

Henry D. Griffith

Interviewer: It's Wednesday, November 1, 2006. We are interviewing Henry D. Griffith at his home in Las Vegas, Nevada. My name is Shannon Berndt and our videographer is Ed Feldman, and also present with us is Elsie Smith. Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed for the Veterans' Oral History Project. Before we talk about your service career, let's go back a little bit and jog your memory about where and, uh, you were born and your childhood for a minute.

Henry: Well, I was born in Idabel, Oklahoma, uh, February 10, 1917. I moved out of Idabel and southwest Arkansas, and that's where I went to high school. That's where I enlisted in the service in 1935 and I was sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma in the field artillery. I spent three years at Fort Sill and got out and came home and, uh, the war in Europe had started. So I re-enlisted in, uh, which was the Army Air Corp at that time and they sent me to Hickam Field in Hawaii. I was at Hickam in December 7, 1941 when the Japs hit us, and I spent another about fourteen months after that in the Pacific. We moved away from Hawaii and moved into the Solomon Islands to start an offensive against the Japanese, and I returned to the States in 19 and, uh, 43 and I stayed in the States for quite awhile as an instructor in an Air Force technical school at Lowry Field. And then they shipped me out to Korea. Ever heard of that? (Chuckle). I spent a year over there and that was almost like a country club compared to World War II. We had planes that flew into Japan and brought back steaks and milk and stuff like that that you liked to eat, you know. And stayed there a year and came home and spent the rest of my time in the United States. During that time I, uh, I, uh, got married in nineteen in, uh, 1944. We raised a boy and a girl. Uh, the boy unfortunately...well, not unfortunately...he became a lawyer. He had several degrees and he was an ideal son and he was murdered by a robber in Topeka, Kansas. My daughter's in...with her, with my great-grandchildren, lives in Reno and she comes down once in awhile to see me. And, uh, about four or five years ago I met Elsie Smith and, uh, that's kind of a long story. I'll get her to tell you all about that. I'll be glad to answer any questions if I could.

Interviewer: Okay.

Henry: I covered rather rapidly.

Interviewer: All right. Let's go back to, um, when you first joined the service, you enlisted into the...

Henry: Field artillery.

Interviewer: Field artill...

Henry: At Fort Sill, Oklahoma. That was the Field artillery school at that time. And I spent three years there.

Interviewer: And what was your job in, uh...

Henry: My job? Well, for awhile I was, uh...they acquainted me with riding horses and shooting cannons and, uh, I was, uh, one of the few guys in the outfit that, that, uh, had a high school education so they put me into the orderly room to do the payrolls and collection sheets and things of that sort. So

I spent the rest of my time doing that type work. I didn't have to make any reveilles or anything like that. (chuckle) I got to fat-cat a little bit.

Interviewer: Um, and so then you were...you did your time there and you re-enlisted?

Henry: I re-enlisted about fourteen months later when...and they sent me to Hawaii.

Interviewer: Okay.

Henry: To, uh, re-enlist...

Interviewer: You re-enlisted in what branch of the service?

Henry: Army Air Corp at that time. And that later became the U. S. Air Force and, uh, I retired from the U. S. Air Force.

Interviewer: Okay. What job did you do there?

Henry: What?

Interviewer: What job did you do in the Air Force?

Henry: Oh, my goodness, I did a little of everything. I was a...let's see...which shall I start with first?

Interviewer: Start with the first thing that you...

Henry: Well, um, when I went to Hawaii, they sent me to armament school, aircraft armament school, and I became responsible for an aircraft armament section which had to do with the, uh, maintenance of the armament equipment on the aircraft. And I flew some, not very much. Flew enough to get my fly, flying pay and, uh, I, uh, I did that pretty much until the war started. And then I...during the war while I was...actually war going on, I, uh, I worked with aircraft armament while I was overseas. When I came back to the States they sent me to school as I said and, uh, in armament school so I could teach, teach other people about aircraft armament, other airmen.

Interviewer: Okay, what exactly is aircraft armament?

Henry: It's all the things that go boom-boom and drops bombs on the aircraft.

Interviewer: You loaded. You fixed the machine, the mechanics of it?

Henry: Absolutely. You checked to see if they're working properly. If they're not working properly you repair 'em. You load the bombs, you fuse 'em, or when they hit they'll go boom rather than just sputter. And you may be...you also take care of the machine gun equipment. At that time they were in turrets, the machine guns were in turrets and electrically, uh, moving turrets. Uh, like on the top of an aircraft, on the bottom, in the tail...I'm talking about bombers. I was in bombers all the time that I was in a war zone.

Interviewer: And that was what type of a plane?

Henry: I beg your...

Interviewer: What type of plane was it? What type of bomber was it?

Henry: It was a...when the war first started, uh, the day that the war started we got our first twenty-two B-17's to Hickam Field. They had no armament installed. They had no ammunition and half of them were cracked up. Some were on a flat plain on the island of Oahu because when they tried to land there was a bombing raid going on by the Japanese. And none of them were killed but none of them had anything to shoot with, they didn't even have a pistol. So, uh, that was my first experience of B-17's. They were a new aircraft. They sent us about twenty, twenty-two of 'em as I recall.

Interviewer: Um, and then you moved to a different...did you work on B-17's the whole time or did you move to a different...?

Henry: Well, during the war, uh...until I returned to the States, after the war started it was all B-17's. When I came back to the States it was a different type of aircraft. I was in fighter aircraft. Uh, I did work on fighter aircraft. Again, it was armament...aircraft armament. Which on a fighter aircraft, it had to do with synchronizing the guns so it would shoot through a propeller if it had a propeller, you know. And loading and unloading the guns and checking them out. And checking the bomb racks if they were equipped with bomb racks. So I stayed with arma...armament pretty much, uh, through the war until the war ended. And then they began to move me out to different areas, to do different things. Where I...wherever I was needed I guess that's what I should say.

Interviewer: So when you said you went to the Solomon Islands, they...what did you do there? You did the same thing?

Henry: Well, when, when we left Hawaii, we went, uh...we started bombing the Solomon Islands. I should've, I correct that a little. We were actually stationed on a little island, the Espiritu Santo, and our bombers were bombing the Japanese which had, which had overrun Guadalcanal. That's an island out there. They had set up an air base and they had ground troops in there. And we bombed their positions until we got rid of 'em. The Marines landed there about August the fifth of '42, and wiped out the Japanese ground forces after a long and hard struggle. And after we got rid of the Japanese forces on Guadalcanal, they ran a bombing raid on us from northern-most islands. Called it the Dr. Pepper...ten, two and four, they bombed three times, three times a day. (Chuckle)

Interviewer: Laugh.

Henry: And leave it to the Marines to come up with something like that. But that's very true. They'd send one or two aircraft over about ten o'clock, then two o'clock and four o'clock. And our fighter planes, especially the Marines, they finally got smart and looked at their watch and were ready when the Japs came over. (Chuckle)

Interviewer: Chuckle.

Henry: That's the truth. Believe me. That's the truth.

Interviewer: Um, tell me about December 7, 1941.

Henry: December the 7th?

Interviewer: Yes.

Henry: Well, uh, December the 6th, uh, several of us had gone down to Honolulu and had a few drinks and prowled around down there until about two o'clock in the morning. Came home and went to bed and the next thing I knew I woke up. And I was in a two-story barracks, the second floor of a two-story barracks. I heard somebody say, "Oh, they're firing those coast guns this morning." And these are my exact words. I raised up and looked out the window. It was a screened window without glass. We didn't need to regulate the temperature over there. I looked out and I saw Japanese planes banked with that rising sun on the wing and I want to say exactly what I said then. I said (chuckle)...I shouldn't do this, should I, Elsie?

Elsie: Oh, you go ahead.

Interviewer: You say it.

Henry: I said, "Coast guns, my ass. Those are Japs." I never realized that the rising sun was an insignia of the Japanese Air Force until that moment.

Interviewer: Oh.

Henry: I rushed down to the hangar to...I'm, I had keys to an armament section. That's where all of our personal weapons and machine guns for aircraft were stored. Uh, I go up a...there's a three-story building and I go down a sidewalk between two of these, uh, wings to the hangar, and as I go down that sidewalk, one of these Japs came over and was strafing. Well, I was smart enough to get down on the ground and he strafed over my head. And he...then I jumped up and run on down into the hangar. Got into the hangar, it was a hangar, uh, an aircraft that had been in the hangar. They had dropped a bomb through the ceiling of that hangar right on top of that aircraft and it was burning and oil was floating over the, uh, floor of the hangar. There was a Honolulu fireman who had been fighting that fire got caught in the second bom...there was two bombs. The second bomb knocked him out and he was laying there helpless. And I helped get him in onto a...a, a gun, gun table where we repaired the guns and things. And he wanted something cold to drink. And he was hurt pretty badly. I go out to a Coke machine which is in the hallway of the hangar. I run out there and, of course, I can't get into it. I don't have any nickels or dimes or quarters. I think they were a dime then, maybe a nickel. So I just took my gun out and got my gun and shot the damn lock off and got him a Coca Cola. Opened it, took it back into him, handed it to him. He's dead. I realized that war is a pretty tough situation at that moment. He died. So from then on, it was "take care of your fanny, Griff." (Chuckle)

Interviewer: How, how long was the bombing and the strafing and just the chaos going on?

Henry: Well, uh, I'd say probably about four hours.

Interviewer: Oh, that long.

Henry: They had a couple of submarines, uh, that were spying on us. They were submerged and they'd come up at night and they had every...they had just...the Japanese just had perfect information on us. They hit every hangar that had, that had aircraft in it. They left the hangars alone that didn't have any aircraft in it.

Interviewer: Oh.

Henry: And they, uh, they just did one hell of a job because at that time there was fifty-five thousand Japanese in the city of Honolulu. And I'm sure out of that group there was some of them that was doing some spying. And most of them were real good citizens but, uh, they...the Japanese Air Force, they got the message of how to go, when to go and where to go and what to hit and they hit it real good.

Interviewer: Um, could you see, could you see the harbor from...

Henry: Oh yeah. When I looked out the window I could see the smoke balling up from a, from a...I think it was a battleship that I saw the smoke from -- could have been the Oklahoma. I don't know for sure but, uh, I lost some friends that day. I lost a friend on the Oklahoma, a high school classmate of mine, and lost several there on Hickam Field to enemy action. When...uh...we had a kind of a second bombing raid while I was in the hangar and, um, kind of an amusing thing. I had moved from the...our section, our armament section was in the center of the hangar, full, full length of the hangar. I went over to an office where the, uh, hangar chief was located. I don't remember what I went over there for, but when I went over there they dropped another bomb. It didn't hit the hangar but it hit close to the hangar and, uh, the amusing part of it that, when the...when we heard the bomb explode, of course everybody hit the floor, you know. And the one guy, there was a lamp blown above him that came loose and hit him on the head (chuckle). It took us a, quite a long while to convince him that he (chuckle) didn't have a bomb dropped on his head. But a good friend of mine, a piece of shrapnel from that bomb hit him in his stomach and cut his stomach open. And the only transportation we had was a fire truck, and we got George Martin, Jr. onto that truck and took him to the hospital. I didn't go with him. I stayed there at the hangar area. And that was the second good friend that I lost and I lost others in addition to that.

Interviewer: When, when all the chaos is going on you're just really probably not thinking, were you?

Henry: Oh yeah. You gotta think.

Interviewer: What were you thinking about?

Henry: You gotta think. Well, I want to use that dirty word again. You have to think about saving your ass (chuckle). That's, that's the truth. When it, when it's bombing above you, you can't do anything with just your hands. You just have to take it until you get some guys up there. We eventually

got five, five aircraft that got off, not at the same time. They had fifty and thirty caliber machine guns on 'em, but they didn't have any ammunition in the fifty caliber machine gun so they had two full...I guess it was two or either two or four thirty caliber machine guns, and they shot down five aircraft, five Japanese aircraft. I saw one shot down. Uh, we had a fighter aircraft over Pearl Harbor now. There's just a fence between Hickam and Pearl Harbor, a wire fence. And I was where I could see this, uh, this fighter. I knew it was our fighter and he was flying kinda northward. And everything on Pearl Harbor that was...that could shoot was shootin' at him. So he...I could just see what he was thinkin'. Well, I'll make a turn and go down Hickam, they'll recognize me and they'd quit shootin' at me. Well, poor guy, he was shot down right in the middle of the damn runway on Hickam Field. I think that was the only plane that Hickam shot down that day. But the other...one, we had one guy, uh, one fighter pilot from the...from Wheeler Field...shoot down three Jap aircraft. Now you gotta get my sweetie in here.

Interviewer: Um, what's your most memorable, um, experience or...that you had?

Henry: My most memorable experience...in my lifetime or in this war?

Interviewer: In the war.

Henry: Oh gosh, I don't know. I guess probably December the 7th, what I experienced that day and what I saw that day. It's pretty vivid that's etched in my memory and I guess it'll stay there.

Interviewer: Right. When everything calmed down that night and you were in...you know, you had time to breathe and think, what, what did you...what went through your mind?

Henry: Well, we didn't know it was calmed down, see. We didn't know whether it was coming back or not.

Interviewer: Right.

Henry: So our barracks was demolished. It was a monstrous barracks but it was demolished and we couldn't use it. So, uh, I slept, uh, what time I slept, I slept in a officers' quarters. They evacuated the families immediately. So I slept in the, in a...what a, I must've slept two or three hours that night in the officers' quarters. And every time some guy over in Pearl Harbor would get nervous...where I was sleeping was much closer to Pearl Harbor than where I normally slept...and every time somebody was hollerin' "there he is", every gun on Pearl Harbor would (chuckle), would break loose and start shooting. I don't think they shot anything down that night.

Interviewer: So what was the difference of, uh, your routine before at Pearl Harbor and after? After Pearl Harbor.

Henry: Oh, before Pearl Harbor it was a job. That's really what...it was a job. We was in training to handle the aircraft and equipment what we used. But you had normal hours and once in awhile we'd have an inspection on Saturday. But after Pearl Harbor, after that started, you were on, on duty twenty-four hours a day. And you got your sleep and your rest and your food when you could because they changed things. Uh, everybody was on alert and they were prepared for, for a long while

after December the 7th. In fact, we expected ground forces to land December the 7th, but they didn't. They missed a good chance.

Interviewer: Um, were you surprised at the attack by the Japanese?

Henry: Absolutely. Absolutely. Eh, Tokyo Rose was their propaganda gal and we tuned into, to a station, I don't know where the station was. I didn't do the...I didn't do the tuning, but we were in the old barracks where it was bombed and there was a radio in there and we were listening to Tokyo Rose talking about our aircraft. The fighter planes that they saw landing when they came there said they were real fast but they didn't have any gunp...any fire power. So that was our B-17's that were landing (chuckle). So after that Tokyo Rose, we made it a point to listen to her because she told us all, where all our shortcomings were (chuckle).

Interviewer: (Laugh). Um, do you...did you make close friendships while you were in the service?

Henry: Make what?

Interviewer: Close friendships?

Henry: Oh yes, yes, definitely.

Interviewer: Do you keep in contact with them now?

Henry: Well, you know, unfortunately, I just...I was talking with Elsie about this the other day. My boyhood friends, some of them were killed December the 7th. My other friends were killed after December the 7th, either in automobile accidents, or on the Oklahoma, places like that. And almost every close friend that I've had for a number of years has reached...well, they've died either through an accident or, or whatever. And I've lost almost all my close friends over the years from the time at Pearl Harbor until up to the last five or ten years. And I'm so old now that there wouldn't be anybody of my friends around.

Interviewer: Laugh.

Elsie: What about Cappy?

Henry: What?

Elsie: What about Cappy?

Henry: Well, he's still alive.

Elsie: Yeah.

Henry: He's, uh, his name is Attilio F. Capresio. And he was in my outfit in Hawaii. We were later served in the States together. And he's now living in, um, in Denver. He's had a wife, no children. And, uh, he's not in good health. But, uh, he's a pretty good story teller (chuckle). We called him Cappy and his name was Attilio F. Capresio.

Interviewer: Laugh.

Henry: Thank you, Elsie.

Interviewer: Um, do you ever attend any reunions?

Henry: Do I...beg your pardon?

Interviewer: Do you ever attend any reunions?

Henry: No.

Interviewer: No.

Henry: No.

Interviewer: Do you belong to, like, the VFW or any organizations like that?

Henry: I belong to American Legion and AARP.

Interviewer: Oh, you AA...

Henry: And I'm not going to Sunday School because the chairs hurt my back just like this'n's hurtin' my back.

Interviewer: Um, what skills or lessons do you feel that you learned?

Henry: What lesson I learned?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Henry: From what, the war?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Henry: Well, I learned a lot more lessons outta the war than I did in the war. But, of course, most of my life has been...most of my useful life I should say has been in the military, uh, twenty, twenty-five years actually. Um, so I learned a lot about the military. And I always knew quite a bit about the civilians (chuckle).

Interviewer: Laugh.

Henry: But I never did tell anyone, but uh, the Air Force sent me to schools and helped me get pretty good, pretty good knowledge for the work that I was doing. It was all for the Air Force benefit and I think I did a good job for them. I sure hope I did because I tried. And, uh, it was tough losing those friends. I remember we were on Espiritu Santo, we had just left Hickam to go down there to, near the Solomon Islands and one of my responsibilities was to meet all the returning bombers and determine what mi...tell them what their next mission was and if they had to have bombs for the next mission,

naturally they'd have to have, um, ammunition for their machine guns. I'd check with them and tell them what, uh, what their mission would be. And if it said loaded bombs, why, when I left them I'd make arrangements for guys to start loading bombs. Well, this one aircraft came in and, uh, I had a real close friend, was George Elliot. He was from Denver, and he was a bombardier. He came, they came in on that plane and, uh, they pulled it into a bunker. And as I walked up to the plane, somebody opened the bomb bay door -- it's a door that's underneath, underneath the front of the aircraft -- and blood ran out, blood had collected in the door, and George had got hit with one cotton-picking machine gun bullet and it cut an artery and he bled to death before he got home. George Elliot. I corresponded with his family about it and told 'em, the mother, what I knew about it. I called her on the phone. But that's war, see, and you have to learn to tolerate those things and, and keep going. I once had a group commander tell me, he said that there's a difference in a, in a coward and a brave man. He said a coward gets so frightened that he can't do his duty. He can't do anything. He said a brave man is just as frightened as he is only he does his duty, does what he's supposed to. So I thought that was a pretty good definition. Did you think that, Elsie?

Elsie: Yes. (Chuckle)

Henry: Okay.

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much for doing this interview.

Henry: Oh, there's a charge for this. I think you won't get it.

Interviewer: (Laugh) Okay. What's your fee?

Henry: (Chuckle) I'll let Elsie discuss that with you. She has a fee, too.

Interviewer: Okay. (Laugh)

Henry: No, it's really nice talkin' with you. Really, I never expected to be interviewed. But I haven't shot you any bull. What I told you was the straight facts as I saw it. Somebody someplace else might've saw it differently than I did but...

Interviewer: Do you...

Henry: But I was just as frightened as they were.

Interviewer: (Chuckle) Do you think the attitude toward the military is different now than it was back in World War II?

Henry: Well, you're probably thinkin' about that, uh, if you're not educated you'll be sent to Iraq. Are you thinkin' about that remark?

Interviewer: (Laugh) No.

Henry: That Senator made. You heard about...

Interviewer: Well, I did hear about that, yes.

Henry: Well, the thing of it is, um, what...at a period when I was in the Air Force, and after I was in the Air Force, the guys that didn't go to school, that didn't go to an Air Force school, are...they were uneducated. When the draft was on they drafted them and believe me they were sent over there. They kept the guys with the college degree and the, and the skills that was needed, they kept them here in the States. They didn't go over...send them over there and feed 'em to the...feed 'em as fodder and that's what this guy was thinkin' here when he made the remark that you, you don't get your education, you're not gonna rate. That's what he was thinkin' about, see. He was in the service the same time I was. He was thinkin' about that when he made that stupid remark. But, uh, that's the way it is.

Interviewer: When you were in Korea did you do the, the same thing that you did in World War II with the...?

Henry: Well, when I got to Korea, the second day I was there the...uh, I'm trying to think of his name...the General called me to his office. I was a Warrant Officer at the time. And he said, "Mr. Griffith, we have a problem. We understand that you have some skills in accounting and also in, uh, other areas which you might need in this job. But we have a big shortage in our hobby craft revolving fund." That was a fund that we ordered stuff from the United States and brought it to each base. There was 19 airbases in Korea when I went over there. Each one of 'em had a hobby shop. We were responsible for getting equipment from the States and bringing it in the hobby shop and we sold it to these guys, not at a profit, but we sold it to 'em. We couldn't take government money and buy them personal things. And they'd have hobby craft, engines and most everything that you can think of in there. And he says, "We got a big shortage, and I want it straightened out." And, of course, I said, "Yes, sir." (Chuckle) So I got to work on it, and it took me about 4 months. And after I got it straightened out and I got the documents filled out, I saved a first lieutenant from getting shot. He was the responsible officer. I turned in the report and about 3 months later I made Chief Warrant Officer. So I figure I did a pretty good job. So I run the hobby craft program all the time I was there. And it was like...we had no problem. We got bombed once or twice, but it was Charlie that came over at night and uh, like I say, we were close to Japan. They'd fly things in there and make nice... we had a bar set up, you could drink in the evening time. It was like a country club, really. And I liked, I like Korea, really.

Interviewer: Chuckle.

Henry: (to Elsie) Did you like Korea?

Elsie: I wasn't in Korea.

Interviewer: Chuckle. OK, well, thank you very much.

Henry: Well, I thank you. And I hope...

Elsie: Can I interject something into this?

Interviewer: Certainly.

Elsie: This is a boy born and raised in Oklahoma, the American South, Southern, with a lot of prejudices. And all of a sudden there's been a 180 degree change...

Henry: A hundred and how much?

Elsie: 180 degree change...

Henry: Oh, oh, you're turning now...you're not...you have a temperature...

Elsie: Here is a man who is absolutely non-prejudiced. I mean non-prejudiced. I am in a lot of ways, but he isn't. And I think the military did it.

Interviewer: Oh, you do?

Elsie: Yes.

Henry: Well, I don't know. See, I'm handicapped. I got an ear infection, and I can't wear my right hearing aid, so everything she says over there I just...(all chuckle) she's right in my right hearing...so she can say almost anything, so I'm trying to check on her but I can't. (All chuckle) Thank you. Nice meeting both of you. I'm gonna have to retire here pretty soon and go to a doctor's appointment.

Interviewer: Alright, well, thank you.