

Today is Wednesday April 16th, 2003 and this is the beginning of an interview with Joseph Katen at his place of business in downtown Asheville, NC. My name is Jennifer McPherson and I will be conducting the interview.

J Were you drafted into the war?

J No I volunteered. It happened on Sunday, Pearl Harbor, 1941 December 7th. I was driving in a car with my brother-in-law and a friend when we heard the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. So we went right down to the Marine recruiting station to volunteer, but thank god they were closed because the next day I joined the air force.

Jenny: What made you choose the air force?

Joe: That is very interesting. I was walking past this recruiting place for the air force and there was a sign outside "join the air force, learn how to fly, become a second lieutenant and make 150 dollars a month plus flying pay". I said heck that beats being a private for \$21 in the infantry so I went in and asked about it. They said, "are you a college graduate." I said "No in fact I'm finishing high school." Well he said "in the cadets we only take college graduates or people who can pass the equivalent test. Well they are taking the test right why don't you go in and take the test and see if you can pass." I said "okay" I went into this great big hall there were about 320 guys in there and we sat down and took the test and the test was a long test. When it was over they called out 13 names and said "you fellows go in that room over there and the rest of you stay in your seats" so I figured well, I failed the test so I got in the room and they said "well congratulations you're the 13 to pass." I said "well that is wonderful, now all I came for is information, what's the story?" Well the guys says to me "go take the physical, if you can't pass the physical you can't get in anyway." I was 18 years old; I figured I could pass anything. So anyway, I took the physical and then they said, "well go talk to the psychiatrist." I said "I came for information"... "go talk to the psychiatrist see if you can pass it." The psychiatrist says to me, "do you like girls?", I said "I love girls." "Good." And he takes a book, back in those days we didn't have many airplanes. The most famous one was the B17 the Flying Fortress, and then the P47 The Liberator or , anyway it had twin tails and these were in the newspaper all the time so he opens this book and there is a silhouette of a B17 and he says "do you know what kind of airplane that is" "yeah I think that is the B17 Flying Fortress" he says, "very good", turns the next page and there's a P38 and I says "yeah that's a P38." The next thing he opens was a DC3. It was a C46 in the air force. "Oh you know your airplanes." By this time I kind of got caught up with this thing and I said "Oh heck ever since I was three years old I wanted to fly an airplane." and I never had any interest in airplanes. So anyway, I passed all that and I said "Hey I'm still in high school. I have five months to graduate" and he says "Well we'll let you graduate. We'll pay you \$75 a month while you are home and \$1 a day for food and we'll let you finish and graduate high school and then you will go to cadets". I couldn't sign the paper because I wasn't quite 18 yet and so I went home and we were having dinner and I presented this to the family and my father says hey you can't go cause I wont sign for you. I said dad look if I graduate I will be a 2nd lieutenant, I'll make \$150 a month plus 50 percent flying pay and he says give me the paper. This was the

depression you know. So that is how I got in the air force. There was no big what do you call it just that's how I got in and I stayed in school till May this was in, I signed up in Feb. of 42 and I guess I was going to my prom that night when I got a telegram "Aviation cadet Joseph Hayden you are hereby ordered to report for active duty tomorrow morning at Grand Central Station. Bring enough clothes for three days." Nobody was home so I went to the prom. When I got home about 6 o'clock in the morning, I 'm walking up the stairs. My father says to me "well son did you have a good time." I had a great time. "Well ok go to bed." I said "Dad get up." He got up. I said, "I have time to take a shower take some clothes. I 'm reporting for active duty at 9 o'clock." And uh well of course my mother wakes up, my sister wakes up my brother's wake, they are all crying. I leave finally. I get to the Grand Central Station and there was a Sergeant there. I report to him and he says, "well fellows they don't have any place to send you right now so go back home and come back her Monday at 1 o'clock in the afternoon." I say "Sergeant let me tell you something. I just went through the goodbyes and the crying and all that stuff, put me up in a hotel." He said to me, "boy listen to me this is going to be a long war. Go home and be with your family". So I went home. We partied. All the family was there and the party started. Monday I went to the air force and that was it. That's the story of my joining the air force.

Jenny: What were those first few days like?

Joe: To me they were fun. I had a great time. I must have got 25 shaving kits (laughs) and stuff like that. It was fun. The whole family was there. I was the first one from my school to go to the war you know what I mean and I was the president of my senior class and they treated me like a king.

Jenny: So what happened when you got into the air force? Where did you go?

Joe: Well the first place. They didn't tell us that you had to go through basic training and now that \$75 a month was now cut down to \$25 a month and they sent me to Basic Training at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. Beautiful old army base and we went through basic training there and then from there I went to Nashville, Tennessee for I think it was for classification or something. so we took test to be a pilot a bombardier and a navigator and I passed all those . Then they said so what do you want to be. I don't know if I can fly a big airplane so I better try a navigator or bombardier at least I will get a commission. So that's what happened. I said I want to be a bombardier navigator. So they sent me to Pickinson College in Carlisle Penn. for certain courses. Took those courses and then, When your 79 you don't remember too much... I went to Las Vegas Nevada for gunnery school and then went through gunnery school and from gunnery school I went to Victorville, Calif. Victorville California was my advanced training and that's where I got my commission. And then from there we went to the hell hole of the world Tonopah, NV. The middle of no place. That's where the crews got together the pilots came the gunners, the navigators, the bombardiers and you flew as a crew for awhile in training and uh from there I went to Fresno California and from there we left for overseas. That was our training. And that took.... Let's see I graduated in August '43.

Jenny: And where did you go?

Joe: Well my father was an importer from China and I worked with my father after school he was a wholesaler and I spoke a little bit of Chinese. Maybe 30 words of Chinese so when they were getting all the history for the air force they asked any foreign languages. My family spoke Arabic and I spoke Arabic fluently so I put down Arabic and then I put down Chinese. I don't know why I put down Chinese, but I spoke a few words so I put it down . Well after we got transition and all the crews received their order (the fellows who graduated with me) all of them went to Europe, England I think. And me my crew they sent to CBI China Burma India Theater. So we left from California and instead of flying over the Pacific Ocean that time they sent us by way of the East Coast. We flew stops until we got to Newfoundland and then from Newfoundland to the Azores and then from the Azores to Maricatch and then to Algeria and then to Egypt. Now that's where my mother was born so I stayed two weeks in Egypt until they ran us out of there and then finally go to Calcutta and then from Calcutta they sent us to a place called Asensol, India. And then from there the next day we started flying combat. Most of our missions, in fact all of our missions were to contain the Japanese in Burma because the start of the Pacific battles we wanted to tie up millions of Japanese in Burma a million of them. so we were flying combat missions into Rangoon, Bangkok, Mandalay, places like that. Then later on they sent us uh the fighter planes in China the ones that took over from Chenaults flying tiger. Everything going into China had to be flown in. There was no transportation into in except by air and they were running short of petrol for the fighter planes so we converted our B24's , they sent us to a town called Pesspore, near the Himalayas and for about six months we flew the hump with 500 gallon tanks three of em in our Bombays and then we flew the Himalayas to China to supply the fighter planes. We did that for about six months and then we went back to India and continued combat.

Jenny: Was that scary flying?

Joe: Over the hump? I would say I don't have the exact figure. I wasn't the commanding officer I think we lost more planes flying the hump than we did flying combat over Burma. The reason being the B24 loaded - we were redlined I think at 7500 pounds and we were carrying 12500 pounds of gasoline and the B24 didn't climb to fast and it was a struggle to climb and we had to climb to 2500 feet to clear the Himalayas and most of that flying was in actual instrument couldn't even see you know what I mean you were in the clouds. So a lot of fellows hit the mountain and we lost a lot of crews. We didn't lose any in combat gong over the mountains. We lost them hitting the mountain or losing an engine and not being able to maintain an altitude with all that gas. So we really did, we lost more planes over the Himalayas than we did in combat over Burma. But Burma from our base in India it was a long ..it was probably the longest missions we ever flew was done to Bangkok we would fly from India , most of our missions took of at night, we flew all night and then we got there at daybreak we would go to .. it was like 6 , 7 hours each way depending on where we were going . So they were long missions, but we had different kind of targets, priority targets were anything in shipping. If you were flying

over the water and you saw a ship, you forgot the target you had and went after the ship. If you got to the target and you saw trains moving supply then you went after them and if not you went after the target they assigned you to and uh. That was about how it was. I stayed there until the war ended, when the war ended I had a lot of points and they let you go home on your points and I said I want to go home and I went home I was one of the first ones to go home. I came back by boat and I figured the rest of them were going to be there another four or five months. They all beat me home, they came back by plane. That's the story.

Jenny: How long did it take you to get back?

Joe: 30 days. We got back, it was the first ship after the war ended coming back from the CBI, on there were war brides and their kids and all the fellows that were over 40 years old or something like that they were on there and air core men and uh it was about 4500 passengers coming back. I'll tell you a funny story. This is a, that boat, that ship came in it was supposed to come to Florida, but when we got thorough the canal there was a hurricane in the Atlantic ocean and it was hitting near Florida so they sent us up to New York. Now I lived in Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, New York and it's right of the shore road which is the narrows so our ship docked in the narrows waiting for the morning for the pilot to take us to the berth and I'm in that boat and there's my house, I could see my father's house. I used to swim in the narrows. I almost jumped over and swam home. But I finally got back to .. we finally landed on Pier 84 in New York and I was coming down the gang plank and there was my mother and father and my wife. I said how did you know I was on that boat. My father said all night long I thought you were on that boat and they got there and met us or ship whatever and by golly they were there.

Jenny: When did you get married?

Joe: Oh that's another story, I was in Las Vegas in gunnery school. I got in a crap game shooting dice. Not at the casinos because it was only one or two casinos there in those days there were no big hotels. I got in a crap game on the base and I won \$300. Now I want to put this in perspective. For a kid living in the depression who never had more than a dollar at one time \$300 is more money than I ever thought I would have in my lifetime. So I am looking at that money and I say if I keep that money I will get in a crap game and I will lose that money. So I think I better do something with it so I wired it to my childhood sweetheart and I said If you care to come, so she came out there and the first words she got there about three o'clock in the morning on the train took her three days and when she got there the first words out of her mouth was my mother wants the marriage license in the mail today I said uhoh. So that's it. Last month we spent our 59th wedding anniversary.

Jenny: So I would like to ask you more about your time in India.

Joe: Well, we were very fortunate. In India when we were there we were far enough away from the Japanese, the Japanese were of course in Burma, and that was out of the range of the fighters, the Japanese fighters and they didn't have to many bombers down

there so occasionally we had midnight Charlie who would come and drop 100 pound bomb. It was almost like they were doing now the ones that were in Japan flying into Korea and at night when we weren't there we weren't really in a combat zone, except in China, China we were, but in India we were too far away from the Japanese to give us any trouble. It was kind of peaceful. We had an outdoor theater where we saw movies once in awhile we played bridge when we weren't flying, things like that. But we flew pretty regularly. We flew just about five days a week on a mission, but as far as living in India, I am not a champion of India for one reason. I came down with every darn thing there was to come down with. I had Malaria, I had dysentery, I had a rash that never went away the whole time I was over there. India isn't a place for a delicate white skinned man to be in those days, I don't know how it is especially in a monsoon season when it rains all the time. So I would never have any desire to go back to India not that it isn't a beautiful country when we had rest leaves we went up to places like Cashmere, Darjeeling where they grow the tea which is lovely. But uh, the rest of India was pretty ? Combat was combat you know what I mean. We didn't have fighter problems too much, most of our opposition was ack ack (?) and that was in some places over Rangoon or over ... could have been heavy and especially in you went in after a ship, that was always bad. We were flying high altitude you know 1400 feet to bomb an factory or a plant or something like that, but to bomb a ship you had to come down low otherwise you would never hit the ship. And so when you go down low, they had plenty of 50 mm and great big caliber guns and they gave you a fit. In fact we got shot down, we had a ditch in the ocean on one mission in the ship, cargo ship, but it was combat, that's all I can't tell you any big long stories. I got wounded twice. I had the piece. A piece of flack came through the Plexiglas and hit me here. It was a piece of steel that came from a railroad track that was sold to the Japanese as scrap metal from America. I had that damn thing and I lost it. I don't know what happened to it. I saved it for a long time. But yeah, combat in the air force in those days was a gentleman's thing. When I see pictures in the guys in the Marine Corps or the guys that fought in Vietnam on the ground or fought in Korea on the ground I was glad that I made decision to go into the air force, because that was a different kind of war. And as a cadet, you know I was a kid, I was only 18 years old and when you go into cadets, it was like going to WestPoint, your whole life was different you were treated as a gentleman. Everything was ... you lived by the honor code. It was probably the greatest builder of confidence and moral that I have ever had you know what I mean. And cadet life was wonderful. I loved cadets. It was really great. Out of the clear blue sky the only officer was in charge with the major and he called out the names of the guys were going to be the cadet officers. Well I became the cadet sergeant major so the only thing that I didn't like about that, everything that we did was in double time. So when we ran five miles you had to go back and forth and keep them - we ran ten miles (laughs). That was the only thing I didn't like about being a cadet officer. I was great for running. But uh, it was a different situation then these poor guys on the ground had. That was the smartest decision I ever made, or the luckiest one that I walked past this place and that the Marine station was closed that day. So that's the story.

Jenny: And were you stationed in China?

Joe: China, when I stay we were stationed in China when we flew over the hump and then we came back the next day and we were in ___?___ and Shangqiu (?) and a couple of other places we flew the gas. Our job there was not a combat mission it was the job of flying the gas. We were like the service station for the fighters and we kept em flying because it was very important to tie those Japanese up in China to so they couldn't go into the Pacific, because those islands needed a lot of people and that was really the mission of Burma to keep them tied down. And we did. We did fly to what do you call it the first air commandos in to Mandalay that was terrible what a disaster that was to the guys on the ground. So that's the story. But uh, it was ... I think that the experience I got in the air force made me grow from a 18 year old kid when I got out I knew what I was going to do. I had all the confidence in the world because as a high school graduate, I went against all college graduates. They were all college graduates and while we were in training . There was a kid from Texas, his name was Dixon Skidmore, he was from Skidmore Texas and he and I were the only two who weren't college graduates. So I said to him during training, I said "Listen, the only way you and I are going to get through, it were going to have to work ten times harder than these guys, so I will tell you what I will do, we will work together". So we would stay up after the lights were out, we'd go to the latrine and he and I would stay up a couple of hours every night doing the studying and all that stuff and when we graduated in Victorville I graduated number one and he graduated number two. Figure that out. We worked like dogs and when we got our commission. At that time certain percentage of you became 2nd lieutenant and some of them became flight officers which is like a warren officer on the ground and he and I both became 2nd lieutenants.

So we were very proud of that, that was something. I went to a good school in the north. I went to a Catholic school – LaSalle academy. They taught calculus and solid geometry in high school so we had a good back ground. We worked our butt off to become 2nd lieutenant.

Jenny: What did you do when you got out of the war?

Joe: When I got out? My father as I said was an importer and I worked for my dad when I was in high school – that's why I went to high school in Manhattan because my father traveled on the road and took orders and my mother went in in the morning and stayed there until I got out of school at noontime and I went to the office at noontime and my momma went home because of my younger brothers and sisters. So I went back to working for my dad and I traveled on the road for him as a salesman until 1948 and then in 1948 they embargoed Chinese merchandise because they went communistic. They became a communist government so we couldn't import from China anymore so my father retired and went into another business so I left and came down south and I have been here ever since. I met a fellow that was in the jewelry business and he hired me so that's how I became a jeweler. I took courses while I was working you know what I mean.

Jenny: How long have you had this store?

Joe: This is my 54th year in business beginning of my 55th. I was in the grove park in for 25 years and I've been down here about 17 years something like that. I had a store in Hendersonville and I had a store in Waynesville and here. But now I retired like 15 years ago, but I guess I 'm to active to retire and my wife couldn't stand me home all day long (laughs) I 'm going back to business I don't care how much business I do , but I have a wonderful clientele . This lady called me up from Raleigh and she wanted to buy a bracelet that she looked at. It is just something for me to do. Otherwise I'd go nuts. And this war here this thing in Iraq. These are different kind of soldiers now. Most of the people I was in the war with were drafted. The grounds people the fellows in the infantry. And those poor guys, even the 2nd lieutenant in the infantry or artillery it was a 90 day 1 day. Went to school for 90 days and then boom he went overseas. We went overseas with a 100 flying hours. These kids go over there with thousands of hours. These kids are professionals they sure show to be the greatest. They all know what they are doing with high type of equipment. Our equipment we had B24 we flew in, we had a radio compass. These guys have all this electric equipment, these fellows are professionals. We were a hometown army, but we did the job. These kids here today are unbelievable. I had a home in Florida and a home up here so we spent the winters in Florida and I had a neighbor kid, my wife used to call him her slave, he did all her chores around the house and of course she paid him, but he loved to do them because he made money. Well this kid is flying these F14's, naval plane. I can't believe it. They are real professionals these kids today. Chuck Blaire who was the pilot on my plane, he had 90 hours when we went overseas he had a B24. That's not a whole lot of flying time with a four engine bomber. Today these kids have thousands of hours. But they are professionals. So that's it. I can't think of much more.

Jenny: Do you have any photographs?

Joe: When we moved from Florida I know we have some in the house... when we moved from Florida up here a lot of that stuff got.....and then my kids grabbed a lot of those things. I might have a picture of the plane and the crew that we flew in. I'll go through them. When do you need them for?

Jenny: Anytime.

Joe: Saturday I'll go through the..... She's got ten thousand of these albums. This might be interesting. You know the bridges over in Burma are all wooden bridges and we wanted to knock out all the bridges to stop supplying. Flying at 1400 feet these wooden trestle bridges, our bombs would go right through the bridges and never blow up, you know what I mean. Half of the time... so we had to figure something out, we had to figure how the heck are we going to knock these bridges down. Well on the base next near us was an Australian group of heavy bombers. So I got with the head bombardier over there and I said listen 'We've lost fighters on that damn thing, we've lost... we've got to figure something out.'" So we got together and we figured out how to skip bomb these things with a B24. Now that is an experience. We took the bomb sight out of the plane and we put a spot on the Plexiglas and we came in at 1500 feet and we threw the plane into a 45 degree bomb and we'd pull out very close and skip that bomb right into

the bridge and blow it up. So we became known as the Burma Bridge Busters and for designing that thing they gave me the Distinguished Flying Cross which is I laughed like hell. They named us the Burma Bridge Busters the BBB's. That was a big problem, knocking out those bridges from a high altitude. They weren't solid bridges, you know what I mean, they'd go right through them before they blow up. But we did get them after that, after that we took out all the bridges I don't know what the hell happened after that. They are probably still building bridges.

Jenny: Did you get any other medals?

Joe: Yeah. In the air force they give you the air medals every 25 missions you got the air medals. I think I got five air medals. Two distinguished flying crosses and two purple hearts.

Jenny: Where was your other wound?

Joe: You don't want to know. (Laughs).

Jenny: Alright. What was the other flying cross medal?

Joe: The other one was for 150 missions they gave me another flying cross medal. We were supposed to go home after 50 missions, but I kept staying over there. Frankly, I enjoyed it.

Jenny: What was the actual date that you came home?

Joe: I came home December or October, the exact date ... My terminal leave ended in '46 which was in January of '46 and I think I had about 30 days terminal leave so I probably came back in November of '45. The war ended and then I left about two weeks later. I got back in November '45.

Jenny: So was that just a leave and then you had to go back or...

Joe: When you got back they ask you if you want to stay in, or if you want to get out. Well of course, I wanted to get out. They sent us to New York and we went to fort Dix and when I said I wanted to get out, they sent us to Seymour Johnson air force base here in Greensboro or Goldsboro, NC. And there they sent us on terminal leave. They gave us terminal leave and a discharge, but our discharge didn't come up until you finished your terminal leave. And then I was in the air force reserve and Korea came and on July the 4th I was driving through Memphis, Tennessee and some drunk came across the highway and hit me head on and I almost lost my leg and I was in the hospital. The next day my wife came and she your orders to report for active duty for Korea. I said well; get the doctor to send a letter. My leg ... I wore a steel brace for two years you know what I mean. So he sent a letter that said he won't be available for combat duty for at least a year. So at the end of a year they sent me another letter and I was still wearing the steel brace and then they discharged me from the reserve core. I almost made Korea.

Jenny: did you feel lucky?

Joe: I guess by that time I felt I had enough war, but I would have served. It would have been alright. I had a hell of a year that year trying to get better. When I took that brace off, I couldn't get out of bed until I put it back on. That was enough. My father came to this country in 1912 as a 16 year old kid and when the 1st WW world war came he was a 2nd lieutenant he went off to training school. Tulane , Georgia camp Campbell or something like that was a 2nd lieutenant and was on the boat going overseas when the war ended and came around and came back.