

Transcription: Jack Oliver

Today is Thursday, March 18th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'm interviewing Colonel Jack Oliver. This interview is being done in person at Colonel Oliver's home in, this is Belton I guess...

Jack Oliver: Yes.

In Belton, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for letting me interview you today. It's an honor for me and for our program to be able to talk to you. The first question we pretty much always start off with is just ask you to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

Jack Oliver: All right, thank you very much. I was born here on this farm on 21st of September, 1924. On this farm, we had two old uncles. My great grandfather was killed in the Civil War, and his two brothers brought my grandmother and the family over here from Mississippi. And just treated them just like they were their own family. And so that's how one of the uncles gave my dad 150 acres here that he bought for him, and built him a home. It's just something else, nearly unheard of in today's world. So then my 40 acres that we live on, on the north side of the road on the Temple side, we bought from, or he bought from another uncle, and then we of course, my dad and mother bought it from them and then we bought it from my dad and mother and built our home here.

How many siblings did you have?

Jack Oliver: Three. I had one sister a year older, and four, I'm sorry, there were four of us in the family, and I had two brothers. One brother was three years younger and he was in the Navy in World War II, and my youngest brother was born the year I went to A&M, and that was 1942, well the year after I went down there.

So you grew up on a farm and I guess throughout the Depression as well.

Jack Oliver: Absolutely, yeah, I was born in 1924, and by the way as a high school senior, I had the first bale of cotton in Bell County, and we still had mules and wagons. How do you like that?

Wow, yeah. So you've definitely seen a lot of change through the years.

Jack Oliver: Oh yeah. We bought a tractor that year because my dad was in the service and he left me here 12, 13, 14 years old on a farm.

Tell us a little bit about your father's service in the military.

Jack Oliver: He was commissioned in World War I, but just commissioned and missed the war. It always teed him off.

Was he in the Army?

Jack Oliver: Army, yeah, he was Infantry, and of course he stayed in the reserve and National Guard, and of course graduated A&M, too, and so anyway, he stayed in National Guard and he was commander of Company I, 143rd Infantry in Bel___, from Bell County, you know. And in 1935, they called him to active duty, promoted him to captain and gave him a CCC camp.

Civilian Conservation Corps.

Jack Oliver: And then after three or four years, well they called him down to Fort Sam and put him in charge of the replacement center where they bring in, Roosevelt started bringing people in before the war.

Yeah, peace time draft.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, in '39, and he was commander of the little field there. I can't think of the name of it right now at Fort Sam Houston. That's where they brought all the guys in from civilian life. And then he stayed in. And oh, he wanted to go overseas so badly. Well, finally I, I'll tell ____, but I beat him back. Then he went over and he was headquarters commandant for the 65th Infantry Division under Walton H. Walker from Belton that he'd gone to high school with, and Walton H. Walker was Patton's right hand man in World War II. So anyway, he went across Europe with Walton H. Walker and Patton.

So your father was a career military man.

Jack Oliver: No, he was a National Guard.

National Guard, OK.

Jack Oliver: The same thing.

He'd been activated. So when he was gone I guess your siblings and your mom had to keep the farm running.

Jack Oliver: We had to continue running the farm, and my brother was just three years younger and just, you know, 8 or 9. He couldn't handle livestock, you know, he just wasn't big enough yet. So dad just went up to the county courthouse, had my age raised to where I'd be 14, then they get their driver's license, and so I could drive and do whatever I had to and run the farm. And then he got a tractor.

And during that time you were in school, too?

Jack Oliver: I went to high school, trying to go to high school.

Where did you go to high school?

Jack Oliver: Belton High School. I was class of 1941.

So tell us what your memories were the day you learned that Pearl Harbor was attacked.

Jack Oliver: Well, that was December the 7th, 1941, and with me, of course, we are a very patriotic family and my dad's in the military, and he was in active duty at that time, and I just, I

wanted to join right then. Of course dad talked me into going down to A&M, and like I say, just as soon as I finished class of '41 Belton, I went down to A&M, and studied there nary a year and a half. And the end of my, of course went straight through, so I nearly had two years in. A&M was very benevolent in those days, and so whenever I went down and volunteered for adjacent ___ and passed three 9's, I could go to pilot, navigator, or bombardier school, well anyway I was ready to go and I signed up for a class. Well they wouldn't let me go to pilot training then, and that was 1942. And they said you got this math and science and all this stuff, you know, pre-engineering at A&M, we want you to be a navigator. I didn't want to be a navigator, I wanted to be a pilot. I already had 40 hours I had taken at Colter Field there at Bryant.

Now A&M at that time was an all-male school.

Jack Oliver: All-male school and more, we had more people there as students from other branches – Marines, Navy -

Not everybody that was in the Corps of Cadets were they, but a lot of them were.

Jack Oliver: But everybody that was in college, regular college like myself, we were all in the Corps.

It was almost like a military school.

Jack Oliver: Absolutely. It wasn't like, it was a military school. But you walked in the door, it was not easy. I never encountered anything in the military that I hadn't already went through, been through at Texas A&M. It just was something else there. It took me a while to understand and thank the Lord for having gone to A&M. So I was very, very glad that happened to me.

So when you got signed up, was your mom and your dad, were they supportive of you going in?

Jack Oliver: Not at first, no, because like I said, I kind of pulled one on my dad. He wanted to enlist me so I could go into advanced ROTC training, Texas A&M as a junior, and here I am a sophomore and I had full intentions of going in the military because I didn't want to miss the war. So the minute that he swore me in and turned his back and went back to Fort Bend in Georgia, I went down and volunteered for aviation cadets. And so he was a little concerned for a little while.

How long was it before you told him or did he find out?

Jack Oliver: Oh, a month to six weeks, just as soon as I went to preflight training and was an aviation cadet, I had no choice, I had to let him know that I'd left A&M. No more bills at A&M for him. So anyway, that's when he told, and my mom was plenty upset, but dad was -

So tell us then where you went and what it was like when you got into training.

Jack Oliver: Like I said, I wanted to go to pilot training, but they said no you can't, this engineering and everything else, science. You're gonna be a navigator. I said well is there any way to get over there quicker where I could still get a commission so my dad wouldn't disown me. And I said well you could be a bombardier. Well, I didn't know what he knew. I said well I'll take the bombardier then. Well what he knew that I didn't know was that the first bombardier navigation school had been formed at San Angelo, Texas, and he had signed me to it.

Well he kept his word that I was going to bombardier and his word to me that I didn't know that I was going – so we went out there and took bombardier navigation training, and got along towards the end and the commandant called us in and they said we have been unable to get the T-7's for your celestial shots.

Tell us a little bit about the T-7's.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, T-7, that's a twin engine trainer that the navigation students trained in. They got their celestial shots, had to put the radon in the thing. And said we couldn't get 'em in on time and we don't have enough T-11's to spare and blah-blah-blah, which was the same airplane but for bombardier training. So anyway we'll give you your commission and your bombardier wings, but to get your navigation wings, you have to go to San Marcos. The ones that are half the class goes __ and instruct, they get to go to Monroe, Louisiana, they have a brand new area there, blah-blah-blah. You know, hot and cold running shower. And those of you that are going overseas and we already knew we were going the ones that were, said you're going to go to San Marcos and be in tar paper shacks with a latrine a mile away. You know what I'm talking about. But it was OK. We went there and six weeks later we got all our shots in, bam, and assigned me to Salt Lake City to be with the 4 officers. B-24 has 10 crewmen, 4 officers, and 6 enlisted men. And so the 4 officers were sent to Salt Lake City for a month just to get acquainted with each other and work together, and the end of the month we went to Almagordo, New Mexico, and our enlisted men had all been sent down there with a senior engineer, aircraft engineer and a radio operator. Both of them were pretty old. We called them "pop." 27.

That was old for you guys.

Jack Oliver: Old-timers. We were all 19 or so, 20 years old, and so we got down and got with the crew, and got familiar about a month with a B-24, really just familiarity with the airplane, flew all over that place. Then they called us all together one morning by the end of the month and said we're moving the entire group to Charleston, South Carolina. So fine, I'd been assigned to this crew as a bombardier, and far out, gonna go overseas. Well how soon do we go overseas? Well, you're gonna be about a month to six weeks at Charleston and then you're gonna go overseas. So we went to Charleston, got there Thanksgiving Day of 1943, and we spent about a month and a half there training, and 1st of January of '44, or actually the last day of '43, my dad was headquarters commandant up at Fort Mead, Maryland, and he called and said he was gonna come down and bring my mother on the train for New Year's Day and then he would have to go back on New Year's Eve, which he did. And of course we had a hell of a time to find a place to stay, in a war being on. The Francis Marriott was full, big old nice hotel there, and so we found a little motel, kind of not too good, but ____. And they got something to eat, went down to the Francis Marriot and no place to eat, so we went next door to a little delicatessen, and that's where I met my wife. First day of January, I met her, with another girlfriend. My mother said no, I like that one. I said no, I like, want to get a date with this one. And I did. First of January 1944. On the 30th day, I married her. I went up and asked her mother up near Columbia on the 15th.

And she was just in there eating with her -

Jack Oliver: She was there looking after the delicatessen for her brother-in-law.

Who ran the place?

Jack Oliver: Yeah, who ran the place.

Wow.

Jack Oliver: Isn't that something. So anyway we had married, and so I had already crossed my mother and nearly my dad when I went ahead and went into aviation cadets, and I really crossed 'em then whenever I married a girl that they didn't know and didn't approve of.

Because you dated her for just 30 days -

Jack Oliver: 30 days.

A month. A whirlwind courtship.

Jack Oliver: Absolutely, and we've been married 66 years.

Wow, congratulations.

Jack Oliver: It may never last.

That's an amazing story.

Jack Oliver: Yes, and so we hadn't been married a week until they sent us to Cuba and they started our combat tour. Went down there and through a bunch of missions trying face down subs, you know, submarines and things, and we never even came back to Charleston. We went from there, well we did stop at Beauford and dropped off our airplane that we'd taken down there.

Tell us a little bit to back up a bit about your getting married. Did you have just a quick marriage? Did you get married in a church?

Jack Oliver: No, it's a funny thing. I went up and asked her mother who said no way. And of course her dad and I had a little talk about it and he said well I think it's a good idea, that's fine. And so he finally talked her into it and she said only if you get married in the church. Well I'm a Methodist, and they're Baptist, and back in those days, southern Baptists were well known for being pretty conservative and very tight and controlled the girls especially. So I said oh, good gracious, this will never happen. But she finally said OK, as long as you get married in church. That way, couldn't get married in church because the timeframe, but the minister happened to know my mother-in-law, and he called her and said you know, we just can't do it at church, but I'll come, let 'em come over to my house and you come with 'em, and that's how it happened.

That's great.

Jack Oliver: We got married in a house and so we were able to have a little, not much, we didn't get to go anywhere, just a courtship there.

So she stayed there in South Carolina?

Jack Oliver: She stayed there and worked, she was cashier for Francis Marriott hotel. Back on those days, she was 18 years old and she was the cashier for that big hotel because everybody else had gone to war. Oh yeah, something else. So she was ahead of her age, too, just like I was. I feel that I was because I'd run up -

And of course she knew you were heading off to war.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, she knew that all the time, absolutely, and really she was good about it. I still have her letters that I got from overseas.

So you go on and you start doing some sub hunting in Cuba.

Jack Oliver: For a week, and then we got word down there, the old quicks, you know, you used to get in those days, to bring the airplane back, drop it off and head for Mitchell Field in New York out in Long Island, and pick up your new airplane. And so we got up and a couple of pilot check, he happened to know the officer and he checked and he said you know, really the pilot engineer and radio operator, the guy's got to get familiar with the airplane, said that's great, you only let 'em off two or three days you can, but four days, you're gonna leave for Belem, South America. Four days. So anyway my wife came on up. So that's when we got the honeymoon. Got two and a half, three days.

In New York?

Jack Oliver: In New York City and just got to see the shows, all that kind of stuff. That was one time it was nice to be a bombardier because I'd already checked out, I knew, what else could I learn about from the northern bomb site that I didn't already know. And we were already familiar with the airplane from Tom Mc___, so they gave me off and that's one reason I got to court her, had a little time for courting, and although she was working. And then it worked out real well. So we left in February.

They sent you to South America?

Jack Oliver: Yeah, our route overseas flying our own airplane. We left from Mitchell and went down to Puerto Rico first night out, and then on down to, they don't call it that anymore, but it's in South America, just on the end of Venezuela, and I can't think, there's three little countries there, and we landed there. It wasn't Trinidad, it was a little bit away from that. And then we went from there on over to Belem and spent a couple of days, made sure the aircraft, because a long flight across the Atlantic to Dekar.

In Africa?

Jack Oliver: In Africa, and we went to Dekar, and we didn't stay there any time at all. Got there and the airplane was in good shape, so we went on up into the mountains to Marrakesh, which was a good day's flight on up toward's Europe. We were down in Africa, way down in the heel of Africa. And went to Marrakesh and corridor about there for two days, waiting to see whether we were to go to Italy or to the old base in Tunis. And Bengasi they called the place. That's where they flew the missions to the low level over to blast the oil fields. But anyway, we had to go into Tunis because they just weren't ready for us up in Italy.

All this lead time you know you're heading into war, did you feel like you were ready for what you were going to experience?

Jack Oliver: Absolutely. There wasn't a question in anybody's mind, no, nobody, none of our gunners. Of course our engineer radio operator, old timers, our pilot had been around a couple of years, and he had, didn't just graduate in the B-24. The copilot actually had not been in bombers, but he'd been in P-40s for a year. So both of them were older pilots and regular pilots. They were pretty settled down guys, and we were lucky enough to have these two enlisted people that were out of this world, that were great advisors and mentors for the rest of us.

Tell us then, sir, you get to Tunisia?

Jack Oliver: We got to Tunisia and we spent, we were gonna spend two or three days there. We landed and asked if there was any place to get something to eat while they were servicing the airplane. So anyway just across the street, ____, and we went over there and we sat there eating and we noticed two of the local people with all their garb on, just got in our airplane. Well, our engineer and our assistant grabbed their 45's and went over there. And they were trying to steal the instruments while we were eating. We were that close. Bengasi, Africa. So anyway they chased 'em off and stayed there at the airplane. We had to take their food to 'em, and the pilot went over to the commander and said we'd like to go on up if it's all right. So they said yeah, you can go on. In fact, it's good to get there before dark, because they don't like you going in there after dark.

You had a final destination, right?

Jack Oliver: Yeah, we had Sam Pam Krazio was our base, and that's halfway between Brendisi which is on the east coast on the Adriatic of Italy, and Toronto which is down in the heel, that the British were in. And so anyway we flew in there 4:35 in the afternoon. And they had a tarmac, remember the old metal laid out, 5,000 feet, yeah. What they'd done, they'd gone there about a month before in a vineyard and just cut out this runway a mile long.

That's a pretty short runway.

Jack Oliver: Yes it was, and they loaded those things down with a full load, it was nippy tuck getting off.

Sounds like it, yeah.

Jack Oliver: It was, but we learned to do it. We had ten 500-lb. bombs, normally. And of course if you had the runway, you could take 7,000, but we didn't. So we used those ten. And sometimes we'd have frags and things like that, wasn't quite as heavy. Or we'd sometimes have the big bomb burst, I forget what they called the thing.

Tell us what it was like the first time you took off on a mission.

Jack Oliver: Well let me tell you how I got in there. We landed and went over, just a tent, we were on shelter half, we were right there with the Marines. There weren't any barracks, there weren't anything, and we had our ops trim, perimeter tent there, and a bulletin board out front. So we laughed about it and said let's go over and see if any of us are flying tomorrow. Naturally not. But went over and checked and there was Oliver, navigator, flying for this crew. And I told

my pilot, I said hey, ___ Johnson, the pilot, and I said hey, I'm flying tomorrow. He said oh, there's a lot of Oliver's in the world. And this sergeant, op sergeant heard it, and he said your name Johnson? He said yeah. He said is that your bombardier? He said yeah. He said we understand he's a navigator also. He said well he is, but he's my bombardier, very emphatic. And this sergeant said he was your bombardier. Tomorrow he has to fly with Michaels because he lost his navigator was killed yesterday, and he's going to have to fly with him tomorrow. Well my pilot said well didn't they mess up the airplane? Not bad enough you can't fly tomorrow in it. So I had to fly my first five missions as a navigator with a guy and I didn't know any of them. And later I found out just how important the navigator was, because if something happened to that bomber, lost the engine, lost people, had trouble, it's hard enough for the pilot to fly that airplane. Old B-24's, everybody knows about B-24's, it's difficult. So the navigator had to be prepared to get him home. That's just how serious it was. And I found that out first mission right away. We got shot up real bad. I flew 50 missions and at the end of my 50 missions I had a very good friend that had to go up to headquarters for duty, and he said could you fly a few missions for me? I don't want to lose my job. Because he was the lead bombardier for our group. I said yeah, I'll do it for you. So anyway I did, and on the 53rd mission, I was hit. That's my second time. On my 16th mission, I was hit in northern Italy. 88-millimeter canon, antiaircraft got, and just nearly blew the nose of the airplane off. And I was in the nose by myself, so fortunately was not out flying the bombardier and the navigator, see, so I had both ratings, and I got nicked up pretty good but not enough to where in a week I was in the Marine Corps, the next day you'd be, it took us a few days in the Air Force to get back in there.

So you flew 50 combat missions.

Jack Oliver: I flew 50 combat missions. Then I started flying until he got back. I figured it'd be about 10 missions. On the third one, 53rd one, that's when I got hit again, and we went up to Zagrayab, Yugoslavia, up near where they had the battle a few years ago, I don't know whether you were there or not, but anyway we went, it was a milk run. I was lead bomber, command, and everything was fine, just wiped out the marshalling yards, you know, the railroad yard, and came off the target, and I looked up and way down, coming toward me is a twin engine airplane, and I told the pilot, said Johnson, there's a P-38 up here coming at us. Of course you couldn't make out props from that far away. He said there's no P-38's up here. And about the second copilot, we already lost our copilot, but the copilot said P-38? That's an ME-262, and he's already laying down 20mm shells and you could see him coming. The next to the last shell, you remember they couldn't stay up about 15 minutes once they got the altitude because of the fuel, the next to the last shell exploded right underneath and blew that, and I had saw him coming. I ducked down behind that ___ in the bomb side, and I tell you what, I got my ear nearly cut off and all kinds of shrapnel down through my face and eyes, one piece in this eye out here, and that's the reason I'm so ugly. But that was on my 53rd mission. So anyway we, when the mission was over, the flight surgeon said Oliver, he said I want you to go down to the rest camp with me. This is my week to be down there. Because I don't trust you taking care of your eyes. And he's right, I wouldn't have. And so I went down there with him and he told his sergeant, medic, said you just stay here. Oliver can be my medic down there. So I went down and spent a week, and when he came back at the end of the week, he went in and talked to the old man for a couple of minutes, he said Colonel Smith wants to see you, Oliver. I went in, reported to him, and he said didn't you get married right before you came over here? And I said yes sir, I sure did. He said don't you want to go home? I said well everybody wants to go home, sir, but I promised that I'd stay. And he said go out there and set on the steps, come back here in five minutes and tell me you don't want to go home. So I went out there and stayed a minute and I came back and I reported, I said sir, I'd like to go home. Of course this was late July, '44.

And you had enough points I guess at that point?

Jack Oliver: You didn't have to get points back then. You just had to finish your mission.

I know that some services, or branches they had like points.

Jack Oliver: Oh, that was later on when the war was nearly over or over.

So in your case, you had a fly a certain number of missions.

Jack Oliver: And I already finished them, 50. I was just anything above that was free, gratis.

I know flying into battle, what's in your mind? For people that have not been in a situation like that especially being in a bomber, knowing you are flying into combat, kind of what goes through your mind?

Jack Oliver: You probably won't believe it, and most people don't. We just had a mission to do. I don't know anybody on my crew that ever and I had to talk to others, too, they never showed any particular fear about it, you know. We had a mission to do and we were up there to do it, and even the gunners had a little extra time waiting to see a plane come in to shoot at, a lot of times we didn't have 'em, too many, because they were over the target more than going to and from. Unless you lost an engine coming off the target, then they'd stay with you until they shot you down if they could. So that's when it got hairy, when you came off the target. I don't know anybody that ever worried. I knew one guy that used to throw up, but he did that when we were going through training, before the mission. He was the only guy I knew that ever got before the mission, and I don't know anybody on my crew that was stirred up. I think we get more stirred up going out here and getting on a civilian airplane going to LA than we did over there. By that time, we were cohesive, very close, hadn't been two or three months but we were really close, and so I just don't remember anybody, I don't ever remember being afraid. I was afraid for a friend of mine maybe in the neighboring airplane that got shot up and I'm seeing it get shot up and I know he's going down and not going to make it home. You know, I would worry about him. Isn't that weird? I never worried about myself or my crew.

Well I wonder, too, in some cases it's almost like the best way to handle certain things maybe in combat is just to become fatalistic about it and if it's gonna happen, you just kind of can't worry about it I guess.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, good a way to explain it as any. Even all the missions, even after being hit on the 16th, that never bothered me one way or the other. In fact, I wanted to get back in the air. They made me stay down two days.

What type of communication do you have with your family back home? Were you able to write letters?

Jack Oliver: No way except send them a letter. That's the only way we ever heard from 'em.

Did you write to 'em pretty regularly?

Jack Oliver: Oh yeah, nearly every day, if you could

Did you keep the stuff out about having been hit on missions? I mean I guess certain things were censored, I guess my question is did you kind of spare your family back home from worrying.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, we never told them anything like that. Or you might have said had a couple of rough missions this past week.

There wasn't any reason to worry your family back home.

Jack Oliver: No, and that's the worst I think I ever did was just saying we had some rough missions, and I don't remember but one person that I know, my wife knew him, _____, a very close friend of mine was killed up over _____ and _____, I didn't say he was killed. I just said that

And that was on a mission you were on?

Jack Oliver: Yeah, we were on a mission, and I said he didn't make it and I let it go at that. But I really felt bad. And they let it go through. Now I didn't say what mission or where. Had a couple of rough missions and we lost Mc_____. And I got to thinking about it and finally I said nah, that's no good, they'll be worrying about losing me or somebody else, so I didn't do that anymore.

Tell us then sir, to jump ahead a little bit, where you were when you learned that war in Europe was over. Were you already back home?

Jack Oliver: We had come back, when we came back home, we had finished our missions, they sent me to Davis ___ out in Arizona to set up, they had a brand new bomber, and it was a cross between a B-17 and a B-24. They took the better parts out. I think they called it the B-52. It's been so darn long. Not the B-52 we have now. And anyway it took the better parts of the two airplanes and we made about a dozen of those. We set up the first corps. They would train there and then go on to the Pacific. And so I was there to set up the bombardier and navigation school with whoever we could get to help us. And so while I'm there, they ran out of instructors at San Marcos, and they picked me up and that's because the school was being cancelled because of a mission, you know, they weren't going to build the airplane anymore, so they sent me back to San Marcos to instruct navigation. I got there just in time to start closing down the base because the war was over, and that was in '45. And we were, while we were there, we lived in an apartment, had a friend in Austin, so we were able to rent an apartment from her and my wife was very pregnant by then, and the baby was born in October and this was August or September, I forget the date the war was over.

Yeah, June I think of '45 and August was –

Jack Oliver: Yeah, I was thinking August, it must have been August or September.

Was there ever any risk that you were gonna be sent to the Pacific?

Jack Oliver: Oh absolutely, I went out there to be in the B-52. I was gonna definitely go, and a few of those airplanes did go over there, but I don't believe any of them got in combat.

When you were still flying in Europe, did you have a gut feeling or could you tell that it looked like we were gonna beat the Germans because your missions were going longer or more successful?

Jack Oliver: We had a good feeling that we eventually would. When we first got there, man, it was so rough, the first six months we were there, we had lost 50 airplanes and 500 men. That's an entire outfit, 100% turnover in six months. And it was rough, but we could see it changing and we had no escort in those six months. They would go, the P-51's would meet us at the target, but they were so busy fighting off the Germans, 109's and 190's and such, they didn't have any time to take care of us. Then by that time, then they ran out of gas and had to go home. So we'd have to come home on our own. It was damn rough.

How long was a typical mission?

Jack Oliver: They were from 7 to 8 hours long.

How many miles would that be?

Jack Oliver: Oh, I don't know offhand. At least 1,500 miles or something. Pretty long days. I don't know why I just can't come right out and tell you, but we had 10 hours of fuel on those airplanes and usually the missions ran about 8 hours over in the Balkans or up to France. We went to Marseilles, Nice, places like that, across through Munich. Once you get to Munich, and Augsburg, Regensburg, Star, Wiernernstadt, it'd be about 10 hours when you went up and back.

Would you be flying on a mission pretty much every other day?

Jack Oliver: Mm-hmm. Sometimes you'd fly every day for four or five days if your airplane was good enough. And that's one of the few things that kept you out of the air.

Did you do most of your missions day time, night time?

Jack Oliver: No night time. There were a few that did special reconnaissance flights, like when we were gonna bomb Palesti, the oil fields, they would go over there and we had a stripped down B-24, and they would take you, of course they would fly pretty fast, high altitude, and go take pictures, and that's the only night flying. Very few of us got to do that. The head, lead navigator and bombardier in the headquarters only go to fly.

I guess with the Norton bomb site, you kind of had to use it in the day time.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, that's right, we did.

It had to be clear as well, right?

Jack Oliver: Yeah it did, because we had what we called offset bombing. The target was here and we knew it was 1,000 yards over here, we would set up on something over here like a smokestack and we could set that in the site, and when we dropped the actual target, the bombs hit there.

Would you have a chance to see if you hit your target?

Jack Oliver: Oh yeah, yeah, and they would have people go back and even fighters sometimes would go back, P-38's, and take pictures of them to see what it was. But we always had our waste gunners over the target. It wasn't any of their 109's or 190's coming in on us when that ____, so our guys were able to take pictures.

Tell if you hit your target. So after the war ends, what happens next? Where do you go next?

Jack Oliver: Well when I got home, came home, I went in to check in the first Air Corps I got to, and OK lieutenant, what do you want to do? I said I want to go to pilot training. Pilot training? You finished the tour over here. I said yeah, I know, but you promised me I'd go to pilot training after I mission. Said that's right. There is a message out anybody that wants to go put 'em down. So they put me down and I had to of course wait for a class, and while I'm waiting for a class, that's when they sent me to Davis ____ to set up the school, bombardier/navigator school for the B-52. And then when that failed, well they sent me back to instruct in there, and then they sent me to Ellington Field to set up oil ____ school for navigators, and waiting. And every place I went they were very polite and nice. Said you're gonna go to, and so dad-blam they didn't send me to the Keister, and I said I've had it. I'll never get out of Keister Field, you know, electronics and all that kind of stuff. Well anyway, I got over there and they sent me to a public relations school. I was gonna be the PIO Officer for _____. Dreamed that up from an aggie that can't even talk well, but anyway they sent me to school up at Selma, Alabama, and while I was there, my class came in, and they would not release me. So when I got back, of course they rode my tail for two or three days, so they finally told me, oh, that's all right, you're in the next class. We already have your orders. So in '47 I got to go to pilot training.

How was it that you got to stay in? It seems to me that a lot of people, the military was downsizing and they were kind of pushing people out.

Jack Oliver: The ____ had kept their word. It's hard to believe, that people believe that anybody kept their word back then, but the Army had promised, we were Army then, they had promised us we'd go, and although they'd pull back, cut back on it, and finally even cut it out for a few months, they kept their word. But they sent 800 of us to pilot training and 200 graduated. They didn't need 'em. So any excuse they watched for. Well, 10 of us like I told you got to fly the P-80, first jet in advance, two of which were leading aces in Korea. One of them was Joe McConnell. If you haven't seen, be sure you get the McConnell story, Joe McConnell story and read it from Korea, because he is the leading ace over there.

And you were with him?

Jack Oliver: I learned to fly the jets with, he, and with Cecil Foster who was a runner up jet ace. There were other aces, but not jet aces, and we were, we went like I say, we carpooled three of us together all the way through pilot training.

Where was your pilot training?

Jack Oliver: We had Randall, took primary on one side of Randall Hill and basic the other side, and I went to single engine and advanced at Williams Field in Arizona. The multi-engine guys went to Barksdale, and you would've thought they'd have sent me to multi-engines since I'd been a bombardier, navigator and all that kind of stuff. But in advanced pilot training, well actually when we were in basic at Randall, they came in and said anybody want to become a

regular Army officer? Well I knew if my dad ever found out that I had volunteered, I'd be a dead duck. So sure I volunteered. So 7 of us volunteered and went over to Fort Sam Houston and went before the board and all that, and promptly forgot about it because we were gonna become Air Force here in just a few months. And we're in advanced pilot training, we had already finished our P-51 training and had just been put in to the F-80s, and a guy named Shedell and myself, they told us to go up and report to the commanding officer. So anyway, out of the 7, 2 of us made regular. So that cinched it. I was, think I was gonna get out, sir, if I'm a regular Army officer, and of course you transferred that right to the Air Force so I spent 30 years in the Air Force, and it's a fantastic career and I'd do it all over again. If I had not, I wouldn't have spent the full 30, I'd have gone out and gone back and finished my degree and such. But I was reassigned to Panama because I gave an old man a hard time about wanting to go to Korea and they never would assign me, so finally he somewhat thought about it and he sent me to Panama to fly gooneybirds. But that wasn't what really saved my neck. The fact of the matter was, they changed everybody's MOS's, military, the Air Force specialty codes, and that's when we really became Air Force. The law had been passed here before, but we still, we're still Air Corps anyway you cut it. I got all this time in gooneybird. They gave me the oldest gooneybird down there, the youngest copilot, and the youngest engineer and we started in Mexico City, met everybody in the embassy and the missions and changed all of their MOS's to AFS, special Air Force __, and well it dawned on me, hey, you dodo, you only have two years at A&M, you ought to be pickin' up some hours while you're flying eight-hour missions to go somewhere, you could be studying. So I signed up University of Maryland and got to rackin' up the hours. So by the time I got ready to leave Panama, I was just ready to have enough hours to graduate. I just needed some class work, and I got up there and I took, old man asked me what are you gonna take? I said astronomy, and that's when I was telling you he thought I was crazy, but anyway I'd been a celestial navigator, had that background in math and science at A&M, and it paid off. So anyway I got a degree in astronomy and went right into the space programs, unmanned black box at Vandenburg, and I spent 12 years there. I went out there as a brand new major and came home a full colonel.

What year was it that you got to Vandenburg?

Jack Oliver: They assigned me in '59, but early 60, yeah, 1960.

Were you around any of the skunkworks type projects?

Jack Oliver: Oh yeah, well, that's skunkwork right up there, the Gina satellite, three different sizes up there and I was with them from the day one.

Tell us a little bit about that because I think that's pretty fascinating. I read a little bit about Kelly Johnson and it's come close –

Jack Oliver: He designed that thing like he designed lots, well he designed that F-80, and T-Bird.

Tell us a little bit about that because that's I think pretty fascinating and pretty secret stuff.

Jack Oliver: Our problem was in the earlier days, we tried to get pictures, intelligence, flying over Russia. Well, we used these big balloons. We sent 400 balloons up at this high altitude as we could go. Little did we know at the time we certainly were getting a decent camera design. Out of 400 balloons, only 12 gave data back to us that was worth a damn. Excuse my language.

Isn't that something? And they realized something had to be done. So Kelly Johnson, he came up with this idea, he said, and of course Lockheed Missiles & Space, what we need is some sort of a capsule with a camera in it that we can rotate as the earth rotates. As it goes around it, it rotates. And it's got to have three parameters. Well anyway, he designed that cotton picking, a Gina satellite. Well I got out there just in time for us to start testing them. Of course he designed it in '59 like in no time at all put that thing together. Well anyway, of course I'm assigned to train with the western development laboratories which was Philco, Ford, or Nutronics, so ___ Cane. And with them for a year, and that's when I became a satellite master controller flying that thing from the ground. And we'd signal it to come back in. Of course it'd get up and it would get into orbit at say 300 miles, we would turn it around, point it down so that whenever we got ready to eject the nose, in other words we'd take all the pictures and run that, of course this was all top secret, run those film up into that nose, and the blade is shell, mind you. That's when they learned about this ___ shells are the thing that the manned in space I was kidding you about, they'll take everything that we just had, which was great. I even had a friend that had the factory up at ___.

How would you get the film back?

Jack Oliver: All right, it's in the nose, OK, had it close evoked, we said commands, ___. Load the boats that separate the nose cone from the Gina, lost the Gina. Even had a parachute in that nose cone. It would fall back through space.

Did you have a pretty good idea where it was gonna land?

Jack Oliver: Absolutely because really close, within say 5 or 10 miles. So you'd signal it to come back, close your ___ to separate, and it would come back, fall back through space, and nearly burn up, it looked like it burned up. And then once they got down to about 56 out of the tree, the parachute would come out. All this was done by telemetry. We were reading out and then they would give the commands to it from our different sector. They had nine tracking stations around the world. Each one could see the other one, like the next one up from us was up in Alaska, and from there around Tuille, Greenland.

That's fascinating.

Jack Oliver: So what I wanted to tell you about this, the first 10 satellites that we launched, using a Thor missile from Vandenburg, were all failures of some sort or other.

Really, the first 10.

Jack Oliver: But they weren't total failures because we were doing all these things, designing new explosive boats, you know, became some of them wouldn't, but various gyros and such that we would put in that thing had to be changed. The cameras had to be changed. Everything went along. And they got two or three of them that actually got into space in orbit, but we lost 'em. So anyway, Johnson was working his butt off, and got all these great people with all the intelligence in the world in those days, redesigned this stuff as we'd go along. Well, Eisenhower, that's remember Powers got shot down that was flying the U-2?

Yeah.

Jack Oliver: Well when that happened, we were in a world of hurt because they had already agreed the Russians, we were gonna fly over their territory.

Yeah, Gary Powers.

Jack Oliver: And so we had to have something else. Of course they had been working on this thing, and of course like I say, we had already shot 8 or 10 of them up there and had failures. Well Eisenhower was president. I mean he called in NSA, National Security Agency, head of the CIA, and our top dogs in the Air Force, into the office. I don't know how much of this, I guess it's all right to say something. Anyway, and he said gentlemen, and he explained about Powers and all this stuff, you can't fly over it anymore and all that kind of stuff. We've got to do something else. And we've had like I say 9 or 10 failures. And he said well think you've got all those bugs worked out yet? Well we hope so, sir. Well, it sounds disrespectful but it wasn't. The president reached over and grabbed the American flag, laid it down on his desk, untied it, folded it up, stuck it in the CIA guy's chest, I'm not telling you who they are, in his chest, and could I just – and he said I want you to take this satellite, I mean this flag, and put it in that satellite, the next one flying, he said I want you to get it to fly just normal. I want you to do your regular countdown. I don't want anything in that nose cone but this American flag. I hope I'm not getting into too much trouble over this. But anyway, and he said 17 days, I want it back on my desk. I don't want a burn mark on it. I don't want a scratch or a tear, and I want factual proof that it actually took off, went into orbit, flew it's orbits and you got it back. Oh I tell you, I bet we counted that thing down I don't know how many times, every little thing, you know, checking it out, checking it out, and launched it and everything went perfect. It went into orbit, everything, turned that thing around, everything perfect, got ready to bring it back, everything just like clockwork. Isn't that something? And Moose Madison picked the thing up down there and took it away from the Navy and flew it back to the president, one of our old colonels out there, old time colonels, back when they could do things like that, and took it back in and gave it to him. He said now see there, I told you you could do it. Now go out there and do it. And the next mission we flew 17 orbits over Russia. We filmed 1,600,000 miles of Russia and didn't miss anything from up in the northern end where they had the submarine pens, all the way down over where they were building new launch pads for their missiles and everything, and the great big centers where they had their tanks and everything.

That's great.

Jack Oliver: And Eisenhower was elated.

Oh I bet.

Jack Oliver: And of course we had the programs ____, anything we wanted, anything. And I stayed with them for about 8 years and it's a wonderful program. Ended up being commander of my tracking station in Hawaii, ended up being chief of staff plans and ops for space missile. In those days we only had one commander, not 7 or 8 like we have now. One commander of Space and Missile, and that was in Los Angeles and I was chief of staff, this little old country boy from Belton, Texas.

That's quite a story to go from the farm to A&M and then to being in World War II and then being able to, well the thing I'm most amazed about is that you were able to stay in when the war ended because I've heard so many stories from veterans about how they started, wasn't even

conceivable for them to stay in because they were cutting down so much. That's great that you were able to do that and then see all that history. So you finally got out in 1972?

Jack Oliver: Mm-hmm.

What were you doing right when you retired?

Jack Oliver: I was chief, in fact I had the east coast field office for the Fisk Communications Agency and we were building these big 60-foot dishes to track our defense satellite communications system for all research. He got these 12 60-foot dishes that they had around the world for communication, plus they had a lot more of the 46's which were half as big, the Army types, and the Army built the terminals and the Air Force built the, TRW built the satellites.

I know earlier before we started the interview you mentioned that you'd had a chance to fly a P-51 Mustang, and tell us a little bit about where that fit in and how you were able to do that and how long you were able to do that.

Jack Oliver: We got to fly the P-51, say we went through steerman's and primary, T-6's first class, I read the BT-13, you know, fixed gear, and basic, T-6 Texan was a great airplane. That's the reason we had such great instrument pilots in World War II, the guys that could fly the bombers.

Yeah, I've always heard great things about that plane.

Jack Oliver: They really learned to fly instruments on that T-6, that was a fantastic airplane. Had that in basic and then in advanced, we had P-51's and then had B-25's and B-17's, but I had the opportunity to go to Williams and fly the P-51's. Well after we had been there two or three months flying and got all our hours in, they picked 10 of us to fly the P-80, and which was great. You don't ever really leave the P-51. If you've ever flown the P-51, you're gonna do anything to try to fly it again. It's such a wonderful airplane. But I went ahead and graduated and got my pilot's wings, and we were sent to Hensley Field to check out Reserve and National Guard in the P-80 because it was coming to Hensley, and Hensley Field Reserve and Guard were really strong in Dallas. I went out there and they changed it from P-80's to C-119's. So gracious sakes. But everywhere I went from there on, they said we don't you have some P-51's, would you tow targets? Would I tow targets? You bet. So I towed targets a little bit around there, but not very much in Dallas, but doing it for the Navy.

Because there was a Naval air station.

Jack Oliver: Oh yeah, Naval air station there at Hensley Field. So a little different, but when I got down to Panama, oh boy they were really hurtin' down there. The boys asked me to fly 'em and of course the P-51. They were out at Biggs, El Paso, and a guy got in trouble down there and -

So this would've been sometime I guess even in the 50s?

Jack Oliver: Yeah, that was into the 50s, but I actually towed targets in '48. After I left Hensley, I went out to the west coast with B-29's for a while, for a year, and I had all these friends down at March Field, First Fighter Wing, and I had to go down there and fly the P-51 and two targets. And a new commander there and he said if you'll tow the targets anytime you can

get down here, I'll give you a P-51 once a month and you can go anywhere in the United States you want to go. And a year later until they got down there. I never got to take him up on the once a month bit, but once I got down there, I did. I said you want to shake hands on that? He said I sure will. And you know at the end of that month I said where's my P-51? And you know, I'd take a P-51 and it was the most wonderful thing in the world. It's just like part of you. Well, you've heard of Chuck Yeager talk about it.

Oh sure, seems like it just, such a revered plane.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, well it's just fantastic. But anyway, I towed targets for 'em, and we'd go places, and I would go and land, and of course in those days we had foreign 15 gas you could buy gas locally, and I'd go in some little old strip or anyplace, and land and you would be surprised how many people would come out to see that P-51.

That's just amazing, yeah.

Jack Oliver: I never ever had anybody guard that P-51. They would be all over it. Even kids. They'd even set in the cockpit. You think anybody would touch or try to take anything? It was the most fantastic thing. I was so proud of the airplanes, we were all proud of that airplane. And then of course finally I'd give 'em a little bit of a show, not like Yeager.

When was the last time you had a chance to fly in one? I know they still have some at -

Jack Oliver: Oh, it was years ago, years ago.

I know in some of the air shows they have the two-seater ones. Have you talked to any of those groups at all?

Jack Oliver: Oh absolutely and visited with them, yeah. I had one in Temple, and I went over there in this past year, it was out of commission. Yeah, it was in the hangar working on it. And it had the jump seat in the back. I was gonna pay him anything he wanted.

Get you up there one more time. It's an amazing aircraft.

Jack Oliver: I had my own airplane for 25 years. I had a Moonie, four-place Moonie, constant speed prop, retractable gear. My wife and I flew all over the United States in that thing. It's a nice, it looks just like a P-51. In fact, responds a lot like a P-51.

Who made that?

Jack Oliver: It's made out here at Kerrville, Moonie. It's Moonie Aircraft Corporation, been out there for years. Fantastic little airplane.

That is really something. So then you retired and then I guess you came back here to Belton.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, this was of course, this was home. After I was finishing my 30 years, of course they wanted me to stay up over there and take what they called Code 400 which all communication, electronics and satellites and such at the Defense Communications Agency, and I told them no. I told them I'd come home. You know, there's always you look back and kind of wish maybe you might've stayed because every two or three programs I'd sure like to have been

involved in, but it's OK. I came home and we had bought, my dad and I had bought this GI farm from the Texas Veterans Land Board, '52 and '53, and of course I bought my dad and my brother was in on it, too. I bought them out over the years, and we picked on a place to build the house over there and my wife, she kind of wanted to live here where we are now today, but she loved that farm over there. We had 208 acres of GI, not GI, but a pilot, World War II pilot had it from Belton, Texas, he got recalled in the Korean War and Bob McEroy, and he asked my dad if he wouldn't like to buy the farm from him. And his aunt carried the note to the Veterans Land Board and we could get together. I'm in Panama, probably getting old for me, you know, and I wasn't so sure that I was really interested. But over the years we learned to love the farm over there, and praise the Lord for the Veterans Land Board. We never had stocks and bonds like you do paperwork to make money. Ours was four-legged cows and a farm, and that farm over the years we put our money into the farm, and cattle there and fenced the place in, and got ready to sell it after -

I think you mentioned too before we started this farm's been in your family since the 1870s.

Jack Oliver: Yeah, the one we have now, and that's the reason I came over here. I just tell it over there in my Texas GI farm. If this farm hadn't been in the family and I could see that nobody else was interested. It would've killed my dad for me not to come back.

No, this is great. Well sir, I know one thing we do with this program is we try to record these stories or these interviews for posterity, so we'll have them hopefully for hundreds of years. At the Land Office, we have archives that go back to the Spanish Land Grant days, we have Stephen F. Austin's original register, the registro that he kept all the original settlers names in, and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow got after he was killed at the Alamo, so we have all these things and our goal is to have these things added to that archive and -

Jack Oliver: Have one you want to add in there. We're on the Manchaca League Line, the GI farm between Salado and Holland, the Manchaca League Line was on my east fence. Now get a load of this. We moved over here and checked it and had it surveyed, the opposite, the west fence road of my property here is on the Manchaca League Line. Isn't that fantastic? That is fantastic.

And with that in mind, I guess what I'd want to ask you is if you have any closing thoughts or anything you'd want to say to anybody that's listening to this interview, potentially decades or even hundreds of years from now, what would that be if anything?

Jack Oliver: Well, I want to thank all of my friends that I flew with all these years, even up to a couple of years ago when I had to give it up because of health, but I loved flying. I never had anybody in World War II or the wars since let me down for anything. I just love the military and even when I got, well long before we got out, of course we bought the farm with the Veterans Land Board, and when I got out, the VA disability, I had aircraft tax on B-29s and they picked it right up and before long I had 50 percent. Now I have 100 percent. But didn't get it overnight because I was still living, able to, you know, had my own airplane flying around a lot. When I hit 80 years of age, that was the end of that. I still drug it out for two more years because my license was good for two years.

Sir, I tell you it's been an honor for me to be able to interview you today and I know that people listening to this interview will really appreciate your service and sacrifice for our nation and everybody at the Land Office from Commissioner Patterson on down appreciates what you've

done and hopefully this program is just one little way of saying thanks to you and to other veterans for their service, and hopefully it will remind folks of what that's all about. So thank you very, very much sir.

Jack Oliver: I thank all of ya'll and Brother Patterson very much, too, for the great thing you all are doing, especially like the veterans home over here and all.

All right, well that concludes the interview.

[End of recording]