

**INTERVIEW**

**Donald D Bryant**

**YEAR**

**2005**

**GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

**NAME:** Donald D Bryant

**DATE:** November 30, 2005

**PLACE:** Copeland, Kansas

**INTERVIEWER:** Joyce Suellentrop

**PROJECT SERIES:** **Veterans Oral History Project for Gray County**

**BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:**

Donald Bryant was born raised on the farm near Cullison. After graduation from high school he received a full basketball scholarship to Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas. The war was beginning so, after one year he tried out for a basketball team in Wichita and was hired to work at Stearman Aircraft and play basketball. Later he was hired to help build the B29s at Boeing. He worked there several years and in '44 was sent to Nebraska to be in the Air Force to train for B29 mechanics. His Squadron was sent to Guam to service B29s that were making bombing raids on Japan. He was discharged in 1946 and he and his wife moved to the Copeland area in 1954 and have farmed there since.

**SUBJECTS DISCUSSED:** Training at Boeing on the B29 and life as a part of the Pacific war. How his training at Boeing enabled him to service the planes at Guam and his return to the states and a move to Copeland area to farm.

**COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:**

**SOUND RECORDINGS:** 60 minute tape

**LENGTH OF INTERVIEW:** 1 hour

**RESTRICTIONS ON USE:** none

**TRANSCRIPT:** 16 pages

**ORAL HISTORY**  
**Bryant, Donald D**  
**Interview Date: November 30, 2005**

**Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)**  
**Interviewee: Donald Bryant (DB)**  
**Tape 1 of 1**  
**Side A**

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**JS -** Do you remember when World War Two started either in 1939 or in 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

**DB -** Oh sure.

**JS -** What were you doing? How did you hear about it? What was your reaction?

**DB -** I was working at Boeing and we were building the B29s. I think they attacked Pearl Harbor on a Sunday. We were on our way back to Wichita when we heard it.

**JS -** You were born here?

**DB -** I was born at Haviland.

**JS -** You graduated from high school and went to work at Boeing?

**DB -** That's right.

**JS -** How did you get to Boeing?

**DB -** I went to work at Stearman. Boeing wasn't at Wichita yet. I went to work at Stearman, and we were making primary trainers for cadet training. The way I got my job was if you could make the basketball team it got you a job.

**JS -** A basketball team for cadets?

**DB -** No, for Stearman Aircraft, they had a basketball league growing in Wichita.

**JS -** With whom did you play?

**DB -** I played with an outfit they called Bell Clothiers. All of the players worked at Stearman.

**JS -** You would work during the day and play at night?

**DB** - No, you had your job building primary trainers at Stearman and you would play of an evening and practice in the evening. Then Boeing came along and most of us were transferred down to Boeing and we started building the larger planes.

**JS** - You say at Stearman you were building primary trainers. Can you tell a little bit about those?

**DB** - They were just bi-planes and that was where the Air Corps had these PT trainers to start flight training.

**JS** - Did you have a particular job that you did?

**DB** - I did spot welding.

**JS** - Did they train you to do that or did you already know it?

**DB** - No, I didn't know a thing about it. It was the first I had ever heard of it. I think that was the beginning of spot welding. Now it is on automobiles and everything. I think spot welding started in the aircraft industry.

**JS** - You said something about trainers for the cadets. What were the cadets?

**DB** - That was the first step in flight training.

**JS** - You said you volunteered for that?

**DB** - I volunteered, but they didn't need anymore. I took my physical at Strother Field in Ark City. I was just waiting to be called. This was like in '44. The war had been going quite awhile and they had enough cadets so they didn't need any more. They cancelled the cadet program and that wiped me out. All the cadet program training was automatically ended.

**JS** - Then you were eligible for the draft?

**DB** - I was eligible for the draft, that's right.

**JS** - You were working at Boeing. What year did you start there, do you remember?

**DB** - In August of about '40.

**JS** - You were building the B29s?

**DB** - We started building the B29s, yeah, in about '43.

**JS** - The B29s were after the B24s?

**DB** - The Pacific was the only place the B29 was used. It was a large four-engine plane. The B29 was designed and built for the purpose of bombing Japan, period, without having to invade it. Now, that is the reason, and mainly the bombs were incendiary bombs to burn them out and they did that.

**JS** - Did Boeing design the B29?

**DB** - Sure, the Army had to have a large four engine plane. Out of the blue sky, they designed it and put it in production. Before that they had never built anything like that. Nobody had, they had these designs and they just started building them. The Army needed them bad and they didn't test fly any of them, they just started building them. They improved them as they went along.

**JS** - You were in spot welding. Did Boeing work three shifts?

**DB** - Yes, Sundays and everything because they wanted these planes to be ready for this Japan deal. They never did use them in Europe.

**JS** - They used B24s in Europe, is that right?

**DB** - B24s, B17s; the flying fortress was the B24. That's what they used in Europe.

**JS** - Did you know anything about airplanes and flying before that?

**DB** - No, I came off the farm.

**JS** - Why did you want to work there?

**DB** - Basketball was the incentive, right then. When I went to work down there it was hard times. If you could make a team, the personnel director just took me in a side door and I was signed up. Here there was a great big long line of people trying to get a job. It made me feel kind of bad just to walk in a side door and the next day I went to work.

**JS** - That's because you had the basketball?

**DB** - That is exactly right. That's the only reason in the world.

**JS** - What was it like to work at Boeing during war time?

**DB** - It was fine and dandy. You had to work. They would move you from one shift to another depending on the work load and the personnel. They were hiring employees like they were going out of style. They needed employees.

**JS** - Did they hire both women and men?

**DB** - You bet, sure, probably more women than men.

**JS** - In the department where you were, there would have been the women that eventually were known as Rosie the Riveter?

**DB** - I guess so.

**JS** - Was there any difficulty with the men and women working together?

**DB** - No, not a bit.

**JS** - Did Boeing have a basketball team?

**DB** - Boeing had a basketball team. They later developed a basketball team, but I was with what they called Bell Clothiers. That was a clothing store down town and they were sponsoring this team. When I went to work at Stearman, Boeing wasn't even in Wichita, yet. We were building these PT trainers. Along came this blueprint of the B29 and then they built the plant and started hiring people. People that had some experience were needed the worst.

**JS** - Do you remember what your pay was?

**DB** - I started in at twenty-five cents an hour.

**JS** - You worked an eight hour shift?

**DB** - You figure that out and that is not much money.

**JS** - Were you married at that time?

**DB** - No, I wasn't married at the time, but we were married on April 27<sup>th</sup> of '41. War broke out in the fall, December 7<sup>th</sup>. It was not much money.

**JS** - Where did you live in Wichita, in an apartment?

**DB** - In an apartment.

**JS** - Did your hourly wage increase? You were there several years.

**DB** - Oh yeah, it went on up, I can't tell just how much. After you had some experience you were put over other people as department assistant foreman and chief. It was first one thing and another. You worked on up and then you were put on a salary in place of hourly wage.

**JS** - Were there security measures because it was an aircraft plant? Now we are so security conscious.

**DB** - No, not at that time. Of course, they had security people all the time, but there never was any trouble.

**JS** - When you weren't working and you lived in Wichita, were you friends with fellow workers and did you do things together?

**DB** - Oh yeah, we lived three or four places in Wichita, apartment houses and duplexes. We did things with other people there on South Hydraulic.

**JS** - You had a car?

**DB** - No.

**JS** - How did you get to work?

**DB** - It was no problem to get to work. There were people that had cars and they would come by and pick you up and gas was no problem. I mean money wise.

**JS** - How did you get around Wichita?

**DB** - Bus.

**JS** - Go to the grocery store on the bus or walk?

**DB** - That's right.

**JS** - The war started in '41 and you were working in an aircraft plant. How else did the war affect you in your life? Were there things that you could not get or could not do?

**DB** - Yes, I don't know of anybody that suffered from any of that stuff. You had the essentials. It was no problem. A lot of the frills that people have now, you never even thought of because they weren't available.

**JS** - So, you are working at Boeing and then you are drafted? Were you drafted from out here or in Wichita?

**DB** - You were drafted from Boeing. The way I was drafted was that they had a large number of these B29s built. Therefore, they kind of needed trained people that had built them to service them. It just made sense. I wanted in the Air Corps because I had a brother that was down in Australia. He said, "Above all, get in the Air Corps." A lot of us fellows went up to Fort Riley and were inducted. None

of us knew what it was, but we had a letter that we were automatically in the Air Corps because of our B29 experience.

**JS** - That was good.

**DB** - We were automatically put in the Air Corps and assigned to B29s at overseas bases.

**JS** - Did you have to go through basic training?

**DB** - Oh yeah.

**JS** - Where did you do that?

**DB** - Camp Carson, Colorado, shots and pull your teeth.

**JS** - Pull your teeth, why?

**DB** - They said there was dead in them. Think it was just so they could get another bar.

**JS** - Could you describe basic training, what you thought about it? Was it hard?

**DB** - No, it was a snap.

**JS** - You were born in '20 so you were twenty-four years old when you went into the service?

**DB** - That's right.

**JS** - Was it hard to follow orders and obey?

**DB** - No.

**JS** - After basic training, did you have more training?

**DB** - No. After basic training, you just automatically were shipped to an overseas base, where they had the B29s.

**JS** - Where were you shipped to?

**DB** - I was shipped to Harvard, Nebraska. That was an overseas base that had B29s and they were training flight crews. I had nothing to do with the flight crews, but they let you do maintenance right on the plane.

**JS** - When you say overseas base that means that the B29s that were flying would fly overseas into the Pacific and do what they needed to do and come back here for maintenance?

**DB** - Oh no, these planes were strictly training planes. Say, the flight crews were there for three months training they would take a new plane and fly to the base.

**JS** - These overseas bases were strictly for training. What role did you play in maintenance?

**DB** - We did everything. We did sheet metal repairs, replacement of parts, and even on the training planes there was a certain amount of upkeep. That was your maintenance duty.

**JS** - How many planes would there have been there that you were responsible for?

**DB** - I was in the 21<sup>st</sup> Squadron and there were about twenty-five planes assigned to the squadron.

**JS** - Did they have a regular schedule for maintenance or not?

**DB** - No, these crews were in the air for flight training whether it was night or day or both. Whatever maintenance work was required, we would do our part.

**JS** - You just had the day shift of maintenance?

**DB** - Principally, that is right. Most of the married fellows lived off the base. We were stationed at nearby housing and other fellows and wives were there. Really it was a break. Lots of people and their families were there. We didn't leave our families till we went overseas.

**JS** - Do you remember what pay you received when you were in the Army Air Corps?

**DB** - I don't remember.

**JS** - Was it less than what you received at Boeing?

**DB** - You are kidding. I can't tell you what it was. I don't know, but it was according to your rank. Just being a PFC it probably was around forty-five dollars a month.

**JS** - If you were married, did you get more?

**DB** - You got a little addition to it, but it wasn't much.

**JS** - Were you on a particular crew that all worked together at the same time?

**DB** - Yes. We weren't assigned to any plane. Whatever plane needed work on it, you worked on it.

**JS** - How did you keep up with what was going on with the war?

**DB** - We didn't have communication like we have now, but we still had radios. I don't really know.

**JS** - You don't remember reading newspapers? Can you remember when victory was declared in Europe in May of '45?

**DB** - Oh sure, I was overseas and it was a big deal.

**JS** - Were you always in Nebraska?

**DB** - We spent the winter in Nebraska with our flight crews and then we were shipped overseas in the spring of '45 to Guam. That's where the B29s were stationed. I don't know how many planes they had over there for the Air Corps as far as Japan was concerned. There were Tinian, Guam and Saipan and they were all in the Marianas, a group of islands. I expect there were 150 or better planes there in Guam where I was.

There were several squadrons. We wouldn't have anything to do with any of those other planes other than our squadron's planes. It was just like we were at the training base in Nebraska.

**JS** - These were bases that the United States had set up. Were they permanent bases or temporary?

**DB** - Temporary and we lived in barracks. Our quarters were A-okay.

**JS** - You were in Nebraska and shipped out so you went to the West Coast?

**DB** - Yes.

**JS** - Did you fly over?

**DB** - Oh yeah, we took a troop train to the West Coast and then were flown from there to Hawaii Hickham Field. We changed planes and went on and made another stop or two. I forget the islands and we wound up at Guam.

**JS** - What did you think when you were leaving the United States?

**DB** - I had never ridden on a water based plane before.

**JS** - By water based you mean what?

**DB** - It landed and took off in water. It was pretty rough taking off because you would hit those waves before you were there.

**JS** - How many men were on this plane?

**DB** - Oh, forty or fifty I suppose, I don't know, it might have been more.

**JS** - Especially being raised in Kansas where there is very little water, I expect that gave you something to think about. When you got to Guam, what was it like on Guam?

**DB** - It was just an island with coconuts and gooks that were the natives. The climate was fine.

**JS** - It was warm, wasn't it?

**DB** - Yeah, it was nice and warm.

**JS** - They would fly in and out of there on missions, is that correct?

**DB** - Oh yes, they would leave maybe at four or five o'clock in the evening and they would migrate. The next morning they would begin coming back. They would make those raids depending on fuel and stuff like that. It might be a couple or three days before the flight crews would make another run depending on the orders from headquarters.

**JS** - When you were there and you needed a part or tools or something or they needed bombs for the plane or food, how were those supplied?

**DB** - As far as the artillery or bombs were concerned, we had nothing whatsoever to do with dealing with that. They had nothing to do with the maintenance.

**JS** - Basically, you just knew what you were to do and you did that?

**DB** - That is right.

**JS** - If we can go back a little bit to where you were in Nebraska. Talk about parts of the experience. What was the food like? Of course you lived off the base so that was different for you then.

**DB** - Right, we killed lots of pheasants. Nebraska is running over with pheasants. We had lots of pheasants to eat.

**JS** - Did you get to come home when you were in Nebraska?

**Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)**

**Interviewee: Donald Bryant (DB)**

**Tape 1 of 1**

**Side B**

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**DB** - No, we never did have a leave.

**JS** - When you went to Guam did your wife stay in Nebraska?

**DB** - No, she came back to her folks in Cullison. She worked in Pratt.

**JS** - You were in Guam until you got out in '46?

**DB** - Yeah, when they discharged you, they flew you to the States.

**JS** - When you were in the States, because you were married, you didn't have a typical experience because you lived off base?

**DB** - That is exactly right. We lived in a private home with an old lady who took us in. Back in those days, people weren't afraid of anybody. You never thought of trouble and they didn't think of trouble.

**JS** - Then in Guam it was a typical experience because you lived on base. Could you comment on the food, the barracks life, what you did when you weren't working?

**DB** - The food was at the chow hall and you had quite a bit of free time because the planes were gone.

**JS** - What would you do, play cards?

**DB** - Oh yeah, we played cards, pitched horseshoes and stuff like that to kill time. We had an outdoor movie. Of course, everything is outdoors, restrooms, showers and so on.

**JS** - You received mail on a regular basis?

**DB** - Not on a regular basis, but you received letters, sure.

**JS** - Were the letters that you wrote back censored?

**DB** - I don't think they were, maybe the V-mail ones. V-mail was condensed. My wife still has the letters.

**JS** - The Historical Society would love to have copies of those letters. That is a piece of history that will be lost.

**DB** - We have a special edition of the paper telling of the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7<sup>th</sup>. I sent my wife a paper from Guam when they dropped the atomic bomb.

**JS** - Do you remember how you heard about that?

**DB** - It was as much a surprise to us as it was to you. The news probably traveled faster back here than it did to us.

**JS** - After they dropped the bombs in August of '45, you stayed in Guam till '46 is that right? Did you go to Tokyo?

**DB** - I got lucky enough that I pitched a lot of horseshoes and I had trophies. They picked an Olympic Team from the Marianas and I got lucky enough to be on that team. We got up there to Tokyo and never heard a word about the Olympics. I got to fly up there and spend a week up there just doing nothing.

**JS** - Did you get to move around and see things?

**DB** - Sure, it was a disaster area. It was just burned out. You can imagine how it was. That was the idea you know, how many lives they saved by the atomic bombs ending the war. It was a bad deal, but how many lives would it have cost to have invaded Japan. In place of invading they just burned those places up.

**JS** - That was the theory that they would have fought to the bitter end.

**DB** - Yes, because they did on the islands. When we were coming back from Japan and we landed there at Iwo Jima and they had embankments of four or five-foot of cement. They could see those guys coming in and they were protected. It would have been a terrific loss of lives if they had had to attack Japan on foot.

**JS** - When you were in Tokyo, where did you stay?

**DB** - Just in some army barracks.

**JS** - You were free to move around?

**DB** - Oh sure, but there was nothing there to move around. Everything was burned. There were some large buildings that were full of Army rifles with the pins taken out of them. There were just large warehouses of Army junk.

**JS** - When was this? The war was over in August.

**DB** - Seems to me like it was in the winter of the year. It was cold. We were coming back from Tokyo and we lost our radio contact. We could receive, but we couldn't transmit so we had a hard time of finding the little island of Iwo Jima. We flew quite a while and we kicked out everything that was loose because we were lost. We were afraid of flying into that mountain that was over there because we couldn't see very far, but we made it okay.

**JS** - What were you thinking?

**DB** - You were hoping you made it.

**JS** - Did you smoke?

**DB** - Yes, I had never smoked before, but we had too much idle time I guess. I never did drink. I did take up smoking and when I came home I smoked for a short while and it wasn't for me, so I quit.

**JS** - Did most people smoke at that time?

**DB** - You were given cigarettes in your rations. They furnished you cigarettes. They got you hooked.

**JS** - Did you take a camera?

**DB** - No.

**JS** - So, when you went overseas, you really didn't take many personal things?

**DB** - No.

**JS** - Did you bring souvenirs home?

**DB** - No, I kicked all that out on that plane before we got to Iwo Jima. I did bring a kimono and several things like that.

**JS** - On Guam, there really wasn't anything?

**DB** - That's right.

**JS** - It was what we might call primitive living?

**DB** - Yeah, there was no where to go. Their transportation was by ox cart; two wheeled carts. We didn't have access to a Jeep or anything like that.

**JS** - You were just sort of on base there in Guam?

**DB** - That's right, that was it, period.

**JS** - What clothes were you issued? What did you wear when you worked, for example?

**DB** - I got too much sun, I know that. I got skin cancer. Nothing special.

**JS** - Did you have a uniform?

**DB** - No.

**JS** - Because you were in maintenance, you didn't have to march or anything?

**DB** - No.

**JS** - You mentioned that your brother was in Australia. When did he join?

**DB** - He joined December 7<sup>th</sup> and he was on the farm and he would be going. By Christmas time he was on his way to Australia. He had no basic training, no nothing.

**JS** - Because that was right after the bombing and they needed soldiers?

**DB** - That's right. We got a lot of correspondence from him through V-mail and he is the one that told me about it. He was in supply in the Air Corps and he would issue parts and things they needed out of supply. That is where he told me to be sure and get in the Air Corps because I didn't want to get in the Army and live that kind of life. Somebody had to, but somebody had to be in the Air Corps, too.

**JS** - Is there a particular friend that you made, a particular officer, a particular incident or an event that you tell when you discuss the war with a neighbor?

**DB** - They are kind of like I am, they don't say very much about it.

**JS** - Why do you think that is because I have heard that before?

**DB** - I don't know why it is. A lot of people might think you were bragging. I hear guys, particularly guys that were in Viet Nam. That is fine and dandy, they were really proud of their service and they like to talk about it; seems like World War Two guys just don't care much about talking about it. I don't know why.

**JS** - Did you have friends that you kept in contact with?

**DB** - We had friends, but it was sixty years ago and you lose contact. Most of them are gone.

**JS** - As you moved around were there other young men from this area of Kansas that you would encounter?

**DB** - No. See, I was born at Haviland and my folks moved to a farm out by Cullison. I went to high school at Cullison. Of course, I didn't have any money. I got a chance to try out for a basketball team at college and I made it.

**JS** - What college was that?

**DB** - It was Southwestern in Winfield.

**JS** - I think your sports ability has done well for you.

**DB** - That's right. It has opened the door. I just went to Southwestern one year and here is this war looking you in the face. As I told you, they were starting this basketball team in Wichita. They got my name and you had to try out in a gym in Wichita and if you could make the team you had a job at Stearman.

**JS** - When you went to college, what were you going to study in college or did you know?

**DB** - Nothing in particular other than just play basketball. That's how I got to college.

**JS** - That would have been fairly unusual to go to college, right?

**DB** - It was then. It was pretty much a big item and I got a free ride to school because I made the basketball team. It was kind of tough to quit after a year, but there were several of us fellows that got a chance to get us a job. The war was booming and England was being bombed everyday. The handwriting was kind of on the wall.

**JS** - After the war started and England was being bombed, what did people think about the United States entering the war before the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Did they just think it was probably going to happen?

**DB** - I presume that. You just kind of took things as a matter of fact and went along with it.

**JS** - In '46 you got out. You came home and then what?

**DB** - I had to find a job. My wife and I lived in Pratt and I got a job with a motor company there. I could have had a job at Boeing, but I didn't want to go back. I

can't really tell you why. I guess it was because I was raised on the farm and I wasn't too interested in going back to Wichita. I knew they were laying off people just like flies. Like they had hired when the war started, they were laying them off after the war.

**JS** - How did you eventually get out here?

**DB** - I had an aunt that owned a farm here southwest of town. She knew that I liked farming so she gave me a break and she would rent me the farm. I didn't have anything, then.

**JS** - What year would that have been?

**DB** - 1954.

**JS** - You came out when it was pretty dry out here.

**DB** - You bet it was dry. You know about it?

**JS** - I was raised at Ingalls. I was born in '40, but I was growing up when it was dry and the dirt blew and no crops were raised.

**DB** - That is how I got the break and went to farming the five quarters here southwest of town. I dry landed for four or five years and suitcased back and forth. At that time irrigation was just starting and she said she would put down a new irrigation well if I wanted it.

**JS** - Looking back at your experience in the Air Corps, how do you think that experience changed you and what do you think about it?

**DB** - You think about how lucky you were. I hear guys talking about being in the Army and really having it tough. I know they did. I didn't have any of that. You don't forget that.

**JS** - Is there anything else that you think might be important? Students might be reading this in the future, is there something that you think they should know about the war experience?

**DB** - I don't think the military experience hurts anybody. You learn a lot of things that you don't pick up in normal life. You grow up there.

**JS** - The training that you used in the service was what you had at Boeing. That was more than sufficient?

**DB** - Oh yes. I didn't have to go to school because I had the experience at Boeing. Therefore, you could skip the training and go right to the actual job.

**JS** - At Boeing you taught some spot welding? Did you have people under you?

**DB** - Sure, we had crew chiefs, assistant foremen, and foremen. I got there early enough that I worked up. The pay wasn't much different. It was a title.

**JS** - You said there was a group from Boeing that was drafted. Did some of those go with you?

**DB** - Yes, right on through Nebraska and right on overseas together. I don't know about being discharged. I don't know how they determined that. I have no idea how they made the selection. A whole bunch of us fellows went right on through there.

**JS** - You were discharged in '46 and by '48 or '49 we were involved in Korea. That war was in '51 and '52. Any thoughts of joining?

**DB** - No, I didn't join the reserves when I got out. I guess I thought I had had enough.

**Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)**

**Interviewee: Donald Bryant (DB)**

**Tape 1 of 1**

**END**