

INTERVIEW

Ira Strawn

YEAR

2006

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Ira Strawn

DATE: March 7, 2006

PLACE: Cimarron, Kansas

INTERVIEWER: Joyce Suellentrop

PROJECT SERIES: Veterans Oral History Project for Gray County

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Ira Strawn enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1944 after having worked in a Baltimore, Maryland shipyard. He was nearly twenty-five years old, several years older than his training mates. He was chosen to be in a pool of airmen training to replace those who were killed or injured in war. His group was shipped from base to base in the United States and he was trained as a pilot. He was never sent overseas because the war ended when the bomb was dropped in Japan in August of 1947. He was discharged and sent home from a base in Albany, Georgia.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Entering the service and basic training and life as a part of a pool of airmen who were training to replace other airmen. His experience in many different parts on the United States and his acquaintance with other men from over the country were discussed.

COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:

SOUND RECORDINGS: 60 minute tape

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 1 hour

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: none

TRANSCRIPT: 12 pages

ORAL HISTORY
Strawn, Ira
Interview Date: March 7, 2006

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Ira Strawn(IS)

Tape 1 of 1

Side A

JS - When World War Two started in Europe in 1939 or when Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941, do you remember where you were?

IS - Yes, it was on a Sunday and on December 7th, wasn't it? I was in Baltimore, Maryland, working in a shipyard. I remember going to work on Monday and they were repairing ships. There were crews on these ships and I remember talking to one of the crew and saying, "What's the matter with those people?" We thought the Japanese made toys and firecrackers and stuff like that. He said that their freight ships even had gun mountings built on there for artillery and large guns. He said they were well prepared. They had been at war in China at that time. We had fair warning.

JS - Are you originally from this area?

IS - Oh yes, I lived right over there.

JS - How did you get to Baltimore, Maryland?

IS - I had a business failure and I was offered a job in a grocery store in Washington, D.C. It paid good money, \$201 a week.

JS - How old were you then?

IS - I was possibly twenty or twenty-one and I worked there for eighteen months. I had some friends that were in Baltimore which is seventy or eighty miles east of there on the coast. I went over and got an interview at the Baltimore Shipyards.

JS - By this time the war in Europe had already started?

IS - Yes, that was quite a deal. They were repairing old ships that had been put up in mothballs. There were also ships brought in there that had been torpedoed and run aground. They would hug the coast and the Germans were real good at shooting freighters. When they saw they were being attacked they would turn and try to ground them so it wouldn't go in deep water. They would salvage them later. That was what kind of work I did.

JS - Were you a welder or what did you do?

IS - I was what you call an outside machinist. In other words, I took parts off and replaced valves. It was a much better job. I was making fifty dollars a week.

JS - It was. Did they train you? How did you know what to do?

IS - I had done farm work and repaired equipment. I had some experience, not as much as I should have had, but I knew a wrench and how to repair engines. We did a lot of that, I was in the lower area handyman kind of deal. I worked there until September of '42. I came home and in February of '43 I enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

JS - Why did you choose the Army Air Corps?

IS - I was always impressed with flying and I was young. I also had seen some training between September and February. There were a lot of training exercises in Dodge City and Garden City.

JS - At the air bases?

IS - I'd see them everyday and I thought that was what I wanted to do, be in the Air Corps instead of the infantry. My brother had enlisted in the Navy. First I went down to Kansas City and thought I wanted into the Marines and I talked to the Marine recruiter and something just told me I didn't want there. I didn't want in the Army and I didn't especially care for the Navy so I chose the Air Corps.

JS - Were there other young men in the area enlisting and going at the same time?

IS - Not at the same time; this was in '43. Most of them had already been drafted and I was one of the later ones. I tried to get into the cadet program, but I was one of the older ones and had been out of school quite a ways and I didn't quite pass the exam. If you want to fly you can go into what they call the small airplanes. You could enlist and you could take your training at Dodge City. At that time the Army and the Air Corps were one. They had those people that trained for artillery liaison work which is darned dangerous, I found out later. I could start right here in Dodge City and some of my friends were doing the same thing.

JS - You enlisted in Kansas City, but you came back here?

IS - Yeah, they said it would be later. They would call you, they said. In the meantime, I came back and I was helping my dad and trying to straighten up some of my business that I had left here and went broke. I waited on a call. First thing I knew they closed the training program here in Dodge City. I even wrote them a letter and asked them when they were going to call me. I regretted that.

Anyway, it was in September of '43 and they finally called me. They wrote me a letter and said I could try to get in the program by going through the airbase in Dodge City. I went over there and took the tests and passed except for my physical. This one test you stepped up and down on one foot till it brought your heart rate up, then you sat down for one minute and then they took your blood pressure and your heartbeat was still, what they called "con tic". They didn't take me. They asked me to come back later on and maybe I could pass that so I went back over there and I think the doctor just didn't want to fool with me. In September of '43 I was called and went to Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis for basic training. They give you physical tests every now and then. At that time the war was in full swing and they were losing aircraft. My friend was a bombardier and he had enlisted. He was overseas at this time. If you make twenty-five missions they give you a furlough home. The percentage of losses was eighty some percent. Either they were taken prisoner or dead. He was one of the fifteen percent that finally made it. I had a neighbor over there, Dale Kendall. He was in the Air Corps. First crack out of the box they got shot down. He didn't remember anything, only floating down in a parachute.

JS - When you went to basic training, it was in St. Louis?

IS - Yes, in Jefferson Barracks there. It was just basic, marching mostly and inspections.

JS - Was it hard to take orders?

IS - I didn't notice anything like that.

JS - How long was that basic training?

IS - I think it was three months.

JS - Did you receive any special training?

IS - No, it was just basics. After that they assigned you. I was assigned to airplane mechanics in Lincoln, Nebraska.

JS - Do you think it was because of what you had done before that they knew you had those skills?

IS - That was on your record. You didn't have any choice. You just did what they told you. When I got up there I was going to school. You never know what the military is thinking. With all the losses, they decided on a pool of trainees.

JS - Was there an air base at Lincoln?

IS - Yeah.

JS - That's where you were in training?

IS - It was a school.

JS - You would have known about the loss of pilots? If this is too unpleasant we don't have to talk about it.

IS - The losses were so great that they had to have replacements. They ran me through the physical tests again. They didn't say, but the idea was that they needed gunners to go in bombers. They didn't need mechanics as much as they needed gunners so that is what happened. They processed people to find out if they would want to be a gunner on aircraft. When it came my turn to see the colonel, it was a medic and he asked me if I would be interested in the cadet program. I told him I had tried, but I had failed on account of my tests. He said to go take the test and he would sign it. I took the test and you went before a board and if they passed you, they sent you to a center in Biloxi, Mississippi. Have you heard of Biloxi, Mississippi?

JS - Yes, in the Deep South.

IS - That was in January of '44.

JS - Do you remember what kind of questions they asked you?

IS - They asked if I had any relatives in the service and I told them of my brother. They asked where he was and I told them in San Juan, Puerto Rico in the Navy. They were officers and I remember one who had to be from New York or New Jersey, I could tell.

JS - You could tell by his accent?

IS - I told him I didn't understand the question and he asked if I had any reservations about the military, like conscientious objection. I remember that.

JS - Was it a long interview?

IS - I think it was about five or ten minutes. I remember as I left, they opened up the door and the officer said, "That's the best one we've had."

JS - You must have impressed them with your answers. Did you go on then to Biloxi?

IS - Yes, this has been a long deal. I told you it was a pool.

JS - This would have been in '44?

IS - I came home for Christmas and went back there so it must have been in '44.

JS - You had been trying for a year to get into the cadets?

IS - Most of a year, yes, and we went down there in zero temperature. That place was chock full of people that had to qualify for pilot, bombardier or navigator training. Some of the college kids, whiz kids, qualified for two things. I only qualified for pilot training. I was older than most of them. I was twenty-four. They put us in tents and down there that wasn't very good. It was not very pleasant to get under a wet blanket to sleep.

JS - When you said it was zero weather, what did you mean by that?

IS - When we left Nebraska.

JS - It was zero degrees and you got down there and it was hot and muggy?

IS - Muggy, mostly, like springtime here.

JS - Because there were so many, they had erected tents?

IS - Yes, they called it tent city. They didn't know what to do with us. It was just stalled. Even they had taken people out of the army that they had tested and qualified for flight training. They had taken them out of the army and I will tell about it later. We were there for maybe two or three months taking tests. They didn't have a computer, but they figure out how you did on your tests and then they assigned you there. We had to go out in the field. That means walk out several miles in formation. We stayed all night and had to sleep in pup tents. You staked it out and crawled in there in your half.

JS - They kept you busy?

IS - You didn't have time to sit around and complain and think how bad it was. There came a storm in there and the roads were real muddy so we got to ride back to base and we were happy to get back there. We were supposed to get out of there because there were other people coming and they didn't know what to do with us. This was for the pool that they were building because what if they had losses like they were having in Japan? They sent us out to these training bases in Alice, Texas. Our job was to wash the windshields and clean out the cockpits, gas the engines, check the oil and keep busy. You had to stand-by inspection. You were a cadet then and you had to see that your shirt was buttoned etc.

JS - Did you have to take care of your own clothes?

IS - That's one thing we didn't have to do unless something happened that you had to have it. Then you could go to the latrine and wash whatever you had to, which was not very much.

JS - Did you have a special uniform as a cadet?

IS - No, you had different insignias. You had little wings on you and a nameplate.

JS - You had work clothes that you worked in?

IS - Fatigues, yeah.

JS - Then you had a dress uniform?

IS - Yeah, but you stood inspection just every so often.

JS - What if you didn't pass inspection?

IS - You wished you had. You got five demerits a week. They would come through and check your bed and see if a quarter would bounce on your bed.

JS - Is that really true, did they do that?

IS - I'm sure they did, but not everyday. I never saw them; they'd always do it when you weren't there. They would look in your foot locker. Your sox had to be folded just so, your toothpaste just so, and your extra clothing would be hanging up there all buttoned. Your shoes would be shined. You had two pairs of shoes.

JS - Did they show you how to fold things?

IS - Oh yeah.

JS - That's part of your basic training?

IS - Yes.

JS - Did you ever think that maybe that was silly or anything?

IS - Yeah, but they did that. You knew what you were supposed to do. There was a reason for everything you did.

JS - Was it to follow orders and to do what they told you to do without question?

IS - It was like officers' training; when you got through you'd be an officer.

JS - When you were in Alice, Texas, you were in the cadet program and you were maintaining the planes?

IS - Maybe I had better stop right there. You had been accepted as a cadet, but you weren't a cadet yet.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

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Side B

IS - Our group was down in Alice, Texas, and we were marching and taking physical education. One day we were all called down to the auditorium and something big was coming up. We got down there and I remember sitting and talking to my buddy. Everything is alphabetical starting with A and going to Z. I was an "S" and didn't think about it. The colonel told us what was going to happen. He said, "When I call your name, I want you to fall out on the street, immediately." He started off calling names. I was visiting and not paying attention and my buddy said, "Hey, that's your name." The colonel says, "Ira Strawn." I jumped up and said, "Here, sir," and he said, "Why didn't you answer?" Then I got out there in the street. After awhile they formed us up and marched us back to our barracks. He said, "You go in there and pack your barracks bag and get back here, immediately, as soon as you can get out here." That's what we did, maybe fifty, sixty or seventy of us, I don't remember. The thing of it was they had such a big pool of trainees that they didn't know what to do with them. If you had enlisted in the Army Air Corps, you were still in the Air Corps. If you had been in the regular Army, and you had applied for air training, they cancelled that. You ought to have heard the moaning and groaning. I can understand because of what was going to happen. We were getting ready to go into Europe. They had enough of air trainees, more than needed so they pulled all the Army back into the service.

JS - When you say into Europe, do you mean D-day?

IS - Nobody knew what they were going to do. I had a friend named Greenfield I was pretty close to and he was with the artillery. I got a letter from him and he said he was getting ready to go overseas. We got our barracks bags fixed. They took us and marched us down the street to the railway tracks and put us on a railway car and we were gone in an hour or two.

JS - Where did you go?

IS - Indianapolis, to Butler University. That was where they were going to stack us out for awhile. They found a place for that. That was taking up some of the pressures. It was sometime in March when I went into Indianapolis, Indiana, to a college there. I took classes there and I was there until August.

JS - What kind of classes did you take?

IS - We took physics. We took weather.

JS - These were classes that would help you in your training?

IS - Yeah, we had classes at the college for half a day and the other half of the day we did physical work. You had your homework to do for class. We were there, I'd say, from March until August. We had what they call a "latrine rumor."

JS - What is that?

IS - It is a rumor started in the latrine. The latrine rumor was that they were closing the school down. They were sending us everywhere. One of the orders was that if you had a wife there, and some of the fellows had wives who followed them around, send them home. Don't you dare let them follow you, now. I didn't bother me, but it did some of my friends. They didn't tell you where they were going. They would put us on a train and we would be headed west. Finally the rumor came around that we were going, you'll never guess.

JS - I would guess California.

IS - Garden City, Kansas. That was something. When we got out there, some of the guys asked me what kind of country it was. I said, "It's a dry country. We have all been looking for it to rain." When they got us into Garden City, they put us in some open trucks, darnedest rain storm we ever had. They took us out to Garden City Airbase and we got out and into formation there. We knew darned well those officers were mad about something. Come to find out some of the wives had beat them there. How they knew, I don't know.

JS - Must have been another kind of rumor.

IS - Consequently we had to pay. We were closed down and you couldn't get off the base and I was only thirty-five miles from home. We had the same things we had down in Alice, Texas, washing windshields, checking oil and air cleaners and all that. That was a basic training site out there. Finally, we had a guy by the name of Pedder. He was a little guy and he had an older brother that was in the Air Corps. He had been overseas and I guess he was a colonel. He was assigned this training area. One day an AT6 flew in there; we didn't think we were ever going to get out of there. I think I got home twice.

JS - They couldn't come to visit you, either?

IS - They were busy and I don't think they cared to go with the military. There's always a lot of uneasiness. Anyway, he flew in there and in a few weeks we

were sent down to the cadet center. I know that the cards were shuffled because I know of others that never did get down there.

JS - Where was the cadet center?

IS - At San Antonio, Texas, and that's where we took some more training. We had classes and had to learn the radio code, a lot of physical education and flight training and algebra. That I never did like and darned near failed it in high school. I think my old teacher, Mary Reese was her name, when she was putting the grades down she was looking out the window. I don't know how many months I was down there. There was no opening and I think it was kind of like the lottery. Maybe it was every six weeks, another class went out.

JS - You mean when they went out they went overseas?

IS - The way it started, yes. Really you were a cadet, now. You got paid before that. You got paid as soon as you were cleared down there at Biloxi, Mississippi. Seventy-five bucks, that was better than a private got. I got out of there; I can't think of the name of the place and went to primary training on PT17 single engine, 420 horse power. I was there three months. They had upper class and lower class. From there I went down to Mission, Texas and flew an AT6, 640 horse power. That was quite a step. I was there twelve weeks, I think it was. From there I was sent to (?) for basic and then I went into multiengine school down here at Enid, Oklahoma. This was advanced and they had two classes there, upper class and lower class. Upper class you got your commission and were sent over seas, where you had some practice runs. I had just started there and had one hour and twenty minutes in the B25 dual.. I remember coming in to the news that the war was over.

JS - Did you know immediately what that meant for you?

IS - Pretty much so. I think they kind of threw the switch on the training program right now. There was some grumbling going on with the cadets. We wanted to go home. They sent us home for two weeks. I came home for two weeks and then they called us back. They gave us a choice of signing up till June in '47. That would be two more years and I didn't want to do that. They closed this base and loaded us up in those B25s. I don't know how many were in there. Some of the training officers flew the airplanes. They took us down to Georgia. Albany, I believe it was down there. When we got down there they called us' all up at the auditorium again and gave us a choice. They were going to keep that base open. I decided that I wanted to come home. They were old airplanes and I had all I wanted. So that's it.

JS - You were just discharged and you came home?

IS - Yes.

JS - How do you think that experience changed you and what did you learn; any reflections on that experience? You moved around a lot. It seems like it must have been frustrating because you never got to where you wanted to be.

IS - Well, you were in the army.

JS - That is a good answer.

IS - I got along all right. You got five demerits a week; that means they inspected your bed, they inspected your clothing, inspected your floors and everything. Once a week they had another inspection called a stand-by. They would inspect you while you were in formation like if you goofed up like today's uniform was so-and-so and you showed up with a coat on or something like that you got a demerit for it.

JS - So, if you got five demerits what happened to you?

IS - When the end of the week came, if you had five, instead of getting to go to town you had to go walk your tour. You had to dress up, check out a rifle and walk a certain area at attention and there was somebody watching you all the time and they would give you another demerit if you didn't.

JS - Did you ever have to do that?

IS - Never.

JS - Excellent. What do you think that you learned? You were a little bit older when you went in? A lot of people say discipline. Are there other things that you learned? You say you got along with people well?

IS - I never had any problems. There were some problems and frustrations. Some people just don't cater to other people, you know. There were six of us in a room and sometimes I remember that there was almost a fight.

JS - What was it like meeting people from other parts of the United States?

IS - Well, you make friends. Some you just didn't care about.

JS - Did you keep up with any of those friends once you were out?

IS - There was one that I kept up with. He passed away several years ago. His name was Sweet. He was right behind me and he lived in New York. We corresponded and he came out to see me one time. He retired and moved to Florida and I guess he had a heart attack.

JS - When you were at all those bases and had leisure time, did you play cards or go into town?

IS - You got off one day a week providing you didn't have tours. You had to be back by 9 o'clock. That is through the gate, not coming in the gate, but through the gate.

JS - You would go into town and eat or something like that?

IS - You had USO and you could go there. Most likely you would go to a restaurant and have a different type of food. Going through a mess line is not very appetizing. You went to a movie, maybe.

JS - Did you or most of the young men smoke?

IS - Yes, I was about twenty-five and I didn't smoke and didn't drink very much. When I got in the service, I did.

JS - Looking back, what do you think about the experience?

IS - It's hard to say. I am proud I served my country, but I know that there were others that served differently.

JS - When you enlisted or when other young men in the community enlisted was the word "patriotism" used or did you just know that you felt that way?

IS - My family has been here a long time.

JS - Did your father serve in the military or your grandfather? I know you said your brother did.

IS - There hadn't been anybody in my dad's or my mother's family that served except the Civil War. Both of them had fathers in the Civil War.

JS - You were born in 1918. As you were growing up, did you know anyone who had fought in World War One?

IS - I can't think of anybody. Well, there was a barber, Ferguson, that was in World War One and there was a Rowton.

JS - In this community did you know people who were conscientious objectors, Mennonites?

IS - I don't remember many. Anyway, I don't know them by name.

JS - Where were you when the war in Europe ended? That would have been May, 1945. Do you remember hearing about that?

IS - I must have been down in Mission, Texas.

JS - Was there talk that anyone in, might be going to the Pacific after that, or did you even talk about that?

IS - We knew that was what we'd be concentrating on. However, they did keep some soldiers in Europe for awhile to kind of keep things down and look for some of the deserters.

JS - When the bomb was dropped what did people think about that?

IS - I know it made a difference in the enemy. They dropped another one and that really got their attention.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

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