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INTERVIEWEE(S): Laurence Wood (LW)

DATE INTERVIEWED: Thursday, February 28, 2013

WHERE INTERVIEWED: Hotel Floyd, Floyd, Virginia

INTERVIEWERS: Justin Rizen (JR), Kathleen Ingoldsby (KI), Melinda Wagner (MW)

TRANSCRIBERS: Floyd County High School students, Radford University mentors

DATA CHECKER: Kathleen Ingoldsby

AUDIO TOTAL LENGTH: 59:48

[selected excerpts from 17 page transcript]

FILE/TRACK: 1042

LW: I'm Laurence Wood. My ancestors on my father's side came from Floyd. That didn't necessarily bring me back here, but I've enjoyed the connections and meeting what relatives that was left. I've been here since, in the early '40s. I'll take you back to about 1940 when Adolf Hitler was trying to rule the world, and the experiences that I can remember from the time that we had. I believe the Prime Minister of England was Neville Chamberlain, and he was kind of a "yes man." Each time he would go talk to Adolf Hitler, whoever he was talking to at that time, and for some reason or another, maybe he resigned, and Winston Churchill took over. So, Winston Churchill and our President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, were good buddies. They met a lot, and most of meetings were on a boat somewhere, and I always figure, I don't remember if there was another one but I can't tell you who he was. Seems like it was three of them. But anyway, Winston Churchill was a big influence, and he steered England back to civilization after the war was over.

But getting back to us somewhere in the latter part of 1940, well, not the latter part, but a few months into it. The drafts started of all male citizens of America, and the ages were from eighteen to, I believe it was, thirty-six, and you registered with your local draft board that were composed of three members and some clerks and what not. So, they started the draft, and they had numbers, so if your number came up you were called. Now if you were disabled mentally or physically, you were put in what they called the 4-F, and if you were physically able you were in 1-A. So, the 1-A's were called. Now this is getting off track a little bit, but you know obesity is a bad subject now, but back then it was very seldom you ever saw anybody that was over 200

pounds. And I can remember, I came to Floyd from Stuart and there was a friend down there named Honey Cockram that weighed about 300 pounds. So, each time the draft board would need, couldn't get the full quota, they would send Honey down to Roanoke for examination. Finally, a doctor over there told him, he said, "Son, if you want to get in the Army, you're going to need to lose weight." He said, "You're crazy if you think I'm going to quit eating to get into the military." [laughter]

LW: So, anyway, I went along and I got -- you can get deferments, a six-month deferment if your job was considered essential. So, the draft board considered mine as essential. Then farmers: if a farmer had several sons, they always tried to leave one at home. They didn't always do that.

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So, I got two deferments. I was afraid to ask for anymore, and I went, I was --

You got a two-week delay from the time that you were inducted until you had to report for duty. And for our area, in military classification, we was Maryland and Virginia and possibly another state that you were inducted into service at Camp Lee down in Petersburg. So, I went into service. I stayed in the States. When I went in, I had volunteered my services to what is called the Graves Registrations Service, which was the mortuary section of the Army. I got a letter back from, I believe it was from a Baltimore Office's Colonel, and he thanked me and he said that they weren't needing more at the present time. I took the letter with me. He said, by all means take this to your induction center, which I did, and the classification officer there said, "Well, we are loaded right now. We don't need you and you might have to stay here for a year before you'd be called as an embalmer or as a funeral director." I said that, that would suit me fine because I lived in Virginia. But, anyway, there was a young officer from the Air Force sitting over in the corner. I went to a military prep school. I knew a little military etiquette, not a whole lot, enough to get by. And I went over and said, "Excuse me sir, I know you're here. Are you asking for volunteers for the Air Force?" and he said, "Yes." I said, "How about taking me?" He said, "How old are you?" I told him, he said, "Well, you're a little bit old. I'm looking for eighteen-year-olds --

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LW: -- to get pilot training." And I said, "Well, everybody doesn't become a pilot, do they?" and he said no. Well, if you have bombardiers, and if you wash out, you got mechanics, and he said, "What are you getting at?" I told him my qualifications, I said, "I do not want to get into the medical corps, because all I think about is being stationed in a hospital somewhere." He said "Well, I'll put you down." So, in two weeks I was put on a troop train that looked like a mile

long, and we went to Florida, took us about two, two and a half days. They would run you around in circles it looked like, and some of the fellas that went in along with me, who went into the infantry, they were on the same train. I knew the coaches they got on. So, we got way down in South Carolina somewhere, and they broke the train up, and the cars went on one way and we went on to Florida and took basic train on Miami Beach. We lived in hotels.

We were supposed to be there 90 days, but some way or another the papers got mixed up, so the morning we were supposed to ship out, there was only about a dozen of us that they had our papers filed up, and they kept us there, and we stayed another ninety days. And from there, we went to Texas. We went through training; we were going to Gunnery School. I had claustrophobia. They put you in a tank, decompressed it, and you were supposed to get up about forty/fifty thousand feet, and you went so far and then you'd put your mask on and everything, and I told them, "I'm not going in there!" So, the guy in charge says, "Go and see the flight officer," and I said, "I don't care who I see, I'm not going!"

So, they put me -- there were several of us that happened to---and they put us on another ship, and we wound up down in North Carolina after a two or three-week delay in route. And we were supposed to be taking overseas training, which was a fluke as far as I was concerned. We learned how to take a gun apart and put it back together, and that was it! So we went from there to New Orleans, and we rode a troop train again for three or four days. We went here, and we went there. There wasn't a direct route on any of them. We got to New Orleans, they bunked us down in a Southern Railroad warehouse right on the edge of the canal where the boats came in. We stayed there for about two weeks, and this boat pulled in late one afternoon and put us on it, and I looked at the boat, and I said "I'm dreaming something! I've seen this in my dream or somewhere!" So, about dark we went down to the Mississippi River down to the Gulf where it flows into the ocean, and we sat there until the following night. A convoy came along and we got in with them and went to Cuba. [looks to interviewer] What is the place? I can't think of the name now. Where they had these prisoners?

JR: Guantanamo?

LW: Guantanamo Bay. Yes. So, we went there, we dropped from the convoy, we spent the night -- we didn't spend the night, we stayed there all day long until dark, then we got on with the convoy, which was going part of the way to Panama. And when we left them, man they opened that thing wide open. [laughs] So, what I started to tell you about thinking about how I dreamed about the boat. The Merchant Marines were operating the boat, so down in the dining hall, the mess hall as we called it, these Merchant Marines would have a card game about every night. We could go watch them but we couldn't get involved in it. So, I got to know one of them fairly well talking to him and I said, "Where'd this boat come from?" and he said it was a boat that ran from Miami to Key West and Key West to Cuba, and just made that circle. I said

that's where I've seen it. When I got married, my wife and I, we had no plans about where we were going, except we was going to Florida. So, we got to Florida and we viewed this place and that place and some beautiful spots down there. So, we got to Miami.

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LW: Oh, where was the place that they used to check cars that run up and down the beach so fast? Was it Daytona?

JR: Yes, I think so.

LW: I believe it was. So, I heard and read about that, and so we went down on the beach and drove back and forth several times. Got salt water all over the car. We pulled back up into town, got gas, and this attendant said, "Mister, you been out on the beach?" And I said, "Sure have!" and he said, "You'd better let me put this on the rack and wash your car off underneath. If you don't, it's going to rust." So, he did that for me, and I knew better the next time. But anyway, we drove on to Miami, spent the night, a day or two, and decided we'd go to Key West. So, we drove down to Key West. What was the writer that was there that wrote a book?

JR: Wrote a book? What books?

LW: You might know. [looks to Kathleen Ingoldsby] You know Kathleen?

KI: Hemingway?

LW: Yes, I believe it was Hemingway. He was there at that time. We didn't see him, but everybody was talking about him. So then, while we were there, we stayed at a hotel and we found out about this going to Cuba. It isn't but ninety miles across there. So, we went down and found out there was a boat going the next morning, and so we went to Cuba. And, it was something. There was a restaurant over there, I believe the name of it was Sloppy Joe's, and I'd heard and read about it, but I was very disappointed in it. It wasn't what it was cracked up to be.

[laughter]

KI: What year was that?

LW: It was in the 1940s. So, this was all before I went in service. And, this guide, director of the tour, they had limousines. There was a whole bunch of people; they'd carry you around and we went all over Cuba.

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So, this was the boat that I thought I had dreamt about. It was the boat that we went to Cuba on.

So, on the way to Panama, we could sleep out on the deck, which was much better than down in

the cabins and what not, and I slept out there every night. I guess everybody in the troop did. We got to Panama; we were replacements, so we went into the classification and they sent about 30 of us out to an airfield, which was out in the jungles. And Panama is about 50 miles wide where the canal is. The canal, they've got locks on each side which lifts the ships up to a lake. Then you're on the lake, which it takes about eight hours to go through. You get on the lake, then you go for a good ways, until you get to the docks to get down. Either, if you're coming to the Atlantic, or going to the Pacific, you use the same route. I'm not getting off course now, but I'm just trying to explain this part to you.

So, out in the jungle, everything was more, I don't know whether you'd say relaxed, but you did not have to pay any attention to any military etiquette. You didn't have to salute everybody unless it was a commanding officer; and the pilots, you knew the pilots mostly by their given names if you've been with them a while. Our outfit was helping train the pilots who were getting ready to go to combat, and they were anywhere from eighteen to twenty, twenty-five years old. They were all young fellows, and they were all hot-rodders. They loved to get up and do acrobatics and what-not. [laughs] I hadn't been to any military school. The time or two that I was supposed to have gone, down in Texas, as I told you a while ago, that was to be a gunnery school. And the tale was then, in battle, that a tail gunner or a turret gunner, your life expectancy in battle was just a few moments unless they got the enemy first.

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LW: Well, I didn't get to any other school in the States, and I became a mechanic. I just picked it up from watching the guys do the work, and I eventually became a crew chief. We'd have about three men on our crew, and we did everything that an airplane had to have done to it [laughs] to keep it in operation. We had to keep a record of everything that was done to the plane. We had to change the tires; we had to check it every day, after every flight, keep a record of anything that was done. We had certain maintenance, things that we had to do daily, other than checking all the parts, and it was very thorough. [pauses] I never heard of anybody getting -- not disqualified [clears throat] or being penalized for anything they did not do. Everybody had the pilot's mind and welfare in the back of their mind, and you didn't goof off on anything. We'd have twenty-five-hour inspections, we had a [clears throat] fifty hours going up to 100, and was about 300 hours, I believe, you had to take and pull your plane out of service and check it.

But one time I almost got in trouble. I had my plane pulled out for a 300-hour inspection, and they sent some planes down from the states. These were all prop engines; everything's jet now, but [clears throat] we had the engines, were sixteen-cylinder Pratt and Whitney engines, we'd call them, in-line like a car and a lot [clears throat] excuse me, a lot of planes had what you called a radial engine and you know they stacked around in a circle the cylinders; so you guys that are

mechanically inclined, you'd all would understand that better than I would. But anyway, the state had sent down some planes that had a booster, a jet booster on them, that was used in take off and wouldn't be used in landing, but it would've been used if they got in a dogfight or whatnot. So, we had to send a bunch of mechanics over to put them together; so it came down stripped, and my plane was out, and we had a NCO officer who was a line officer. He was like the manager of everything in the flight, and then we had the engineering officer; so when my plane was out, he came around. He said, "How are you doin'?" I said, "I'm doing as well as I can by myself." He said, "Will your plane be ready for inspection tomorrow?" I said, "No, it won't be ready for two or three days." He says, "Why?" and I said, "I don't have any help, I can't do it all by myself." And he said, "it better be ready tomorrow!" And I said, "Well, you know what you can do with the plane if you think I'm going to have it ready tomorrow," and then, [chuckles] he asked me, and I told him.

So, the following week the main engineering officer came around to me, and he said, "Wood, what happened to you and Tyson?" and I told him; and he said, "Well," he said, "don't ever cross him again." He said, "If he tells you to do something, and you don't think you can do it," he says, "you come to me, and then we'll get him." He said he wanted to have you court martialed for what you said to him. [chuckles] But the engineering officer went to my rescue. So, Tyson and I had a talk or time or two over a beer, and we got things straightened out. [3:58 - 5:18]

But the Army was the largest employer in Panama. They used as much of the Panamanian labor force as they could. And all of the lawn work was kept up by the natives, and they didn't use a lawn mower, they used a machete. You know what a machete is? The long blade about that long with a handle on it, and they could keep those things, I believe they could cut your head off with one lick. Sharp as a razor. They could just squat down on their haunches and mow that stuff along and get right up against the building. It wasn't much for them to do; they kept it up.

And, they had the K.P., kitchen police; and when you're in the states, everybody had each outfit had to have K.P. duty every once in a while. And you went in, you'd help keep the kitchen clean. And you didn't peel potatoes, you put them in a gadget. It had, looked like heavy sandpaper around the walls of it, it was run by electricity and water, and you could put a potato in there and have them peeled in just a few minutes. And you could get them down to [chuckles] like Tater Tots now [chuckles] if you left it running too long. But they had what you called San Blas Indians. It was a little island; it was off of the coast of Panama and the San Blas Indians did all the K.P., and they loved to play basketball. And each squadron had their own mess halls, and these San Blas Indians did all the K.P., and when they weren't on the K.P. duty they were playing basketball, morning to dark. [Kuna (Cuna) Indians of Panama; a fascinating tribal society.]