

RC: This is Reid Chapman interviewing Henry Colton here at 392 Charlotte Street in Asheville, NC and today is April the third. Mr. Colton, you were in the navy—you were a Navy pilot. When did enlist?

Henry Colton: February 1942

RC: What moved you to enlist?

HC: Well everybody was enlisting. I had tried to enlist on December 8, 1941.

RC: Right after Pearl Harbor.

HC: Right after Pearl Harbor.

RC: And that didn't work?

HC: I wasn't able to get into the air corps at that time.

RC: And so you wanted to be a pilot; that's what you had set out to do. Why?

HC: Because it was glamorous.

RC: And so where did you go for training

HC: I trained in Chapel Hill in what was called pre-flight school. And in Florida in Corpus Christi. And many other places. Del Mar, Iowa. I trained all over the place.

RC: And so when did you ship out to Europe?

HC: In May of...April of 1944.

RC: And so you were married in 1943?

HC: That's right.

RC: Tell us a little about that because part of what I want to get out of this is how this impacted your life.

HC: Well, of course, if it hadn't have been for the war I probably would have been doing different things and would have never met my wife in Chapel Hill when I was in pre-flight school. So, it very much affected my life.

RC: And so she went off to DC to do some work that we had mentioned in her interview, and you went to Florida?

HC: Well, I was being trained in Florida and Corpus Christi, Texas. Patoma, Iowa and various other places, but I was in Florida at the time.

RC: Mrs. Colton mentioned that the day you left for Europe was one of the most difficult days in her memory. Do you remember that day?

HC: Yes, but again I hate to glamorize it but I was so excited about going that I wanted to go overseas that it didn't have the effect on me.

RC: You weren't being left in other words.

HC: I wasn't being left.

RC: Now, so then you went to Europe. You flew to England, is that correct.

HC: I flew to England in our plane. It was a brand new B-24. Of all things we flew from Norfolk to Palm Beach to Puerto Rico to Trinidad to Balim(?), Brazil to Fort Brazil to Dakar, Africa To Marrakech, Morocco, and finally to England

RC: How long did that take?

HC: About ten days, but all of that was training. We were trying to get used to our plane and our plane get used to us.

RC: It was kind of like a shake-out flight too because it was a new plane.

HC: It got us there but it was sort of a round about way.

RC: And then once you got to England what happened?

HC: What happened and I think we can stop right here. I was flying my missions out of Devon, which is in Southwest, England. My older brother as I was saying, I'd like to read my statement.

RC: Please do.

HC: He was flying missions out of an army base in northern, north of London. And now reading from what I wrote just today to give you precisely what took place:

From time immemorial man has glamorized and romanticized war. During World War II, being a military airplane pilot was so romanticized that a song was written—"off we go into the wild blue yonder, flying high into the sky...." Other songs were written, too. My brother John and I were both pilots. Doesn't that sound glamorous? Mother and father were proud parents.

War is not glamorous. War is and always has been about Killing and Death.

In May 1944 (one month before D-Day) brother John and I were both in England. I was flying missions out of a Navy base in Devon, and John was flying his missions from an Air Force base north of London.

John and I arranged to meet at his airfield Saturday May 29, 1944 and go to London together for the weekend. When I got to his base, I told the Duty Officer that I was Ensign Colton, and I wanted to see my brother Lt. Colton. He told me to wait and went into the guard house.

After a few minutes, he returned and said:

‘Mr. Colton, I regret to tell you that your brother was flying a mission May 22 over Kiel Canal in Germany. He was shot down and killed. He is dead.’

John was dead; John is dead; John will be dead forever.

My mother and father lost a son; John’s wife lost her husband; John’s 3 year old son lost his father.

That is war.

RC: This was obviously a terrible, shocking incident. You described before this incident about being excited about the prospect of flying and being in Europe. This changed you obviously. Do you want to talk about how it changed you as a soldier?

HC: I would prefer that my interview stop right here with the statement that war is romanticized and glamorized. War is about death and dying and we use all sort of means to avoid the true meaning of war.

Once the camera was turned off, Mr. Colton told me that he had not changed. He said that even after having to write a letter to his brother’s widow (the mother of a two year old), he was prepared to fly his missions. It was his job. He described himself as having been “brainwashed” to complete his missions. When I asked Mr. Colton if he would go on record with statement, he agreed to do so, but given the extemporaneousness of it, he wished to not repeat it for the camera.

He later added that his mother “had the honor of putting a gold star in her window.”