

Interview with Mr. Victor Hirsh

Veteran—World War II

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Narrator: This is the beginning of the interview with Mr. Victor Hirsh at the United Methodist Church in Kinsley, Kansas. Mr. Hirsh is 82 years old, born June 17, 1921. My name is Megan and Todd and I will be interviewing.

Narrator: What was your branch of service, location and rank?

Hirsh: I was in the Air Force, the 90th Bomb Group, 21st Squadron, a Staff Sergeant and served in the South Pacific.

Narrator: What were the memorable experiences you had?

Hirsh: (Chuckles) I flew 33 bombing missions. The longest mission was about 15 hours.

Narrator: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Hirsh: Well, really I was drafted. I requested that I could be in the Air Force because I worked on bombers before and I knew them real good. The instruments, I installed them and tested the instruments.

Narrator: What was your initial reaction to the South Pacific?

Hirsh: Well, it was an adventure. I wasn't really excited. I wasn't all that crazy about going, but that's where my destination was. I started in New Guinea. It's down there by the equator and is very, very hot. We got to know the native people there; they didn't wear many clothes. And they were really backwards there. They would just about trade a child for a safety pin. They were so far behind; they didn't have nothing; the people had *nothing*.

Narrator: What kind of reception did you get from the natives?

Hirsh: As far as I know . . . there wasn't really much communication with them. We couldn't speak their language; they couldn't speak ours . . . The first stop there was the day before Christmas. The people go by tribes, and there were a bunch of tribes at the other end. They danced for 24 hours straight to celebrate Christmas. On the way there we heard the drums, the tom-toms (drumming sound,) that they beat on. That's what they danced to. Any time the drum beat . . . Anyway, on the way there we stopped and picked up some people along the side of the road; these people wore clothes. They tried to dress themselves a little bit, and I thought this one little boy talked German. A few days later I asked our intelligence officer about it and he said, "Yes, that was very possible because there were German missionaries who taught the people a few things." With the Missionaries it was the same problem; we couldn't talk to each other; we couldn't understand each other.

Narrator: What was your most memorable combat scene?

Hirsh: The last one; it was over Shanghai, China. As we got closer to Japan and it was closer to the end of the war, they got more accurate with their shooting. We got shot-up pretty bad . . . The morning that we left to go on this mission; they told us that the United States would have a submarine out there. We had already flown 30-some missions and we hadn't seen anything similar out there to pick us up. This guy, we looked at them and laughed and said, "Uncle Sam wouldn't put no submarine out there to pick us up if we got shot down." About daybreak we got over the target. I looked out at the sea and could see the city of Shanghai, and there was a submarine out there. So our instructions were if we got shot up and couldn't make it back home again that we were to land out there and parachute out close to that submarine; and they would come pick us up. We were lucky; we made it back. That's the one I remember the most.

Narrator: What was your reaction to V-E Day?

Hirsh: Yeah, we heard about it. We always had the news. Everyone was very happy; we didn't really celebrate. We just viewed it as really good news.

Narrator: Tell us about your medals and awards?

Hirsh: I got an air medal and two clusters (displays paper of listed awards.)

Narrator: Was there artwork on your airplanes?

Hirsh: Nose art (laughs)? As I recall, every airplane had that somewhere.

Narrator: Tell us about communications with family and your leisure time.

Hirsh: My dad wrote me every day, and then once a week he'd mail a letter. . . We could listen to baseball games about midnight. Our planes had really high-powered radios; we could listen to ball games, the World Series, and popular tunes.

We'd play cards and we, the servicemen, always had the latest movies. We didn't have any theaters and just had a screen on the outside. We'd sit around on orange crates and stones and whatever we could find to sit on. Those were what our seats were. Since it was outside, if it was raining of course we didn't have the picture. We'd go swimming in the ocean, smoke cigarettes . . .

Our food we had over there came from Australia; we ate a lot of Australian beef. Once in a while we'd get some bottles of Coca-Cola. Everything came in bottles. The only thing that came in cans was our beer; it came in a G.I. can.

Narrator: Did you keep a diary?

Hirsh: Yes, I kept a diary even though they really didn't want us to in case the enemy got hold of it. I kept a log of all my missions; I kept what day we flew, if we had flak, anti-aircraft fire.

We flew on a point system. When we had 100 points, we could come home and that was the end of our tour. So that's the reason I kept track of it, in case they made a mistake (laughs). We got a point for every five hours in the air. If we got flak, we got a point. If we had a crash landing or something like that, we got five points. If the war would have kept going, I would have passed my points. . . I was only there about eight months, and a lot of the guys there were there for three years and, of course, they should have gotten to go home first which is only right.

Narrator: How were you affected by the war?

Hirsh: I got a girlfriend (laughs). I just got me a family, kids. That's just the way I got by in everyday life. It's just what I wanted. I didn't really care about being in the service. . .

Narrator: Do you keep in touch with fellow servicemen?

Hirsh: Just one guy. . . At that time the Southern people were "still fighting" the Civil War. We guys from Kansas and all the Northern states come from north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and the Southern from the south of the Mason-Dixon Line. They got along with the Southerners all right; but those Southerners didn't care too much for us Northern guys. They didn't have too much love for us guys in the North, but we got along all right; we had no problems. So after the war we just lost communication with each other, but I still communicate with the tail gunner. He lives up in Idaho; I talked to him a couple of nights ago. There's one guy in Michigan who lost his wife a few years after he had gotten back. He turned out to be kind of an alcoholic. That was really the only two guys. The tail gunner, he kind of got shell-shocked; he's not in the best of health anymore. He told me he won't ever be able to come back here again because his health isn't so good. I'm planning on going to see him this summer. That's about the way it is. There's another guy that lives up there, in Missouri. When we go to See Connie (daughter in Illinois), we go up and visit with him a few hours. You get your own families and they get their own families.

Narrator: How do you view war and the other wars?

Hirsh: I don't think war is necessary *at all*. People are greedy and frightened. It's not necessary . . . There's a lot of profiteering and things in a war and that's all I got to say.

How many wars has the United States been in? We've never taken a foot of land. Japan was in better shape after we whooped them. We give back everything. That's the United States, that's the way we do things That's the way I feel about war. It's something that's not necessary. When you put all those guys in a room like this and shut the doors and lock the doors, in a couple of hours they'd get along together.

Narrator: Did you feel a lot of pressure and were you under stress?

Hirsh: Did I feel stress (laughs)? Yeah, when they're shooting at you, I stoop down like this (laughs) When you get on a bomber it seems like it's terribly long but maybe it's only half a minute. When it's during the day they're shooting at you. At night they got their lights on you, trying to shoot you out of the sky. It's kind of hell (laughs).

Once in a while when I wake up at night I watch them war stories. I get to thinking about stuff. . . .

Narrator: Were you ever pulling pranks on each other?

Hirsh: (Laughs) Oh yeah, you got to find something to laugh about. Did you guys ever watch M.A.S.H.? That's just the way things were. That's just about as true as it can be.

Narrator: How was it for you adjusting to the United States again?

Hirsh: Oh, it took a couple of weeks. The worst part was we had Army cots to sleep on when I got to the United States, California, to Stockton. From Stockton they shipped us to Fort Logan, Colorado. That's where I got my discharge. When I got back home I felt that when I got into bed, the bed was so soft it felt like it was water. And it didn't take me long to get used to mom's cooking again (laughs). It was great to be back home in Kinsley.

We were coming back and in Idaho, I think, the troop train stopped there; and just down the track a ways there was a liquor store. Some of the guys got off and grabbed themselves a few bottles of liquor. They were from the 1st Cavalry, boys like those in Iraq fighting. They're real fighting men. Anyway, they got a little too much to drink. Then we got to the Moffat Tunnel. The train was an old coal-burning one with lots of smoke . . . I couldn't get one of the windows shut in the train car. The other guys were sleeping; they had a little too much to drink (laughs). When we hit the Moffat Tunnel the smoke just rolled in. Golly, I had a nice, clean uniform on and it was all black (laughs). The car was black and smoky. When the train would pass through a town, there were usually a bunch of girls who would pass out cookies. We were glad we were back home.

Narrator: What was the reception the troops received back home?

Hirsh: I'll be truthful about it. When I got home, I was so glad to get out of the war I didn't think too much about it. The Korean War and Vietnam War broke out. I didn't pay too much attention. But I did have a brother-in-law who was in the Korean War. I kept track of him while he was there. I was just so sick and tired of war. I just went back to my business and didn't think too much about it. I'm sorry that I felt that way. . . .

Fighting the Vietnam people was just like fighting the Iraqi people. They didn't really have weapons. They made all kinds of traps where they would catch guys, hang them up on a tree, all kinds of things like that. But that's the best that they had and so that's what they used, but it was tricky. We Americans aren't used to fighting like that. Some of the pictures I see--it's terrible. That's the way I feel. There's nothing gained by that war too. That's why I feel war is unnecessary. There are just people getting rich by it. It's just like Iraq now. We got rid of Saddam . . . the way he tortured people, it was terrible. It's just hard to believe that people can be so mean. But Hitler was the same way. He killed the Jews by the hundreds. In fact I have friends that saw the people in the gas chambers. I just have no use for war. Sometimes neighboring troops would come over and watch a watch. I saw this one guy sitting beside me in a hospital gown that just had short sleeves. I think the Japanese had gotten him with a .22 machine gun. Some Jap got him in the arm. When I got out of the service, my dad would send me to help a former POW during his harvest. The guy's mother was a really good cook and fed us. We complimented her on how good it tasted. Her son said that he couldn't taste it; he had lost his sense of taste. That's about all we ever got out of him; he didn't talk about it.

Narrator: Did you have any war injuries?

Hirsh: I never got a scratch. There were a couple of times I thought I was going to have to jump out. We made it all right. One time we had to throw out our guns and everything we didn't need . . . we just glided into the base; we ran out of gas. A transfer valve just didn't work; it didn't transfer the gas from one tank to another.

Narrator: Did you get leave time and what was it like during flight?

Hirsh: We had a chance for leave, and they were going to send us to Australia for two weeks, but, it was getting to the end of the war and we decided that we would keep on flying to get home quicker. In June

we flew our last mission and it wasn't necessary to be bombing any more targets. We were just waiting for the Japs to give up.

Those airplanes didn't have any upholstery. Every little crack in there, like around the guns, a gap about that big around would have air coming in at about 250 miles per hour. When the air comes in there it's cold. We didn't really know how cold it was over there. The oxygen masks we had on our faces, the moisture on them, and we'd have to go like this to break the ice off (laughs).

One morning we were on dispatch service and they sent us to Okinawa. Since we were away from home base we just lived in our airplane. This one morning when we had to get up early to fly on a mission, we got up and the mooning was shining about 2:30 in the morning. We got into our truck and they took us down to a mess hall someplace for breakfast. It started to rain and all of the hatches were open, and my heated suit got wet and it shorted out (laughs).

I've always had a problem with this leg. I could talk for hours about stuff like that.