

Traian "Tom" Matye

Interviewer: *Today's October 27, 2015. We're at the Paseo Verde branch of Henderson District Public Libraries in Henderson, Nevada. My name is Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm, and I'm pleased to be here with First Lieutenant Tom Matye of the 366th Fighter Squadron of the 358th Fighter Group who flew in World War II in the European theater. And I'm also joined today by Rick Watson of the Henderson Historical Society, so thank you very much both for being here today.*

Tom Matye: OK, in 1941, I was still at Firestone. I was a manager of [unintelligible] Colony and I left. I went to the war. And uh, I spent three and a half years being a 90-day wonders, as they called them, being a cadet and eventually became a fighter pilot. Spent my days in, this could be interesting. I ought to put this into it. My basic school was at Struthers Field in Texas, then I went to Advanced Single Engine AT6's in Foster Field Victoria (Texas). And I was the Captain of our group. And they had a black arm band, indicating I was a Captain. I have a picture of that somewhere in my albums. And just before graduation, they said "OK, Cadet Matye, I want you to take a solo flight in a P-40." That was the fighter plane, that was the corr- fighter plane. That was the first experience I had in a true--fighter plane.

Interviewer: *Wow*

Tom Matye: I took off on that P-40. I circled the field and a whole group of guys were down there watching me. And I had fun. I really stalled it, and did lazy 8's and did all these funny little things, did, uh that crazy pilots do. And I came in for a landing, and the P40 had retractable landing gears. I released 'em, and the right landing gear indicator light didn't come on, meaning it wasn't down. So I drove by, flew by the tower, and said "I have a wheel indicator light stating

that only one of my wheels is down", they said, "fly back over close to the control tower". I did and they said, "Cadet Matye, don't you ever come that close to the tower again!".

Interviewer: [laughter]

Tom Matye: I guess I shook the tower when I was that close. And they said, "it looks like it's down. Why don't you retract 'em, and then we'll let them come down?". This is just an interesting episode in the sequences of how a cadet gets, let's say, indoctrinated into strange experiences. Well, I went up and released the landing gear again, and sure enough the right wheel still didn't come down. And they said, "make another pass, this time overhead. We'll look up". And they looked up and said, "It looks OK, Tom. Come in and go up and shake the heck out of the aircraft and do a couple of fast stalls and inverted loops and things of this nature, and see if you can break it loose." So, I did everything. At this point my uniform was wet. I was completely saturated. Cause I--Here I was in the first combat fighter plane that I'd ever flown, and it was a cute little ship that--it was right, when you land you can't see the horizon 'cause the nose is so high, you had to feel coming in for a landing.

Interviewer: *That was the plane that the Flying Tigers flew.*

Tom Matye: That's right! Well, I came in for a landing and I looked down and they had an ambulance and the fire engines and everybody was all around there. Oh god. Anyway, I--honest to Pete, I have never made a better in my life. I didn't even know I was on the ground. I feathered that thing in, and I favored my left wheel, but my right gradually came down. And everything was OK, but I put on the brakes and stopped right at the end of the runway and the fire engines and ambulances came through. But there was no problem, but I got out of there. And I was completely wet. That was my first--you might say, my exciting experience. Most of

these things that I have in this book, PROP WASH that I wrote, are of these kinds of episodes. No blood or gory in them. They're all sort of fun kind of things that most people don't even know that pilots, fighter pilots, go through. Well, from there, I graduated and went to P-47s schools. And it was the happiest day of my life. I got introduced to the best aircraft ever built. It was a Thunderbolt, called it the Jug. And I did all my service, all my flying experience in the Jug. Actually unless you're training, it was in Texas, because it was flat ground. And

Interviewer: *Good weather, maybe good weather, too.*

Tom Matye: Good weather and in training a pilot, the instructors gave you instructions on how to fly quadrants. And the way the land is laid out, there are squares all over the place. So, they had you fly the squares and if they had to keep the right, right around the perimeters to make sure you could take care of your windage. If your wind was coming from the left, and you were going this direction, you had to crab in the wind. Make certain you stayed on course. Then when you went down, you had to crab the other direction. So this way--it was a lot of instruction going along in the air on the plats of the ground. One of the missions, I had some flying time--I lied--before I got into the Air Force. I used to fly Cubs, and I guess this is why they thought I was a "hot pilot". But on my first solo mission, my instructor, out of the group he had, he said "OK", on my third flight he said, "Go ahead and solo it". I said, "Oh, well, the reason it went like this, this was a P-13A, a little Fairchild. And we were flying around and he said "Now, this mission, Cadet, we're going to simulate a forced landing", and he says "When I say, when I pull power off, you should recognize that you have had at a no opportunity, but you have to find the best place to land". So, this was in Oklahoma and Texas, both of them, but this happened in Oklahoma, but this is the same flat land as there was in Texas. He pulled--ah--we

were flying along, and he pulled the throttle, and he says, "Forced landing!". And I looked down, and I saw a farm over to the right, and I got closer and closer to the ground, I expected him to put the power back on. He made me land in that damn little field. [laughter] It was a farmer's field, and there's was barbed-wired fences.

Interviewer: *Oh no.*

Tom Matye: I landed all right, and he says, "OK, taxi back around, and take off." I says, "I don't think you want me to do that." He says, "Yes, go to the end of the field and take off". So, I got that P-13A stepped on the brakes, put the throttle on, and I just barely made it over the fence, but I hit the fence with the bottom of the fuselage and ripped it open. Yeah. I said, "Well, did I do OK?" [laughter]. He says, "Well, you're gonna solo---when you get back on the field." He says, "Uh, you've had a good enough flight." I said, "Before we took off on this mission, you said this was not going to be a forced landing, you just wanted to see whether or not we were alert enough to pick out a field." He said, "Well, I just wanted to test you." He used some other words between those, but that goes to the explanation of why we had so much fields in Texas and in Oklahoma. Oklahoma and Texas both. Enid Field is in Oklahoma and there's a lot of basic fields in Oklahoma too. It's because it was flat and good weather. Most of my bomber escort missions were out of Maidenhead and Dungeness right on the coast.

Interviewer: *Did you ever--did you watch the old war movies, Twelve O'Clock High and*

Tom Matye: Oh yes.

Interviewer: *That was-- did they seem realistic?*

Tom Matye: Yes they were.

Interviewer: *Really?*

Tom Matye: A matter of fact, I think in some of those frames it showed the pursuit pilots going above the P-17s back and forth. We had to--just go back and forth, because they were so slow against the way we were flying. So we would just go back and forth over the channel and back.

Interviewer: *So they can keep up with you.*

Tom Matye: Yeah. Strangely enough on the escort missions on the P-17s, what we'd do, we'd escort them out. P-47 was originally built for high altitude escort missions. And I only had fifteen, seventeen missions doing escort work, all the rest of it was ground strafing. That was really something. But, Breast Peninsula they had these big cannon placements in the side of the cliff. And that was to shoot any incoming sea vessels. Three of our, we had three squadrons that had to go and shoot those canon placements out. Now they were on the side of the cliff. The cliffs were perpendicular, and they were embedded in the top of those cliffs. Do you wanna hear this?

Interviewer: *Mm-hmm*

Tom Matye: Am I taking too much of your time?

Interviewer: *No, please tell us.*

Tom Matye: I could go on and on and on. I don't know what you wanted.

Interviewer: *That's OK we can always edit. Tell us this story.*

Tom Matye: Well, anyway, I looked at this as we flew high over. I said, "I'm not going at a straight-in approach because I'd be going in dead. So I had my flight, and said OK, we're gonna come in from the back. Go and echelon right. In other words, stagger on the right wing. And as I go over, what I'm gonna do, is do what we call a lazy, just a, well it's almost a dive bomb into

the side of the cliff. Release our gelled gas into the cliff and get over the edge of the cliff. It was spectacular. We did take the gun emplacements out, but I saw all four of them come back right after me. Out of the 75 missions, I'd say bomber escorts were about 14 or 15 of them. All the rest were strafing, gelled gas, bombing, well we followed Patton all the way through and some of the experiences that man was really I'd say, unusual. For instance, we would take off on airstrips, advanced airstrips which had the iron tracks that were put down. We didn't have landing strips. We had iron tracks that we landed on. We were fifteen miles from the front. There was one airstrip, 826, that we'd take off and the Germans were 15 miles off the end of the runway. And they'd throw the flag up and we'd have to fly through the flag.

Interviewer: *As you're taking off.*

Tom Matye: I can recall one of the missions, I'd say "That's enough of this". I turned around and told my flight I'll join them in a minute. I came back and strafed out of the area. That's what we had to do. But on with Patton. There was one mission that I think was very interesting. And I don't think I put this in the book. We were--he was, he was actually stalled down right outside of [unintelligible] and he called on our squadron to come and strafe and drop bombs on the Germans cause the had stalled down. And the way he was going to indicate where they were and where the Germans were was he was going to throw purple flares into that area so we took off. There was 1-2-3, 4 flights, one squadron that went up. We got close to the mission. And we saw the purple flares and we start in with our bombs and what we had were frag clusters. We had 15 frag clusters underneath our wings. We were going to drop these frag clusters. Now those are devastating. They just explode all kinds of baloney all over the place. We were just about ready to drop 'em when we heard a command, "Break off! Break off! Those are the

Germans and they've thrown flares in our area!". What they had done, was they had intercepted the communications and they got purple flares and they were throwing them into the American environment. Now this is the fun part, these are the types of things I put in the book. If you want to read the bloody part of it, contact me individually and we'll have a drink together.

Interviewer: *OK [laughter].*

Interviewer: *When you were at Beth Stone, the Battle of the Bulge, did you fly support?*

Tom Matye: Did I what?

Interviewer: *The Battle of the Bulge, that area.*

Tom Matye: Oh, the Battle of the Bulge! D-Day, I was strapped in that aircraft from 4 o'clock in the morning to 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I must have, I had 4 missions that day. I want to tell you what we did as far as reliving ourselves [laughter]. We'd take off, go and one of the missions, well the first one, they had the C-47s, the cargo ships, and they had two tow lines behind them. At the end of each tow line, they had gliders. My hats off to those glider pilots, because they didn't have any engines, you know, or anything of that nature. When they were cut loose all they could do was maneuver back and forth, up and down. That was it, and they had a commitment. Well, before they released their, the C-47s, before they released these targets, we were escorting them over the channel. We went ahead and strafed the area that they were going to drop these gliders in. We looked down in there and my hats are off to all those glider pilots. Boy, they really deserve recognition because what they had is steel iron posts sitting up all over the fields. They had advanced knowledge somehow that these glider pilots were gonna drop their troops with--the gliders were full of troops in this area. And once they made a

commitment, they were into it. We watched them while they were landing. And boy, those gliders just fall apart. Guys were strewn all over the field. I'd say about 1/3 of them were killed right on landing. The rest of the 2/3 made it and were the advanced echelons. But that's the type of thing was on D-Day were... Most memorable. I'd have to say my first mission as a combat pilot. Five of us were replacement pilots for guys that were shot down. And we all came from the same class. Four of us, there was Jack Godfrey, Hugh Smith, Jim Summerlin, and myself. We went through the whole war together. And we came in as replacement pilots. When we first got involved with these people, with these other pilots. And at cantinas we were talking, and this is before the first mission. They said, "Well, uh, there are about a dozen of you new, twenty, non-West Point graduates". They called us the 20-day Wanderers. and they said, "When you go on your first mission, 3/4 of you will turn yellow and go back and abort the mission", and that stuck in my head. So the first mission, I was the tail end charley, with what is out of the whole group. Now you remember what a group was. There was four squadrons, and each squadron had four flights. Well, the last flight and the last pilot on the last flight, that was me. I was known as Bookworm 78 [laughter]. OK? That whole group was flying out, and the first you do is you check your, we were going to escort the B-17s and we had one bomb and two wing tanks. We were supposed to go as escorts for the B-17s, and then we were supposed to as they approached the target area, were to go in and soften the target area for the bombers and drop our bombs. And then we came back. And that was a big long mission. That was my first mission, OK? Well, I started out, the first thing you do as a pilot is you check your right wing tank and your left wing tank. I couldn't pull any gasoline from my left wing tank. And I did a rapid calculation, and I figured I'm not going to abort this mission. I'm just not going to abort

this mission. I figured if I leaned out my fuel make sure to the point that they cylinders head temperature just stayed where it was backfiring and almost imploding. I could lean out my gas, and actually go there and if we weren't intercepted by any German tanks, I'd be in good shape. if that's all we had to do was go in and drop a bombs and come back. Well, as I leaned my mixture out, I'm the last guy of the whole group. And Colonel Wells, a commander, said, "Bookworm 78, get your butt back into formation!" So I pushed the throttle forward and got back into formation and then I leaned the mixture and fell back. Because I couldn't stay with them. And he said that three times. Well, I won't tell you what happened during the mission, but when I came back. Yeah, I'll give you a little bit of what happened during the mission. It was my first experience with flack. We dove-bombed, dive-bombed in the area and I didn't ever know that anybody was ever gonna shoot a man. You don't, this doesn't go into your mind. And you go through black puffs of smoke and your wings are flopping around and the closer you get the worst it gets. And you're shooting right back at them. You're hoping you can bring it out. And you, and I flew right, my wing was almost touching my element leaders' wing. And when he fired, I fired. I didn't even look down. I was scared you-know-what. So, when he fired, I fired. And when he dropped his bomb, I dropped my bomb. And his name was Captain Farlow. And he came back, and he says, "My god Tom! I was more afraid of you then I was the fighter!" [laughter] But, on the way back, when I came back I called the commander. I said, "Permission to make a straight in landing". Normally, we'd peel off and I would have been the last one to peel off, and land. I asked permission to land first. I said my fuel warning light is on. And he says, "Permission granted". and I flew straight in and I got at the end of the runway and was barely able to taxi off. And I was in his office the next day and he says, "What the hell was the

matter with you Lieutenant Matye?" I told him, I said, "Well, I", he says, "Do you know that you were a target back there in case of any attack? They would have picked you off and you were my responsibility.". Oh, he was giving me a horrible chewing. I said, "What I did was because I only had one wing tank that was operable." HE said, "You only had one what?" I said, "Only one wing tank. I could only drain fuel from one wing tank. So I did rapid calculations, and if I leaned out my fuel and we weren't attacked, I could make the mission." He said, "Why would you do something like that?" I said, "Because I heard the rest of the pilots talking about us 90-day wonders, came in and being yellow-bellies and we'd abort our first mission. I'd be damned if I was going to abort the mission." No question. He made me fly his wing on two missions. He said, "You're gonna be my one element leaders." That was my first mission. So, that was my most memorable mission, really. I did have P-39 experiences, and those I don't think you wanna hear about but that was after the war. I'd retired, they, after my 75 combat missions they shipped me back and said, "You'd had enough combat experiences come on back to the United States and be a combat instructing fighter pilot instructor for newly commissioned P-47 pilots." So we did that. There were three of us that went through the whole war together. It was very interesting. We all were in the same classes and the same, this is something from Ripley, same classes we went through he same missions. They're, both the other two guys are dead, obviously, but we went through combat flight instructors together and we came back. And after we finished with that, they sent us to Santa Ana for rehabilitation because they thought that we were pretty well shot up. Well, after that they shipped Lieutenant Godfrey and myself to Kingman, Arizona to fly Bell-Air Cobras. Those were those little single engine fighters that had a 37mm canon in the nose. Incidentally, for those who don't know the armament on a P-47, it

had 8, .50 caliber machine guns on each wing. So they concentrated on those 8 .50-calibers. We, I had mine 500 yards ahead. When you actually depress the trigger on a P-47 for firing, it would actually recoil. That's how much recoil there was on the aircraft. So, coming back to the story, the Bell Air Cobra that we flew had a thin skin across them. They were insulated, and instead of that 37mm canon in the front, they introduced a big bulb light and I'm circumventing the war experiences, I'm kinda close to the end of this thing. They had B-17 aircraft with gunners on them, and they would fire on our ship. We'd made passes on B-17 with these Bell Air Cobras, and they would actually shoot at us with frangible bullets. Well, it so happened that a lot of those frangible bullets didn't frange. And I said, "That's enough." After about three of those missions I said, "I want out." I said, "I didn't fly 75 missions to have newly commissioned gunner pilots...gunners, shoot at me and knock me out of the United States." So I quit. I got discharged at that point, so that was in 1945.

Interviewer: *So that was target practice for the B-17s?*

Tom Matye: Yeah. It was unusual, but we had a nice experience in the P-39s. I flew P-39s, P-38s, UC-78s, you name it. The only aircraft I would not fly in combat was a P-39s.

Interviewer: *Was the P-38 the one that had the twin tail?*

Tom Matye: That's the one I meant, the P-38s, twin tails. Because when you ejected out of a P-38, your body was actually split in half by that twin boom, because there was that counter rotating props on that ship and it would suck you right into that boom. As a matter of fact to be truthful with you, it did formulate my character. I think you don't have to be in combat, but anybody that was in the kind of training that I had, you actually become a structured individual. And I, even during this conversation, I think I'll recognize I carry a heavy burden on being,

making certain that it is important to have a good sense of humor all your life, but it is more important to be in command of yourself. And my wife calls me weird and she says, let's see what's her favorite word? Not despotic, but I'm actually hard to live with in a lot of cases where I like to take command of things. And it's unfortunate, but most of the combat pilots are of this nature. They learn to make certain that their every effort is directed towards a specific aim. And that's how I was able to be successful in the industry. I was a leader in industry. I started out as an office boy and became Director of Information Services for Firestone and same thing for Hughes' Aircraft Company, and same thing for Xerox. And it was only because of the determination that you had an objective and you wanted to force the people with you to grow up with you. And I made a lot of friends by actually teaching them how to operate in their individual environments. Well, after the war I joined the reserves. They wanted me to go to Vietnam and I said, "I'm out of the Reserves. I've had enough combat experience." And they wanted me to be a glider pilot, I mean a helicopter pilot not a glider pilot. And I said, "No, I'm not gonna do this." So I stopped flying at that point until later on my brother-in-law was the chief pilot for Temkin Rollerberry and he flew into Los Angeles and I was in Los Angeles. And he had a B-24 that Mr. Temkin wanted to convert into a personal aircraft. So George Dipple flew into the Los Angeles airport and he and I visited about...he and I were going to be, what do you call it, pilots that flew these little Cub aircraft that spray fields with fertilizer?

Interviewer: *Cropdusters?*

Tom Matye: Poisons...and Audrey, who was my wife at that point, said, "No, you're not going to do anything like that." This was George Dipple. He and I were going to be co-partners in that venture. But he did show up at the Los Angeles and they restructured that B-24 and I

helped him fly it back. Boy, it was a real experience. That.,.They had to have lobster and champagne and everything on that aircraft and only four of us.

Interviewer: *Oh, boy.*

Tom Matye: But other than that, yeah, I, I flew some small ships here. The last one in in the book as a matter of fact where one of my golfing partners had a ship that he put together. I looked at that and I said that's a little washing machine engine you've got in there. I'm not going to fly with you in that. He said, "Come on, Tom, have a little fun." So we went up and it really was a lot of fun with that. But, Betty, who is my wife now, after Audrey died I researched the field and there was nothing that interested me after having been with one woman as long as I was, I was devastated. But Betty came along and she has been my soulmate, my second soulmate.

Interviewer: *That's wonderful.*

Tom Matye: There was one group meeting and it was sort of discouraging because there was only four pilots left alive and all of them were maintenance men. Nothing against them but we didn't have that much in common. Of course, overseas in combat your maintenance group...each pilot had his own four people that were dedicated to his aircraft...they were closer to you than your brothers. So we went to this group meeting and I would never attend another one. I don't know whether they'd ever have one because at this point there's only two of us left, Con [unintelligible] and Robert in Ohio and I called them three months ago as a matter of fact. And his wife answered the phone and she says, "Well, Con is having a tough time, Tom. " He's two years older than I am and I said well, I guess I'm going to have to learn to live with the tough times that Con has because I'm two years behind him. But we're the only two left. I

don't know what I did wrong or right but I guess the guy upstairs doesn't want me and the guy downstairs won't have me so that's tough stuff here. [Chuckling] Like I said, I don't want to invade your literary organizations. I just thought that since a lot of my friends wanted to hear about my experiences that I came back and I said, okay, I'll put together a little memorandum and I had a lot of pictures. These are...I had over 90 pictures in that book and these are pictures that you'll never see published anywhere excepting in this particular book because I carried that little Leica with me on every flight and I took pictures. And all through the war I took pictures for, for just for my family. Well, I introduced all of those in this book called Prop Wash and it's sort of a...I had to guard myself because I am a combat pilot and I sometimes use a four letter word so this is why I stutter occasionally. I wrote about the experiences that I had that were sort of on the humorous side if you can call anything in the war humorous. What I did is talk about most of the missions that were interesting that had something that people that never knew what combat was all about would sort of figure out. And most of the people that have bought this book, like all of the guys at Legacy, my golf buddies, said, "Tom, we didn't even put the book down. We read it right through. We started at 4:00 in the afternoon and midnight we finished it and it was like talking to you." I told them what, how the experience was in flying in a fighter pi...fighter plane, P-47, and I told them exactly how it felt to be in the cockpit and how your body was an extension of the aircraft itself and the aircraft itself was an extension of your body. You were one and the same and how you took off and what your feelings were like as you took off. They said they felt like they were in the aircraft right with me. So this is the type of thing I've got in the book so I, I think I have something close to being...well fifteen missions I described. These were all the ones that were interesting but not

battle-worn types of tales that you'll find in most fighter pilots that write a book. They go through a detailed mission of exactly what they did. There were some missions we carried two 500-pound bombs. We could have been classified as a bomb...a bomb pilot, a bombardier pilot because we had two 500-pound bombs, one on each wing. One episode that I thought was interesting and is in the book, it was when we were attacked by [unintelligible] 104's and I detailed that now because that was interesting. So that's basically all the book is all about is how I started life in Akron, Ohio, and how I became interested in flying. How I went through my cadet experiences. What they did as far as cadets are concerned, how they treated us and how we went through pre-flight, primary, basic and advanced and experiences and how we learned gunnery and shot at targets with a P-47 and then graduated and went overseas and spent a few years being a combat pilot.

Interviewer: *I just want to say I know you all are very sort of humble about your service to our country but I want to thank you personally for your service.*

Tom Matye: I told you earlier none of us that were really patriotic were ever, ever asking to be thanked because we did it because we wanted to and we thank you for thanking us. But that's ridiculous to thank us because we did our duty. I guess that's why they call us the past generation.

Interviewer: *That's why they call you the greatest generation.*

Tom Matye: I wouldn't call us great. All we did was do what we had to do.

Interviewer: *Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure talking with you today, Tom.*