

Louis F. La Porta

Interviewer: Today is May 18, 2006. We're at the Henderson Library, the Paseo Verde branch. We are interviewing Lou La Porta. My name is Shannon Berndt and our cameraman is Ed Feldman. Thank you for doing this world history project for the veterans. We're working with the Library of Congress to hear all the voices that want to be spoken and to get our juices flowing, let's talk a little bit about before you went into the Air Force. What were you doing?

Lou La Porta: Well, thanks for inviting me in first place. What I was doing actually, World War II started in 1941 with Pearl Harbor, obviously. I was still in high school and I didn't graduate. My class graduated in 1942, so I didn't immediately go into service. I had taken a job with the Lummis Oil Refinery in New York City doing some junior draftsman, that's really what I was hired to do and I had a deferment for about six months and a fellow by the name of Mr. Hayward, you know, asked me if I wanted another deferment. Well, in those days all of us were getting in the service and so many of my friends had left already and here I am six months yet, *not* in the service, so I just went down to the draft board and I said, "Hey, take me," and I wanted to get into the Air Force and luckily I did get into the Air Force. So from Camp Upton we went down to Miami Beach and that was a long, long railroad trip that we made and when we got there why we were housed in hotels and I didn't realize that the turf was going to be a little rough and we had to exercise and march an awful lot in the sand. We never had the experience. They had elevators in these hotels, but we were asked not to use the hotels that it was off premises, so we had to walk these flights. That's just to give us exercises. So, the six weeks I spent in basic training I wasn't aware of just where we were going at the time. They never told you where you were really going at a moments, except, that we would stay on the side of the railroad tracks. Get in the troop trains and I ended up in Salt Lake City and this was a staging area and I don't think I was there more than about two weeks. The next thing I knew I was in Spokane, Washington for George Wright and this was the Ordinance Squadron that I was attached to and it was a new squadron and from there they sent us to Rapid City, South Dakota and there is where we joined the OTU, Overseas Training Unit, with the Six Hundred And First Bomb Squadron and the Three Ninety-Eight Bomb Group. If I tried to tell you what an OTU is, it goes over in one group, I mean the whole squadron, there's four squadrons to the one group and we all moved in one cadence right over seas. And all of a sudden, we were taken off of OTU and that might seem kind of curious as to *why* we were taken off of OTU. Well, there were enough of the bomb squadrons over in England at that time with the Eighth Air Force and we knew where we were going, but out came a memorandum that we were in RTU, Replacement Training Unit, and I wasn't aware too much of what *that* was. While they were just taking components that were going to replace whatever was missing in other bomb groups in the Air Force, at the Eighth Air Force because that's mainly where we were going. Well, when that RTU started and I used to have, I loved planes and I just made so many models that I was pretty adapted to what planes were about, except that I wasn't flying at that time and I used to go to the tarmac and these lieutenants would ask me while I was at the tarmac these big air frames, big warehouse and these bombardiers were actually training on a spider and you might have seen these spiders and they had a bug on the floor and they asked me if I'd like to follow the PDI, Pilot Directional Indicator, and I didn't know anything about it, but I got up there and I

helped them out. So I just followed the needle. That's all it was, follow the needle and it kind of intrigued me and I went back to the barracks, you know, and I'd keep going back every night. Finally, there was a notice made out for us if we wanted to try to go into Air Cadet Soar, Aviation Student. Well, that's what I really wanted to do, but the funny part of I only had high school education and they allowed now high school education as well as taken the exam, both the written and the physical. Well, I qualified, so I got out of the RTU Training Unit because we were released at that time and I ended up going to Buckley Field, which is another staging area and we had to wait another four or five weeks. Well, make a long story short I ended up in Spearfish, South Dakota, Black Hills Teachers College. They wanted us to have college training because I knew that there was a lot of math, a lot of other things that they wanted to train us before we can get involved if we were going to follow the Air Cadet. Well, from the Black Hills Teachers College, which I spent about five or six months up there, we ended up on preflight down in Santa Ana, California. Well, preflight was another mark that you had to go through a number of different scenarios. There was a lot of written work, a lot of exams, lot of medical exams, everything. Because at every turn you never knew whether you were in or out and you were looking at psychologists too and we were trying to, we were trying to really focus on them and they were focusing on us, but from preflight we ended up, I ended up at least the group did, at Kingman Air Force Base and that was aerial gunnery. So, we knew where we were going to be headed for outside of gunnery and from Kingman we ended up, my class ended up at Carlsbad, New Mexico and that's where I spent about seven months, eight months training as a bombardier and navigator, and we graduated and got our wings and we didn't know where we were going to go because it's getting now into '45 because I graduated 2/45, February of '45. Part of the group went in the medium bombers, part of us ended up at Las Vegas Air Force Base. When we got here, they were all B-24's and we had used aerial gunnery of the B-17, but the B-24 had B-29 equipment in it, so obviously we knew, again, what we were going to be doing. They never tell you too much. You're always going to go one step at a time. Well, we had aerial gunnery, which is nothing but central fire control meaning that the turrets, some of the turrets, not all of them, if somebody got hit you wouldn't lose the fire power. That's what the whole scenario was, so if your turret was synchronized with another turret, if the fellow was inoperative those turrets would immediately end up instead of four guns you'd have probably six guns that you could fire and that's what the training was all about. Well, we completed it, and of course, we were trying to find just what we were going to be doing and where we were going to go. Obviously, everything was on the Pacific now. The war was over in Europe and Las Vegas Air Force Base became a staging area in a great sense. We had a lot of tents out there. People were coming back with three missions, four missions ready to join another group to go to the Pacific. Well, little did we know we were waiting for about a month, two months, just, just about a month as to where we were going to go. Well in the meantime, they threw the atomic bomb, the Hiroshima, the Nagasaki bomb. Well, that through the pipeline just was full going and if my memory of those days were aircrafts all over at a side the war was over in August, August of '45, unconditionally, and I didn't know what we were going to be doing and in November of '45 I was out of the service. That's how I got to Henderson. I didn't know anything about the city of Henderson at that time. It wasn't a city anyway. I guess what I could tell you why did I stay in Henderson, well the movement you know when you have sixteen million under arms and they were all coming out I had the opportunity to stay in, but I didn't

know exactly. My wife is here and I'm just trying to think out what I wanted to do. Go back to college, which I did. I wanted to go back, but everybody wanted to go to college and there weren't as many colleges as there is today and one thing led into another and it got to the point where I sort of got into business and enjoyed Henderson. It was a small community and I came from a village that was small in New York, so it kind of put the appetite there, so for a year or two I wasn't too sure just whether we would stay or not. It just happened that way and it was a happenstance event. I'm pleased that we did, so that was the extent of my career with the Air Force, but I've always kept in contact with them. I'm still in the Air Force Association, but out of, inactive actually, so I could end my remarks about being a Veteran in World War II in that manner.

Interviewer: Well, you did answer, really, a lot of the questions. Were you married while you were in the Air Force?

Lou La Porta: Yes, my wife insisted that she wanted to get married and I kept telling her at the time that I was just going in like it was Teacher's College and I said, "Elaine, this is no time to even think about that. I'm going to be busy, I won't be seeing you." I says, "Why don't you wait until after I graduate?" Well, she took me up on it and out she comes out to Rapid City and I picked her up. First thing she saw at the station was it was the end of the line. She saw the Sioux Indians, [Laughter] and she says, "What am I doing here?" I said, "Well, this is the West, Elaine and this is what you're going to be seeing." So, we did, we got married in Spearfish, South Dakota in April 19, '44 and so she stayed at various bases, but it was kind of an awkward way to do it because she went to Santa Ana with me, but she had to stay with her relatives and I didn't know them at that time in Tarzana and I probably didn't see her for four or five weeks, six weeks at a time, but she just wanted to come out West. And then every other base I was at she ended up in the PX. Getting a job in the PX and so it was kind of a, it was kind of a romantic kind of a situation, but not one that I would be home every night.

Interviewer: What skills or lessons did you learn by serving in the Air Force do you think?

Lou La Porta: I could tell you one thing, I'm indebted to them. They gave me one good education and there was always a saying that if you go in bad, you come out worse. If you go in good, you come out better, and I never forgot that. So I'm grateful to them.

Interviewer: That's great. Do you recall the day the war ended?

Lou La Porta: The what?

Interviewer: When the war ended? What you were doing?

Lou La Porta: What I was doing?

Interviewer: What you thought?

Lou La Porta: It came so fast and most of us that were out there at the Las Vegas Air Force Base didn't know what to think about it. We were exuberant, there was no question about that, but yet on the other hand we never fulfilled a mission. When you look back, do I regret it? No.

Interviewer: Let's see, do they have reunions or do you attend reunions?

Lou La Porta: Ah no, we didn't have reunions, but many of the fellows that graduated with me some of them were in California, some of them were here. Two or three of us stayed here, and so, we kept contact with each other and some of them had gone and stayed in and went over to the European Theater and I would imagine, I know one or two of them ended up in Korea. It was at that time that I could have stayed in the Active Reserve, not that I wouldn't have, but I was getting involved with the city and all, and I'd say, "Well, shall I do it or shall I not?" So, it just ended up that it wasn't a timely situation for me at the time, but yeah I still see, I still see some of the fellows [##] 0:15:47 one or two of them, they are still in town and we get together once in awhile.

Interviewer: They had some housing for service men around town. Did you and your wife live here?

Lou La Porta: No, that was another thing. They told us you know we had, well we could have been in the barracks, the Air Force Officers Barracks, but Elaine was out here and of course she knew one of the other wives that was also here and they stayed in a motel until, and I didn't know really what was going to go on. I mean it was kind of an awkward situation until the, one of the officers or captain came in and said, "You know fellows, if you want to go out to Henderson you can go out to Henderson," and we said, "Where is that?"

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Lou La Porta: And they says, "Well, it used to be a plant site out there and we don't know much about it except they were producing magnese, magnesium for the war effort, but they're not in production now and there's a number of homes out there." Well, that's quite a distance you know to go out there every day because Nellis Boulevard wasn't in there. We had to come down Main Street and then go out to Boulder Highway, which was a pretty good highway. So one of the fellows did have a car, I didn't and he said, "Why don't we go out there and take a look?" So we did and that's how our wives, and so, just before the war ended we were out there on Magnesium Street and a kind of a happenstance event. The whole thing was kind of odd at the time, but here we were out there and at night we would go to the Victory Theatre with the townspeople, but you know the town at nine o'clock there wasn't but a rock in the street. [Laughter] But it was good.

Interviewer: Good. Do you remember any of your neighbors that lived by you on Magnesium?

Lou La Porta: Oh yeah well, one of the fellows that was in the same unit with me was Lagram Wood. He's still here in town and Lagram and his wife were right next door, both he and I, and then there were a couple of others that were out in Henderson too. But we didn't get to know the townspeople as much as we probably saw a neighbor across the street and I didn't realize we had a Justice of the Peace across the way. [Laughter] And I said, "Oh Jesus, we better not do anything crazy." [Laughter] But that was, it was a nice, it was real nice community and we kind of enjoyed it.