New Guinea was the food, or lack of food. And the Red Cross or the Salvation Army had women there that were serving peanut butter & jelly sandwiches. That's what I ate the whole time there. They served chicken and we had sharp knives as part of our uniform. We could not cut the chicken with the knife. It was like embalmed. So that's all we ate were peanut butter & jelly sandwiches. One other thing happened there. One of my crew members, Marty Zincaro, was jumping off a truck and he wore a ring. His ring got caught up on the top of the truck and he ripped open his finger. He just put a bandage on it and forgot about it. Later, I'll tell you about Marty Zincaro.

HOWE: Okay.

LEVINSON: We stayed there for some time. I don't remember how long. Then we went to Palau. We used to call it "Pal-along" but, not knowing some Phillipinos, they call it "Palauan." And we lived in a coconut grove and we had a metal landing strip

where you took off, going uphill, turn around when you went into takeoff downhill. Wind was not a factor.

HOWE: Needed some gravity to help you out.

LEVINSON: That's right. Slowed us up.

HOWE: This is 1945. What else is going on in the world right now?

LEVINSON: Well, the war in Germany is still going on. The war in Japan is still going on. There is no end in sight. I had no idea when the war would ever really end. We hated the Japs. We hated the Germans. And I learned 50 years after the war, the reason my main mission was to fly—main mission, we had other missions—was to fly from Palauan over Borneo and fly flight lines with the cameras. At the altitude we were at was probably around 8,000 feet. We were taking pictures. We were taking those pictures and turning them over to the corps of engineers who are making charts from those pictures because it was uncharted territory. Well, it was right on the equator and it was always—storms in the middle of Borneo. By 10:00, the storms would build up so we were never able to get good pictures because of the storms. And they still haven't taken pictures of the middle of it. But, one day we were flying at 8,000 feet and we broke out. And there was a mountain right in front of us that we didn't even know was there. It was uncharted territory. 6,000 or 8,000.

HOWE: Wow. Pull up quick.

LEVINSON: No, we just turned away from it.

HOWE: Okay.

LEVINSON: And one of the temporary duties was to go to Zamawanga and to take pictures. We spent about a week there, taking pictures of cemeteries where Americans were buried. And while we were there, prior to our getting there, a—well they called them Hucks at that time. They were like communists, terrorists, trying to hijack a fuel truck. And the sergeant driving the fuel truck, shot the guy and killed him. And we, from that point on, were armed. We carried sub-machine guns and we always were armed for the period that we were there. Nothing ever took place but that was a concern.

HOWE: Was there ever a time in either tour of duty, did you feel like you were put in danger?

LEVINSON: No, as a matter of fact, I was just trying to tell ya, 50 years after the war, I learned that the Japanese were preparing for the invasion. They pulled every available airplane back to the mainland. And they were waiting for the invasion

to come. Some of my friends in the later years, were captains of boats and everything, and they told me they were getting ready and they were—one went back to the States to get a boat. And they were getting ready for the invasion. Thanks to a guy by the name of Paul Tibbits, it never happened. Paul Tibbits was the driving force behind the atomic bomb. Him dropping the atomic bomb and probably saved a lot of lives.

HOWE: You said the driving force. What was his job?

LEVINSON: He was the squadron commander. He was in charge of the whole B-29 group. He went on the first mission.

HOWE: So he was one of the ones to give the order?

LEVINSON: Correct. He dropped the first bomb.

HOWE: Alright. You say it saved lives. Expand on that a little bit.

LEVINSON: Surely. The Japanese were—very good question. The Japanese were armed, they were armed with spears made out of bamboo. The children were armed. They were going to die to the last person because of the invasion. It was an entirely different mindset then. The Kamikaze pilots were similar to what we have today with the people that are committing suicide bombing. And they can kill 20 people. These people were fanatics. And this is what we were up against. So, the invasion fleet, even though it was large, was gonna have 13,000 airplanes as kamikazes being the oncoming onslaught. So we would have probably lost more people ourselves than the Japanese lost in the bombing in the atomic bomb. Plus all of the future people that would have been killed. It would have been, probably a couple of million people would have lost their lives if we had actually attacked Japan.

HOWE: Okay.

LEVINSON: So he was really a hero. People, right now look at him as not, don't really understand what they are talking about. It was a terrible thing, but, it was like hitting that little girl going down the mountain with 40 soldiers in a truck. It was a thing that you had to do in order to win. You did what you had to do.

HOWE: So people criticizing those actions today don't have a context of what was at stake.

LEVINSON: Of course. They have no idea. They have absolutely no idea. It is just ignorance.

HOWE: And when you talk about the Japanese invasion. There were reports. There were fears that Japan was going to invade the U.S?

LEVINSON: Well, that was at the beginning but they did not realize our capabilities. As you probably know, they were building one B-24 at the Willow Run Plant every 55 minutes. That was that kind of B-29, so they built 18,000 of them. Japanese probably never thought we would do anything like that. They way way way underestimated. Today, it would have been a different story. But, patriotism then was unbelievable.

HOWE: Do you feel that has changed?

LEVINSON: Tremendously. There is really no comparison. We are no longer a manufacturing country. We are importing and the country has just changed tremendously. I am still proud to wear an American flag on my collar.

HOWE: Awesome. Talk a little bit about what happened. Where were you when the bomb dropped?

LEVINSON: I was in the Phillipines. Flying the mission to Borneo and back. I was on Palauan. And from Palauan, we went to Clark Field. I was there for about 5 or 6 months. And then I was finally shipped back home.

HOWE: What was your job at Clark Field?

LEVINSON: B-24 airplane commander. Still doing combat mapping.

HOWE: Just stationed at a different location.

LEVINSON: Correct.

HOWE: Okay, so I am to understand that it was just shortly after you got transferred to Clark Field, that the bomb dropped.

LEVINSON: No. It was dropped while I was on Palauan.

HOWE: Okay.

LEVINSON: Still at the time, this is very ironic, talking about Clark Field. United States gave Clark Field back to the Phillipinos. It was hit by a volcano and completely covered.

HOWE: Wow. This was after we gave it back?

LEVINSON: After we gave it back.

HOWE: So your duties at Clark Field...

LEVINSON: Remained the same.

HOWE: And, was there an expectation that we were going to march forward into Japan? Invade Japan?

LEVINSON: No. No. We didn't have to invade them, they surrendered.

HOWE: Certainly. Okay.

LEVINSON: There was no invasion. Today, they are our friends. Today they are great people. I have friends that have lived in Japan for 6 years that are back in the States and think the Japanese are the greatest people in the world. Now, I had the same feeling in growing up about the Germans and the Japanese. But, I read a book, *Fly Boy*. I believe it was *Fly Boy* that alluded to what Teddy Roosevelt did in the Rough Riders and it was really a time where there were atrocities they did to the Spanish and to the Mexicans. And I thought, "How can I be angry with people generations ago, did bad things? I have nothing to do with that." So I changed my attitude about the Germans and the Japanese after that. When I read a little history about what the United States did.

HOWE: This was after your time in service?

LEVINSON: This was after my time in service. It happened probably 10 years ago. After that time, I tried to shy away from anything German or Japanese as far as purchasing is concerned.

HOWE: Got it. Did you ever—while you were stationed in the Philippines, did you ever get a chance to interact with non-combat personnel?

LEVINSON: Not too much, really. I realized now that we never ate any Phillipino food. As a matter of fact, we have caregivers that are Phillipino for my wife. And they were wonderful people. They are—I never met people like this. And when they go back to the Philippines to visit, they get sick. Because of the food. They are not accustomed to it. So I never ate Phillipino food. Never went into a Phillipino restaurant.

HOWE: Have you ever, after having served and you left the service, have you ever gone back to visit the Philippines?

LEVINSON: No I have not. It was a beautiful country. But I never went back.

HOWE: So, you leave Clark Field. And, did you stay in the service?

LEVINSON: Well, no. I went home and I went into the auto parts business with my father. But I went into the reserve out at O'Hare field. Continued my flying as—I was an instructor pilot in C-46s until 1951. When the Korean conflict came about, then I

was called up again. I asked for a 90-day delay to get rid of my business and I had an opportunity to go into B-29s or C-54s. And I didn't have the opportunity to op for one or the other because they never called me. Which I was not unhappy about. So, I had only 13 years of service total.

HOWE: And because they didn't call you...

LEVINSON: I just dropped out.

HOWE: I gotchya.

LEVINSON: I just continued my flying, 30 years later, and still flying.

HOWE: So, you came back here to Chicago.

LEVINSON: Correct.

HOWE: What did you do when you came home?

LEVINSON: Well, my father was a jack of all trades. He did everything. During the war, parts for automobiles were very scarce. So he would go around to all of the garages and tell the people to save spark plugs. And they he would come back months later and buy the spark plugs and then sell those spark plugs to rebuilders who would then take the good ones. Clean them and sell them as rebuilt spark plugs. While he did that, he found someone that wanted bearings and he would buy bearings. Then he would buy transmission parts and sell it to transmission rebuilders. And he'd buy carburetors and he then bought fuel pumps and all the pumps that were scarce that went to rebuilders at the time. So that way he built up a business and was making a pretty good living and he said, "You want to come in with me? I could use the help." So that's what I did for about a year or so. I met up with a gentleman by the name of Ted Holiday who was a physicist who worked for the government. He was a full colonel. His company was with Landair. And he was tracking guided missiles. I became friendly with him because I was supplying him with parts. And he says if we are called up again, if you are called up and I am called up, I am going to request you become my personal pilot because I will not become a general. So, we were friendly and one day he says, "You know this business isn't for me. Why don't you buy it?" So he sold me the business for I think, \$2700, at that time was a lot of money. You know, when I grew up, a nickel would get you into the movie theater. A quarter was a lot of money. Minimum wage at that time was a quarter an hour, when minimum wage first came out. So, money was different. Today, a loaf of bread...when I told my wife's uncles that a load of bread would become a dollar a loaf, they almost threw me out of the house! I was crazy. But, now when I buy

loaves of bread for four and a half dollars. So, the bread is still the same bread but the value of the dollar as gone down.

HOWE: What year was it that you purchased this business?

LEVINSON: That was in 1948-49. '50...somewhere in that period. I bought the business. He said, if I do \$2700 in business a month, I'll be making money. I was doing \$27,000 with a business a month and I still wasn't making any money. And, my employees were getting rich on me, because they were stealing. That was life.

HOWE: So how long did you stay in this business before you moved on?

LEVINSON: 20 years.

HOWE: Wow. And you continued flying?

LEVINSON: I stopped flying for a number of years. And I started again. I soon became a flight instructor and joined a flying club then owned my own airplane with partners. Now, I still have an airplane.

HOWE: Are you involved in the community at all?

LEVINSON: In aviation, yes. I am on a number of boards. Still, I was an aviation safety counselor for a number of years. I am on the board of directors of an airport group. I am the AOPA representative for the airport. Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association. In the Chicago Flight Instructors Association. Do a lot of flying. Flown all over the country. My wife flies with me.

HOWE: Nice.

LEVINSON: Trying to think of what else I've done of any importance...

HOWE: I say that is all pretty high-level stuff. Do you do any work with veterans?

LEVINSON: Yes. I do. I've given a number of talks to veterans groups. I have a Powerpoint presentation that I give. I was inducted into the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame. That is the little pin I wear here.

HOWE: We will get a shot of that here shortly.

LEVINSON: I have a 50 year award for safe flying. It's called the Wright Brothers Award. Nothing really great. Just things have happened to me.

HOWE: When you give talks, to veterans, what kind of things do you try to impart?

LEVINSON: I try to impart is persistence. And, the fact that I am not the sharpest tack in the box and by just being persistent, you can succeed. And if I talk to a group of

young people, I always allude to the fact that I failed, and I failed, and I failed, but I got up, and I got up, and I got up. And that is the important thing. You never give up.

HOWE: Is there anything else you'd like to impart on our audience or young people in general?

LEVINSON: Well I just alluded to the fact that...live under the golden rule, treat other people like you want to be treated. If you set your mind to something, in all probability, you will succeed. Because I never, ever thought that being a poor kid, having anti-Semitism staring me in the face, and even though my relatives are more than...all my friends are Gentile, they are not Jewish, most of them are not. I never looked to what a color a person was or what religion there was. My daughter-in-law is Catholic. My son-in-law is Catholic. That really never meant anything to me. I was growing up as an American and that's the way I live my life. Whatever people want to believe is perfectly alright.

HOWE: Just made me think of something else. Looking at your broad experience, and the challenges that you've overcome. Out of all of that, what has been your proudest moment?

LEVINSON: Besides getting married.

HOWE: That's a very good answer.

LEVINSON: Besides getting married...probably getting inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame. That is something that I never ever expected my peers would do.

HOWE: Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame?

LEVINSON: Correct.

HOWE: Okay.

LEVINSON: I never thought that would ever happen to me. The fact is, I thought that other people earned it more than I did.

HOWE: What is significant for you about that recognition?

LEVINSON: The recognition! [Laughs]. That is the recognition. The fact that I was picked by my peers to receive an award that I never even considered was possible. I've been a volunteer for many things. I volunteer for the Shriner's...I fly burn victims to the children's hospital in Cincinnati. I volunteer for Lifeline to fly children or people places where they have to have hospitalization. I have done things of that nature. Never thinking it would ever amount to anything other than the

fact that I wanted to give back somethings that I have been very lucky to have. I really think that I am the luckiest guy in this room. There is two of us! [laughs]

HOWE: I would certainly say so. I could also argue that I am very lucky to hear these experiences and listen to your story. So I feel very lucky as well. Is it—the recognition, being inducted into the Hall of Fame, is it because of all the things that you’ve done to give back, your presence in the community, is it because of those things that they—your peers recognized you?

LEVINSON: I would say apparently. Because I on that board now and I recognize that other people do when I nominate them to that position. But, it was—I couldn’t even sleep the night I was just nominated. I never expected that to happen.

HOWE: Nice. Is there anything else that you thought we would ask that you wanted to discuss?

LEVINSON: Well, I just have to say that I don’t say that I am lucky lightly. I am very very lucky. I mean I still have...I am physically able at 90 to fly a twin engine airplane. I own it. I am lucky that I live the way I live. I really debate anybody to say that they are luckier than I.

HOWE: I would not disagree with that. Anything else you wanted to talk about?

LEVINSON: No, I think I’ve capitalized 90 years in pretty quick order.

HOWE: Well, I certainly feel like you’ve shared a lot. I hope that we have done adequate justice to your story. You’ve given us a broad perspective of your experiences.

LEVINSON: Just I feel very strongly that people should not decide about other people by the color of their skin, by their religion but more by what they really are inside.

HOWE: Is that as a result of your experiences? With the way you’ve been treated.

LEVINSON: Yes. Yes. I can’t imagine what the Tuskegee airmen went through...

HOWE: They were training their own at the same time as you...

LEVINSON: Yes! They were trained a little earlier than I was.

HOWE: Right.

LEVINSON: Because they were black, if it wouldn’t have been for Eleanor Roosevelt, they probably wouldn’t have been where they were. You know that story?

HOWE: Yeah.

LEVINSON: Well, Eleanor Roosevelt needed to fly. She wanted a pilot. She insisted that she fly with a Tuskegee airman. With a black pilot. She was the wife of the President of the United States. That was the beginning of the Tuskegee airmen.

HOWE: That was the beginning of their recognition?

LEVINSON: Correct.

HOWE: Okay. And as a result of her request...

LEVINSON: They opened up a squadron to her. To her request.

HOWE: Wow. Okay, so she really paved the way.

LEVINSON: Kind of paved the way for the Tuskegee airmen.

HOWE: Wow. In your time flying, have you worked alongside any of the Tuskegee airmen? Have you encountered them?

LEVINSON: I encountered them. I spoke to them at OshKosh which was the world's largest air show and they generally have a booth there. I stopped and chat with them and tell them I don't understand all of their problems but I explained to them that I am Jewish and I know what goes on with certain people.

HOWE: Right. How do you feel you are received when you have those discussions?

LEVINSON: By them?

HOWE: Right.

LEVINSON: Oh! They were great people. There has not been a Tuskegee airmen that I know that was not a positive man in his community. They have all done well. They've owned banks, I don't know all the good things that they've done. But, they all did well.

HOWE: You mentioned the Osh Kosh air shows? Is there anything related to that, that you want to discuss?

LEVINSON: I've flown in there many times and I enjoy it. I go in every year. It's an amazing group of airplanes. They have thousands of thousands of airplanes. Probably 11,000 airplanes on the ground at one time. You can see all the kinds.

HOWE: Is this every year?

LEVINSON: Every year.

HOWE: Nice.

LEVINSON: So, when I give my talks, I give them...I call them my 2 dreams. My first dream was to someday become a pilot. Now that I've done that and look back at it, it's like I am waking up from a nap and I have a dream. So, that's where I really realize how lucky I am. Some people say that I am not lucky but, I think I am.

HOWE: It's in the eye of the beholder. And it sounds like to me that you got a pretty decent, pretty positive attitude about it.

LEVINSON: My glass is always half full.

HOWE: Nice.

LEVINSON: So, I am the oldest friend I have. [laughs]

HOWE: Do you maintain contact with anyone that you have served with?

LEVINSON: They are all gone. None of them are left.

HOWE: Actually you mentioned your crew.

LEVINSON: Correct.

HOWE: You said that you had a letter.

LEVINSON: Yes, I do.

HOWE: Did you want to share that?

LEVINSON: Sure, if I could dig it out real quickly.

HOWE: We've got time.

LEVINSON: Here I am as a cadet.

HOWE: I'll hold on to this and I'll let you hold it up so we can see.

LEVINSON: I keep forgetting that you have a tape there. That you can edit.

HOWE: We will.

LEVINSON: Let me see if I can...this letter is...

HOWE: Let me hold this.

LEVINSON: Here's that Wright Brothers Master Pilot award...Here it is! By George!

HOWE: Let me take the binder from you.

LEVINSON: Do you want me to read the letter?

HOWE: If you'd like to, otherwise...

LEVINSON: Tell me what you want. I can read it.

HOWE: You wanted to talk about it. This is in relation to the crew that you had worked with.

LEVINSON: Right. Well, I went to a reunion. One of the former crew members came up to me...no, came up talking to me. I went to say something to somebody else. And he came back and was talking to my wife. Well, he knew my wife from World War II. And she says, "I don't think that is such a good idea." He says, "I traveled all the way from California to Oklahoma City just to talk to Howard." And then he explained to me what had happened, but then he wrote to me afterward. And this is what he said: "My reunited friends, I just wanted to take a few moments to express my appreciation to you two for your hospitality and the fantastic reunion. Howard, I never remember having a one-on-one talk with you before." I wish we had. At the time I was an officer, and during the war...you could not socialize, fraternize with the listed men. It was just not—it was frowned upon. So I really didn't talk a lot to him. But I wish we had. "Until I received the package from Mac, I had no idea where you were. I tried to find you in the Chicago phone directory when I was stationed at Chanute. Well, it is great to have reunited with you again after so many years. I discovered that you weren't born wealthy and came up the hard way makes me even more proud of you." It came back to me that my crew thought that I was a very wealthy, spoiled kid. I don't know where they got the idea. But, we were poorer than they were. "I feel now that I have been pardoned for my very limited role in our attempted mutiny. The most surprising thing was that the others could not recall it taking place. I have a hunch Smitty remembers it well and regrets his role, since he matured from his wilder days. I think that episode was a turning point in my associations with others. I was determined to think myself and speak my own mind after that. Being candid in my expressions served me well during the rest of my military career. Most people would have been a bit vindictive toward us following such an event. But you seemed to put it aside as it had not even taken place. I know you must have been deeply hurt by not realizing any of this was going on. And you told us right after it was over. The other pilots were always talking about problems with their crew. You always told them that you never had a problem. You wonder if they knew about all of the time and never mentioned it to you. The thing that I remember most was that it was all unjustified. You had never done anything wrong and never treated anyone unjustly. The underlying motive had to be anti-Semitism. I think we owe a lot of thanks to the major who got the crew together and threatened to break up the crew and put us all on the crew pool. I am sure everyone took a much better measure of you after that and your performance alone, settled the

issue in our minds in a most positive manner. I know you have influenced us consciously or unconsciously for the rest of our lives. In my case, thank you for your influence on mine. You are a true professional with a permanent desire to succeed and excel for people like me. Thank you. I am looking forward to being with you again in March. I meant you too, Harriet, you are still a doll. It was great to see you two looking so good, so obviously devoted to one another after all of these years. I wish you could have known my wife, Ruby. You would have liked her. We were very close, too. We met when I was first stationed at Chanute Air Force Base, and I married her 5th of February, 1952. I quit working to spend full time, taking care of her the last 6 years of her life. I know you have to know how much all of us think of you today. The finest, based on your performance as a commander, pilot, crew member and human being. And of course, friend. Thanks again. Love you both, Hugh R. Allen” So, that’s what he sent me. And you wanna know what I responded to him?

HOWE: Sure.

LEVINSON: You wanna?

HOWE: Absolutely.

LEVINSON: “Dear Hugh, What you did for me after all of these years, absolutely cannot be measured. All of my life I knew anti-Semitism. But, never ever did I use it as a crutch for any of my shortcomings. When we were young, we surely make more errors in judgment and with maturity, we gain knowledge as well as better understanding. I know now that I made errors in dealing with the crew. I didn’t care when I removed Martin from the crew.” We had a fellow by the name of Martin...something, I don’t remember the rest of his name which is rather interesting. He was incorrigible. He absolutely would not do anything that he was supposed to do. Removed him from the crew. At the first reunion, when they had...that they had many years later. They had the addresses of all the people that they had located even though they weren’t there. He was in San Quentin. He was in prison! [Laughs]

HOWE: Wow.

LEVINSON: So, I guess my judgment was good there.

HOWE: Yeah, you had good instinct.

LEVINSON: “Looking back, I realized I should have made another decision, after our 17-hour flight, I am positive now that you realize I never had ill feelings towards you. Fred confirmed that and when we first met after 46 years, I could only give you an accolade regarding your athletic ability and your easygoing manner. If I had

any negative memories of you, I would have said nothing. When discussing our reunion among my friends, you are the main topic of conversation as they say. I should feel as they say, 10 feet tall. I do, after our heart-to-heart talk. But, Hugh, you should feel 20 feet tall as you are a giant of a human being. You came forward to me with without knowledge how I'd react. It was heavy stuff. But, I respect you for your sincerity, ability, and accomplishments. I am sure we could have been great friends through the years, as I feel now. Fondly and sincerely, Howard. P.S. Perhaps in March, you could come to Chicago to stay with us for a few days. Hopefully I will be flying us down to Florida and you could hitch a ride both ways." So, that is something I still have in my collection.

HOWE: Wow.

LEVINSON: It's kind of amazing...Wouldn't you feel so, James?

HOWE: I am thinking about our conversation and the story you have told. And it takes a lot of courage for somebody to admit when they are wrong. I know from my experiences, it's never easy. It's not something that you wanna do, admit when you are wrong. But, it takes just as much fortitude and humanity to forgive somebody for their wrongdoings. And, that is powerful stuff. What you shared is very powerful. I mean these are lessons I feel that we all need to learn from, that we all need to absorb.

LEVINSON: I learned among other things, that we do not see ourselves as others see us. We don't know how people think of us. But, some of these things that you know, you got to realize that when you are nominated for this or got thanks for that, that you must be doing something right. My eye is tearing, I am not crying.

HOWE: That's okay. Even if you were, that'd be okay too. No, you are right. It is nice to know that you have been doing something right but, I think in your case, you've got a lot to give and that you've had a positive effect on the people you have worked with. This is what that tells me.

LEVINSON: Well, I appreciate you thinking that way. How old are you?

HOWE: I am 33...

LEVINSON: I have a grandson your age.

HOWE: Okay, what does your grandson do?

LEVINSON: He is in the fish business.

HOWE: Here in Chicago?

LEVINSON: Aquarium design and maintenance. He has a growing business. Started off with two trucks and now he has 4 trucks, inside of a year. He is quite an artist.

HOWE: Within the industry, or is he a creative individual as well?

LEVINSON: He is creative and he named his company "Tank it Easy."

HOWE: Nice.

LEVINSON: And it's taken hold. So, one day you are driving around, you may see one of his trucks because it's all fish on them. Tank it Easy, aquarium design and maintenance. I am pretty proud of him. He is quite a guy.

HOWE: How many children do you have?

LEVINSON: Three. Two boys and a girl.

HOWE: And just the one grandchild?

LEVINSON: Well, I have really 5 but, four of them are quadruplets who no longer live in Chicago. I have no contact with them except for one of them.

HOWE: Your grandson.

LEVINSON: Well, no, I have—no, I have another grandson. I have two others and a granddaughter but I do not see them. They are out of the...they are out of the family...

HOWE: Out of the area?

LEVINSON: They were raised in Houston. Trying to think of any other interesting anecdotes I could tell ya.

HOWE: I mean, I am not putting it into it because you have been able to share quite a bit.

LEVINSON: How many of these have you done?

HOWE: This is now my 6th interview. But, I've done other work.

LEVINSON: I am sure you have.

HOWE: Documentary filmmaking. Yeah. So, is there one experience or others that you feel exemplifies your time in service?

LEVINSON: Well, I think that 17 hour mission was the one that would be very difficult duplicate. I only had 15 minutes of fuel left.

HOWE: Can you explain the decision to balance the fuel between four engines as opposed to the engineer's recommendation or his request to let one engine go down at a time.

LEVINSON: I wanted to keep everything stable as long as possible. Remember, numerous times I said I am not the smartest tack in the box. I am not. But, when it comes to logic, boy, I have the logic.

HOWE: Explain the logic.

LEVINSON: Well, as an example, we were flying over Pueblo, Colorado. Probably a 21 ship formation. And this Hugh Allen asked if he could come up to the top turret because the nose turret...he couldn't...he didn't have a great visibility on the top turret. I said, "Sure." So he got in the top turret and the oxygen wasn't working. So he asked if he could use the oxygen from the side of the ship. There was another...there was oxygen all over the place. I said, "Sure." So we are flying along in this tremendous formation at 43 degrees below zero with icicles coming off of our oxygen masks. And all of a sudden, here is an explosion. As he was turning the top turret, he pulled that side of the ship's oxygen mask and broke the line. And the—all the oxygen escaped and crystalized and my co pilot called Smitty. There is a lot of Smittys, don't know which one it is. Smitty says, "Abort! Abort! Abort!" And I said, "Pilot to crew. Pick up a walk around bottle and connect it to this other system." That's judgment. You don't teach that. Correct? He wanted me to peel out of formation and go land and do other things.

HOWE: And that is giving into a panic mindset as a opposed to like you say, how can you solve the problem?

LEVINSON: Judgment. I think, and I have had numerous discussions with a lot of people. I don't think you can actually teach judgment. You can teach a lot of things so that they don't have to make the judgment but, you can't teach every possible scenario.

HOWE: I would agree that you cannot teach every scenario. I do feel thought that practices like yours, of thinking through situations and not reacting and not giving over to the panic, prevents you from making rash decisions.

LEVINSON: Well, I've come across a lot of people through the years that do not have good judgment. And they will never have good judgment because they are not judgment people. They just do not come up with judgment. Their judgments there but it's just poor.

HOWE: Sure.

LEVINSON: I'll tell you an interesting story. When I was...maybe I've told it to you already. When I was in 2nd grade, I was walking across the playground, did I tell you that?

HOWE: You kicked the can.

LEVINSON: Yeah, I kicked the can. Well, since that time, I try to have my judgment be right rather than wrong. And my judgment would not to be kicking other cans.
[Laughs]

HOWE: Yeah? You learned from that mistake, you don't wanna make that one a second time.

LEVINSON: Right.

HOWE: Awesome. Well, I can't think of anything else...

LEVINSON: Oh wow, it's 1:30. Time flies when you are having a good time. Would you like to look through these pictures?

HOWE: I would. Let me call my supervisor down and we will try to figure out the best way to do that. Before I do that, I am going to officially end our interview, for the record.

(End 2:17:07)