Transcription: John Zink

My name is Tom Single. I am with the Texas General Land Office. Today is Friday, April the 3rd, 2009. It is approximately 9 o'clock a.m. I am interviewing Mr. John Zink by telephone interview. I am located at the Texas General Land Office and Mr. Zink is at his home. The interview is in support of the Voices of Veterans Program for the state of Texas Veterans Land Board. The purpose is to create a permanent record of military service experiences of veterans. Mr. Zink, as you know, I am about to interview you relating to your military experiences. The interview is by telephone and I will be using a tape recorder to record this interview. The interview will be transcribed and made into the permanent record at the Veterans Land Board in Austin, Texas. Does the Veterans Land Board have your permission and consent to conduct this interview and make it a part of the permanent records of the Veterans Land Board?

John Zink: Yes, they do.

OK, now the purpose of the interview is to record your recollections of your military experience. We follow somewhat of a question and answer format, but please feel free to expand on your answers and add anything you think may be helpful in refreshing your recollections so that future generations will have the opportunity to know what it was like for you during your military life and how those experiences have shaped your life since then. We understand that some of your experiences may be difficult to discuss and if so, you are free to limit the interview to the extent you are comfortable in relating the experiences. Is that OK?

John Zink: That's fine.

OK. Let's start off with some basic background information. Could you give me your name and present address?

John Zink: My name is John E. Zink. I live at 705 Whitehead Street, Smithville, Texas 78957.

And could you give me your age please?

John Zink: I am 85 years old.

OK. Could you give me some of your family information, background and from birth to present?

John Zink: Well, I was, my parents were William and Noreen Zink, and I was born in Bowling Green, Kentucky, as my dad was finishing college under World War I GI Bill, and from there we moved to Ohio. I was six weeks old when we moved to Ohio, and I grew up and went to school in Threshgo, Ohio, for 12 years. It was a small school with under 12 students in all 12 grades. After school, I went up to Dayton, Ohio and got a job in civil service going in engine overhaul, and soon thereafter, World War II broke out and I __ my dad the idea of going in the military, and I entered, I took the aviation cadet exam in April of 1942. In June, 1942, I entered the service and went to California and September, 1942, I entered flying school, graduating in June of 1943.

OK, now hold on a second, because I'm gonna back you up a little bit for some other information. So as of December 7th, 1941, you were a civilian.

John Zink: Yes.

And what were you doing at that time?

John Zink: I was going to an engine overhaul school up at Bright Patterson Airport, well, at that time, it was Patterson Field in Dayton, Ohio.

OK. And so you were a civilian?

John Zink: Civilian in civil service, yes.

In civil service. And how did you end up getting a job in engine overhaul?

John Zink: The federal government had a program while I was still in high school where they, some of the better, larger schools, they had a machine shop set up and students could go there and learn different kinds of machine shop, and from there they sent out notices to those students once they graduated of various job openings around in the government, and I'd always been interested in airplanes so I applied for the one up at Patterson Field to engine overhaul and was accepted.

How did your interest in aircraft develop in you?

John Zink: Well, as far back as I can remember, I was always interested in airplanes, and one of the car dealers in my county had a Stenson Reliant and he used to land it in my neighbor's pasture field, and every time he did, I'd run down there and drool over the airplane I guess is the right term. And I always wanted to fly. By the way, I had an uncle who was a rural milk tray aviator prior to World War II. I think he graduated ___ in 1935 and he flew the West Virginia Air National Guard Rangers.

Your father was a World War I veteran –

John Zink: World War I veteran, yes. He was in the Ohio National Guard before the war, and in fact he was one of the National Guard units that was sent down on the Mexican border when Pancho Villa was parading back and forth across the border.

Oh, so you've got quite a family background in the military.

John Zink: Yeah, he and his brother both were in that National Guard unit.

OK. Did you fly at all before you entered the service?

John Zink: I had never been in an airplane until I went to flying school. I mean in the air actually.

And you were a somewhat unique experience because you did not have any college education?

John Zink: No.

…when you went into the military.

John Zink: That's right.

And were still able to get into flight school.

John Zink: Well, during World War II, first they lowered it from college degree to two years of college, and then in December when the Japanese attacked, they lowered it to high school education.

Do you recall December 7th, '41, where you were and what you were doing?

John Zink: I was working in Urbana, Ohio, then I'd gone home over the weekend and we were sitting in the front yard and somebody come running out of the house and saying they heard on the radio the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Was it something in your mind you had anticipated or thought about?

John Zink: I don't think I probably had, given it any thought at all.

Is that right? So it was quite a shock.

John Zink: Oh yes. And I think it was to all the people I knew.

Hello?

John Zink: Yes.

OK, I'm getting some static.

John Zink: I am, too. I don't know where it's from, but I can still hear you good.

But I don't want this to affect the recording. Let's give it a little bit more of a try and see if it stays or goes away.

John Zink: OK.

So did you have any other family members who served in the family – any brothers or sisters?

John Zink: No, both my sisters were married and had young children, and so, and I have no brothers. But out of the, seven of the boys I graduated from high school with, six of them served in the service and the only reason the other one didn't was because he had rheumatic fever when he was a child and it affected his heart.

OK. So on December 7th and immediately thereafter, what you were feeling and what have you, what caused you to consider going into the military?

John Zink: Well, I think it was just something that most young people at that time thought it was the right thing to do, and I had always been interested in flying anyhow, and that was an opportunity for somebody with only a high school education to get into the military and fly.

Yeah, certainly was. And so how old were you then when you entered?

John Zink: I was still 18 when I entered the service, and it was June and I was 19 in August of that year.

OK, and what year was that?

John Zink: 1942.

And approximately when did you go in?

John Zink: June of 1942.

In June of 1942, and of course you volunteered at that time.

John Zink: Yes.

And were you surprised that you had the opportunity to go to air school?

John Zink: Well, before I went in, I had taken all the exams to go to flying school because that's when they opened it up for people without a college education, so I took the, you have to take a written exam and a physical before you could be accepted. And so I had taken that and passed it, and I think I took that in probably May, late May or so, and then a month later I went in the service.

OK, and where did you go?

John Zink: I went to Fort Thomas Kentucky and was sworn in, issued uniforms, and a few days later they throw us on a train and I ended up in Victorville, California.

OK, and tell me what took place in the California experience.

John Zink: Well, what caused me to be in California was that all the flying schools, most all the flying schools were located on the west coast. And there were so many people applied right after the Japanese attacked that there was a backlog of people waiting to go to flying school, and Victorville was one of the holding points for people waiting until they got openings in flying school. So I was there from June until September, and in September, I went to pre-flight.

And what did you do from June to September?

John Zink: Well, they didn't really have, first of all they gave us basic training. Of course none of us had basic training. And then they said well, you guys, as long as you don't get in trouble, you can do anything you want. So I got me a job at the officer's club helping the bartenders. And I was 18 and I wasn't allowed to handle liquor, but every time they wanted a bottle, I'd go back to the store room and bring one out. And that was nice because Victorville is the closest air base to Hollywood, and there was a lot of Hollywood stars would come up there on weekends for dances and stuff.

Wow, so you went from a local boy in Ohio to all of a sudden mixing with the stars in sunny California.

John Zink: No, I didn't mix with them too much, but I got to look at 'em real good.

And of course here you are, you're an 18-year-old guy, you're sent off to California – I assume that was the first time you went that far away from home?

John Zink: Oh yeah, oh yes.

So this was your first experience. And at a time when things in the war were not really going well for the United States.

John Zink: That's right.

Tell me what your thoughts were while you were there preparing for flight school. Did you have any concerns about what you had originally did?

John Zink: No, I don't think, I think it was a group of very young men who all had the same ideas and we were I guess very congenial with each other and nobody seemed to really have any worrisome thoughts about what they were doing.

So you weren't having thoughts about the possibility of death -

John Zink: No, I think the only thing any of us thought about would we be able to make it, would we be able to graduate from class.

OK, that was your main concern.

John Zink: Yes.

So you stayed until September of '42?

John Zink: September '42, and then we went to preflight down at Santa Ana Army Air Base, which was a preflight school, and I think there was something like 12,000 aviation cadets at Santa Ana going through preflight, which was a lot of college-level courses in darn near any subject you want to name. So we were there for, let's see, a little over six weeks. And of course we had big parades every Sunday. When you get 12,000 guys out there marching on the parade every Sunday, it's a big parade.

To say the least. So at the preflight, it was mostly schooling and testing.

John Zink: Yes.

And some marching.

John Zink: Oh yeah, a lot of marching. And also they were building barracks so fast, so we got to indoctrinate six new barracks while I was there.

Wow, that's pretty nice. Were you missing civilian life at all at this time?

John Zink: No.

You were happy where you were?

John Zink: I think so, and I don't know of anyone that was really unhappy at that time.

That's pretty amazing when you think about it, it was kind of a low point of the war, young guys, very young guys going into the military and starting to do something that you had never done before, in a very radically different environment, and yet everybody was feeling good about what they were doing.

John Zink: Yeah, well you know, we got weekends off after a while, and you could ride the wreck cars, which was sort of an inner urban type car, ride them from Santa Ana into LA for 25 cents, and we had the Biltmore Hotel downtown was our gathering point, and so we'd go in there. I usually would rent a room. Sometimes I couldn't even get in, walk in the door at night there were so many guys sleeping on the floor and everything.

Is that right? Wow. That was a strange time, wasn't it?

John Zink: It was amazing.

One that our country will probably never seen again.

John Zink: Well, in many respects, I hope we never do.

OK, so eventually you got to flight training.

John Zink: In February of '42 – it had to be '42 because I graduated in '43 – but anyhow, it was later, September of '42 I went to Thunderbird I in Glendale, Arizona, for primary flying school.

Thunderbird I?

John Zink: There was two Thunderbirds. There was Thunderbird I and Thunderbird II. Thunderbird I was for American pilots and Thunderbird II would train Canadian pilots, and Thunderbird was Hollywood's idea of what a primary flying school should be like.

And what would that be?

John Zink: Well, real nice quarters, outstanding food. I guess that's the primary thing because they couldn't help you with your flight training. Anyhow, I was there six weeks, and in six weeks you got 60 hours of flying time, and / or washed out, depending on, and primary in those days, at least 50% of the people didn't make it through the primary flying school.

Tell me about what planes did you start off with?

John Zink: We flew Steerman's in primary. There was two types of planes in primary flying school at that time. One was Steerman and one was Orion.

OK. And was Orion, was it PT-19 or something?

John Zink: Yeah.

And so here you are about to embark on a new thing, leaving the earth in fact. Did you have much trepidation before your first flight?

John Zink: I think you were, had two feelings. Number one was I'm gonna do it, and the other one was, I'm sort of scared to do it. And I guess the joy overtook the other one.

I assume you had ground training before.

John Zink: Oh yeah, you had over at Santa Ana, you had a lot of college-level classes in aerodynamics and various other subjects.

Did they have link trainers then?

John Zink: I didn't fly a link trainer until I got to Advanced. That's the only place they had 'em.

So before you went on your first flight, you really didn't have any stick and rudder practice?

John Zink: None at all.

Or training or – so you were being put into an environment control-wise that you had never experienced before.

John Zink: Never had been, had my body in the air without anything under me.

That must've been scary.

John Zink: It was yeah, I think it was scary, part of it, drilling is part of it.

Do you remember your first flight?

John Zink: Yeah, the instructor, Seeriman, the instructor, sat in the rear cockpit, and the students sat in the front cockpit and the instructor just took off, went out and flew around a while, and didn't do anything other than a few turns and stuff and come back down and landed. And even with that, there's a fair number of people that got airsick.

Is that right?

John Zink: I was lucky. I did not have that problem.

And how did it feel to leave the earth?

John Zink: I don't know how you'd describe it. It's just, it's something that the first time you do it, you just think am I really doing this? And it was enjoyable, scary too, I guess.

You had to have liked the view.

John Zink: Yes, oh, it was beautiful.

So primary training you have to go through a number of flights –

John Zink: You had to solo within a certain length of time, and then you had to get 60 hours' flying time to graduate.

Did you have any concerns in your solo?

John Zink: No, I actually, I was one of the first ones in my class to solo. I wasn't the first one because of the people with flying experience, and somebody even sharper than me, but I did, I soloed as soon as I was allowed to, and one of the interesting things maybe is when you went in the dining hall and walked in, it was cafeteria style, and if you soloed, you weren't allowed to touch the rails into the food area. But once you soloed, you could lean on, touch 'em and do anything you wanted. Some sort of a ritual someone started.

It became an honor.

John Zink: Yes, it did.

So you soloed first –

John Zink: Soloed, and then you'd, they just taught you different types of maneuvers and aerobatics and cross country flying.

So this was still with the Steerman? And I assume if a war wasn't going on, you would've thought this was all great fun.

John Zink: Oh yeah, it would've been very nice. And then at the 60-hour mark into your time, you graduated and went on to basic flying school. And you know, they didn't, your class didn't all go to the same school. I ended up at Minter Field at Bakersfield, California.

Minter's Field?

John Zink: M-I-N-T-ER, uh-huh. And there, we flew an airplane called BT-13, finally known as the Bull-T vibrater.

Bull-T vibrater, yes. It was kind of the predecessor to the T-6.

John Zink: Yeah, it was a low-wing, sync-wing and __ plane.

Closed cockpit.

John Zink: Closed cockpit with a very bad spin characteristic. A lot of guys, in fact when I went there, the students weren't allowed to do solo stints, and then about halfway through, they opened it up for solo spins again.

When did you see your first crash?

John Zink: Well, in primary you saw a lot of guys ground loop the sternum.

And what is a ground loop?

John Zink: It's you land and the airplane suddenly does a violent turn and usually drags a wing tip or something like that. When you land, the tendency is to relax back on the ground, and with the Steerman, you didn't dare relax until you got down to a slow speed and started taxiing.

And why was that?

John Zink: It just had a violent, it was, I don't know how to say it, but it had a real bad tendency to ground loop. And you didn't have real good brakes and stuff like that on those airplanes.

OK, so you didn't see any fatal crashes or anything while you were at primary.

John Zink: No, nor did I, I did not see a fatal crash all the way through flying school.

Is that right?

John Zink: Yeah.

Wow.

John Zink: Saw some crashes, but I never saw a fatal one.

Do you recall seeing your first crash?

John Zink: Well, the first accident I actually saw was at Advanced, and we had this old twin engine airplane that had wooden propellers on it, and you had to squat, what they called squat switches on the landing gear. As long as the weight was on those switches, you couldn't retract the landing gear. So some of these guys got the idea, well, if I flip the switch up, we're starting down the runway, as soon as I break ground, the landing gear will come up. Well, this guy did that one day, and he actually hit a bump and the landing gear folded and he wasn't flying, so he just had fully landed, didn't hurt anybody, but it sure didn't do the airplane any good. And the first real bad crash I ever saw was actually overseas in combat.

OK, we'll get to that. So did you have any close calls yourself in the training process?

John Zink: Yeah, I almost lost an airplane on take-off one day. My fault. I started down the runway and all of a sudden I'm heading off in the boondocks, and if it wouldn't have been for the instructor, I don't think, I think I would've probably crashed out in the desert.

And what would've been the cause of that crash?

John Zink: Stupidity. Lack of attention. And by the way, my instructor in the fast plant school was a British officer.

Is that right? Fascinating. And had he seen combat in Europe?

John Zink: Yeah.

Wow. So you had a seasoned combat pilot teaching you.

John Zink: Yeah, and he was, I always said I got to graduate because he was my instructor.

Ah, so you give him high ranks.

John Zink: Oh yeah.

How did that happen that a British - ?

John Zink: We had exchange pilots in flying school. We had an American instructor over in Britain, and the Canadians, we had Canadians around. And Advanced, we flew an AT-17 which was called the Bamboo Bomber like I said, and then another airplane which was called the AT-9 which was also a little twin engine trainer, except the glide speed on it was 90 mph, which was pretty fast.

That's very fast at that time.

John Zink: It had a wind __ at the top of the fuselage and if you did a power-off landing and had to look out the top window to see the runway because you were going down at such a steep angle. Anyway, everybody got at least 10 hours in that airplane.

This was at Advanced?

John Zink: Advanced flying school.

Where was this at?

John Zink: It's Williams Field in – can't think of the name – anyhow, it's east of Phoenix, Arizona.

OK, so you started in California, you went to Arizona -

John Zink: Back to California.

OK, but you were moving up in the types of planes that you were flying. Any fear at any time while you were doing this? Were you full of confidence that you'd made it now once you got through primary and there's no way you would be stopped?

John Zink: Oh no, I don't think, I think in my mind, the day I stood up in graduation class and they gave me my wings is when I felt confident that I was gonna make it.

Is that right?

John Zink: I think you always had, it wasn't necessary that you couldn't fly, but when you're young you tend to every once in a while do something stupid, and that washed as many people out did fly I think.

OK. So your Advanced training – let's see, this was taking you into about what period of time?

John Zink: I graduated June of '43. That was from early May until June.

OK. And so in this Advanced training, by this time had you ever seen any of the fighter airplanes?

John Zink: Well, while we were in Basic, some of the test pilots of various aviation companies would come up and did an air show for us. I don't know who the pilot was, but one of 'em was a P-38 test pilot, and that was the only thing I'd seen before I got to Advance. And then Advanced, we had the AT-17 and an AT-9, and then we did gunnery on an AT-6 which was a single engine trainer that you still see at air shows and such. And then a version of the P-38. The British did not like turbo superchargers, so they made some 38's without turbo's and sent 'em over to England, and of course they had limited capabilities, so the British finally sent 'em back and we were using those in Advanced training for training for fighter bombs, and everybody that was gonna go to P-38's got 10 hours on those.

The first time you saw a P-38, what did you think? It's very unusual.

John Zink: Well, the first time I ever saw one actually was before I went into the service.

Oh, you saw one before.

John Zink: Yeah, when I was going to engine overhaul school, the classroom was attached to a hangar, and if you opened the door from the classroom into the hangar, there was a P-38 sitting there. And I went back and told the guy ____ what I'm gonna fly. And everybody thought aha-ha-ha.

Why did you like that?

John Zink: It's just something you see and you say oh, man, isn't that nice?

It's a very imposing machine.

John Zink: Yes.

And back at that time, it was, it had to be like seeing a very advanced machine in this day and age.

John Zink: Oh my gosh, yeah.

So you were lucky and never saw any fatal crashes –

John Zink: All the way through training.

All the way through training. When you finished your Advanced training, did you think that the government had been doing an adequate job of preparing you to fly?

John Zink: Yeah, I think they did. For the number of people and how fast everything expanded, I think they did a tremendous job.

Did you think they could've done anything better than they did?

John Zink: Well, I think, not at the time but probably later on in my career I probably thought oh, why didn't they do this?

OK, but you got through your Advanced training, and is that when you got your wings?

John Zink: Yeah, you graduated Advanced, they gave you your wings and your next assignment.

Now you were an air cadet.

John Zink: Aviation cadet, yeah.

And what happened when you got your wings?

John Zink: You also get your commission.

So you got a commission as a -

John Zink: Second lieutenant.

Second lieutenant. So you became an officer and a gentleman.

John Zink: Yeah, now our class was the first class where they also, some people didn't get commissioned, they got what was called a flight officer.

Yeah, that was a -

John Zink: And I'm not sure how they were selected, but I think there was 12 in my class that got the flight officer rank.

12 out of what?

John Zink: About 220. A very small percentage.

Got that, and what percentage could you remember were those with college degrees versus those without college?

John Zink: Oh, I'd say by that time, we were probably down around say 18-20% with college degrees, and maybe 30 or 40% with some college.

So most of the pilots at that time were not college educated?

John Zink: Not college educated.

I'm surprised at that.

John Zink: Yeah, now we had in every class, there was also student officers who were people that were in the military as ground officers or – and then they applied for flying school and they went through with whatever rank they had. And I think we had about 15 in my class and 3 or 4 of them were captains, and most of 'em were first lieutenants.

That surprises me that the number of –

John Zink: Non-college people?

Non-college people who were getting wings.

John Zink: Yeah, because up until early 1942, if you didn't have at least two years of college, you just didn't get in flying school at all.

So I assume you felt like you were a privileged guy and an extraordinary guy who was able to pull that off.

John Zink: Well, you were just one of many hundred at that time, because every Advanced flying school graduated people on the same day, and I don't know how many Advanced flying schools there were, but probably around somewhere between 25 and 30 at least, so you had something like 5,000-6,000 guys graduating and getting their commissions at the same time.

Wow, that number almost blows our mind in this day and age to think that many people at one time going through this process, but there were a lot of planes and a lot of people, slots that needed to be filled I guess.

John Zink: Oh yeah.

So you finished your Advanced training, you got your wings, became an officer and a gentleman, and then what did they do to you?

John Zink: Right. Well, when you were in, all the way through flying school, you kept flying for the type of airplane you wanted to fly, and when you graduated, you got your first assignment. Now out of my class, there was probably a third of us got P-38's. A few got Martin B-26's. Some got North American B-25's. One good friend of mine ended up in B-17's down at Payote, Texas, and he ended up not only going down there to fly B-17's, he ended up an instructor there for the whole war.

Is that right?

John Zink: Can you imagine being in Payote, Texas that long?

Wow. So how would you have felt if you would have been a bomber man?

John Zink: Very disappointed.

Very disappointed. You wanted the fast catch. OK. And did you, and so you found out, when you graduated, that you were in fact going to get fighters -

John Zink: Yeah.

And I assume that made you feel mighty, mighty good.

John Zink: Yes, all of us that were going to go to fighters were very happy.

OK, and where did they assign you to?

John Zink: What is now known as Edwards Air Force Base, back at the time it was Nurack Army Air Base out in the desert in California.

And you went there for how long?

John Zink: We were sent up there for P-38 introduction and transition and we were there for a little over five weeks.

How many flights do you think you made during that time?

John Zink: Let's see, I made probably did about 20 flights, and that's where I cracked up my first airplane.

Oh, so tell us about that.

John Zink: Well, it's one of those embarrassing circumstances. We usually got up early and flew out. It was because it would get too hot for a liquid cooled engine. So we'd get out at 4 o'clock and go out to fly. And I got out there one day and they assigned me to this airplane, and I went out to crawl in the cockpit and didn't check out. So I went running back to the ready hut and they said well, go out there and take that other airplane out there. It's the base commander's airplane, but it's ready to go. And I went out there and got in a hurry, and first thing I just checked the forms and it said all fuel gauges __ information. So I reached down and I could reach outside the cockpit and check the reserve, two reserve tanks, just take the cap off and look at 'em, and they looked, you know, they were down ___ our plane were pre-flighted. So I started up, taxied out. By that time, the fly-out ___ was long gone and they said well, just fly around by yourself. So I'm out there like all hot pilots and buzzing the desert and chasing buses and anything I could find, and the right engine quit. So they always said the theory at that time was if an engine quits better to come back to base. So I feathered the thing, climbed back up about 500 feet and the left engine quit.

So you were without power.

John Zink: And so I switched the gas tanks and about that time, I was bouncing off the sand dunes. Anyhow, I got out of the airplane and had a little bump on my head. The airplane, one engine was way in the back in the sand dune and the other was still attached to the airplane.

Wow.

John Zink: And a gunnery range right over not too far from where I landed. So I went down to call 'em and said I just cracked up an airplane, figuring that was the end of my flying P-38's, and so they come out and picked me up and took me to the hospital and gave me a couple of stitches in my head, and went back down to the operation building and they said what happened? And I told 'em and they went out and checked and here the crew chief the night before, this was the base commander's airplane, and he come in real late so the crew chief decided, well, nobody else is gonna fly, I'll just sign it off as being refueled, and then tomorrow morning I'll get up early and go out and put the fuel in it. Well, I got there earlier than he did. And so he got in trouble

and I was in trouble, but anyhow, two days later they sent me on to my next assignment which was San Diego Naval Air Station, North Island.

So they didn't have a hearing or anything?

John Zink: No, I didn't appear before I board, but the accident investigation officer talked to me.

The base commander must not have been too happy with you.

John Zink: I never saw him.

You wrecked his airplane?

John Zink: I think he just went over and said oh, I'll take that one, now that's my airplane now, and don't let anybody fly it but me.

OK, I want to go back just a second to your first flight in a P-38.

John Zink: That was actually my setup. I flew this RP-322 in Advanced. That was a P-38 without turbo supercharger. And we got 12 hours on those and it was like a P-38 until you got up to about 12,000 feet, and then without turbo you just couldn't get, you know, didn't perform at very high altitudes. So as far as handling and stuff was concerned, it was exactly like a P-38.

And how did that feel to you?

John Zink: Well, first of all, a P-38 for years was fairly heavy on the controls, but it was very stable, so when I got in that airplane and flew it, I thought man, this is living. That was my goal and now I'm doing it. And so the further you went in training, the more things that you learned about flying in combat.

I assume your first flight was kind of like somebody getting their first super car.

John Zink: We used to sit there and watch guys take off and say oh, look, he didn't pull his gear up. And I thought well sure I'm not gonna do that, and I didn't, I pulled it up at 5,000 feet.

You waited until you got up there.

John Zink: I made sure I was off the ground. It climbed so much faster than anything you'd ever been in before.

So just for those who will be reading this or listening to this over the years, tell us what a P-38 was.

John Zink: A P-38 was a twin engine fighter plane built by Lockheed Aircraft Corporation. It was designed in the late 1930s by Kelly Johnson and his engineering staff. Kelly was the head of engineering at Lockheed in those days. And first flew in late 1940, and became I think they got their first contract in late 1940 and started producing airplanes and the first ones were probably delivered to the Air Force in mid-1941 in very small quantities. And then when the war

broke out the contracts were increased of course, and they started – I can't tell you how many airplanes a month. And the total number of P-38's built was almost, not quite 10,000.

It was a very unique looking airplane, wasn't it?

John Zink: Yes, and of course one of the versions, photographic version, had that big nose compartment so they could put windows in that and put cameras in that. That was a photo recon airplane for the Air Force for many years.

And it had twin booms?

John Zink: Twin booms and the engine air coolers for the liquid coolant was in the booms, and then oil coolers and the – oil coolers was in the nose under the engine, and there was an inlet for the air to go into the turbo superchargers to keep them cool. And in the earlier airplanes, that was just a tube under the leading edge of the wing. Then in later airplanes that was put in the radiator under the nose of the engine.

And what type size engines did these have?

John Zink: It was an Allison V-12, and the earlier ones started out about not quite 1100 horsepower, and as they kept working on them, and increased them, by the time I quit flying them they were 1650 horsepower.

And you had two of 'em.

John Zink: And you had two.

And that plane was pretty fast, wasn't it?

John Zink: Yeah, the only, I don't know if you've ever read about it, but one problem the P-38 and P-47's too, was if you got it in a vertical dive and got too fast, you lost the elevator control.

They called that compressibility?

John Zink: Compressibility, yeah. And that was true on that airplane until right towards the end of the war, and they come out with a little what they called the dive flap which is a very small electric-driven flap on the outside of the engines on each wing, and that thing would drop down maybe an inch, inch and a half, and that would break up that air flow over the tail, or change the air flow over the tail so you didn't, then again regained elevator control. It took 'em all that time to solve that.

Right, so pretty close to the end of the war you flew with that compressibility problem.

John Zink: Yeah.

And what kind of a limitation was that for a pilot?

John Zink: Well, I only know one guy that got into compressibility, and what happened when you got into a steep dive and got into a certain air speed range, you just lost any ability to move the elevators.

And the elevators control - ?

John Zink: The pitch angle of the airplane. And you just could not move that elevator at all and the faster you went, the nose would tend to tuck under.

Which put you in a dive -

John Zink: Put you in a steeper and steeper dive.

Which if you couldn't –

John Zink: Now the only, I don't say experience I ever had, but the only time I ever worried about it was we had one of the instructors up at San Diego was a pilot from the African theater, and he said you people got to learn to fly a P-38 above 40,000 feet because the Germans can get to 40,000 feet. So we were up one day at 44,000, and at that time you had a hydraulic control on your turbo supercharger to control the speed, and it wasn't very satisfactory, so my turbos both overspeed lights came on on both turbos. So I called and said I'm gonna pull out of formation to get the turbos under control, and he said OK, so I pulled out, got the turbos under control and I got my head out of the cockpit and looked around and nobody around. And I looked down and I thought at 20,000 feet below me was that flight I was in down there in a dogfight with another bunch of fighters, just practice dogfight. So without even thinking, I just rolled the 38 over and let it fall through, and I got down vertical and I thought what the heck did I do this for? That's the way to get in compressibility really quick. And without even probably thinking, I just reached over and hit the trim cap a quarter of a turn, the elevator trim tab, took my hands off the controls, feet off the rudders, and set there and that old P-38 just pulled out as nice as could be.

You kind of let it do it itself.

John Zink: I let it do it itself. It did a better job than I – if I'd have horsed on those controls, I bet two bits I'd have been in compressibility. Anyhow, I never did that again.

OK, all right, that was kind of just a little reminiscing about the P-38 as an airplane and what have you, and so you're now into kind of a permanent assignment.

John Zink: Well yeah, San Diego you were in what they called operational training, which was learn to do dive bombing and strafing and different kind of aerial maneuvers, and some dogfighting because we were on the Navy base, so the Navy and us had a lot of rat races and dogfights.

Really?

John Zink: Oh sure.

So you would fight with what types of airplanes?

John Zink: Oh, F6F's and F4U's.

Wow. And those were Navy planes.

John Zink: Oh yeah. Sure. And one of the nice things was you'd get 'em on tail so you'd just pull up in a nice steep climb and you could watch in your mirror and when he spun out, you just kick it over and fall back and get on his tail because their stalling speed was not too much different than ours, but their stalling characteristic was a lot different.

Is that right?

John Zink: Yeah, they'd always fall off on the wings and get in a spin if they weren't real careful and the 38 just fall off on the wing, just pick up speed and keep going.

So one of your maneuvers in dealing with single engine Navy planes –

John Zink: Yeah.

…in dogfights was to climb.

John Zink: Always if they got on your tail.

So just climb out of it.

John Zink: Sure. Anyhow, we flew out of North Island for six weeks and got around 100 hours on P-38's. We did some practice dive bombing, strafing, dogfighting of course, and I'm gonna tell you about an incident while I was there which has nothing to do with what you really want to know, but while I was there, we were out one day and this one instructor always pulled up into the sun on his last maneuver before we went back to land, and did ___. Well this one particular day when his plane stalled, it fell down and cut the tail off of his wingman's airplane, I'm flying number 3. Well, the wingman's airplane of course started falling out of the sky, so he bailed out. We were about a mile and a half or so off the shore and down the coast of San Diego. The instructor's airplane made a 90-degree turn and went inland and hit a house and killed five kids.

Oh my gosh.

John Zink: Which this F-18 deal that happened a few weeks ago?

Yes.

John Zink: And I thought man, that sounds like us. Anyhow, so I went back in and landed and reported the accident, and by that time everybody in the area knew that the plane had gone into that house and killed some kids, and so we didn't even go into San Diego my last few weeks there because we weren't very popular.

Is that right?

John Zink: Well, you know, I don't think there'd be any trouble, but sometimes it's just better to avoid it than it is to see what will happen.

So even back then though there was some, at least for the civilians notwithstanding that we were in a war, the pilots were training, accidents happened, and what have you, there was some -

John Zink: Oh, people became upset if something like that happened, sure.

OK, and that was a very tragic thing to happen.

John Zink: Oh yeah, it was very, very tragic. And of course the newspapers even in those days weren't too kind to the military.

Is that right? So even during the war.

John Zink: There was some of the newspapers, and I don't even know who the publishers were, it's so easy to blame everything on the Hearst newspapers, but I don't have any idea what publishers were, but it was not, I don't think it was exaggerated, but it certainly didn't point out the potential of what happens if you're flying a lot of airplanes.

So unlike those of us now who look back and the way history has looked at the great things of World War II, like we were all together moving forward in one, united front, that was not necessarily the case.

John Zink: Oh no. There was, in every place I was ever stationed, there was some anti-military, in a very small amount, but some people just did not like the fact that there was military around them.

Especially pilots.

John Zink: Well yeah. If nothing else, it made a lot of noise.

That's right.

John Zink: Interrupted my sleep.

OK, so you got fully trained here in the United States to be a P-38 jockey, and then what happened?

John Zink: Yeah. Well, we got orders, of course they were sealed, so they told us to go down to the supply and draw all out. So they gave us each a trunk and six wool blankets and a 45 caliber pistol, new issue, and sent us on our way. Well, we said well, heck, we don't want to carry that foot locker with us, so we them ship it. And we got up to the port of San Francisco, and the old sergeant up there says where's your foot lockers? We said well, we shipped 'em to our destination. You fools, he said, if you'd sent 'em here, brought 'em here, I'd have sent 'em home for you. Anyhow so we got up to Frisco and we still had sealed orders and -

So at that time, did you have any idea where you might be going?

John Zink: Well we knew we were going to Frisco, we were going someplace, either the Aleutians or the Pacific.

So Europe was out.

John Zink: Yeah. And since we had winter flying equipment, most of us thought well, we're going to the Aleutians.

At that time, had they withdrawn the P-38 from Europe yet?

John Zink: Oh no, no. In fact, the only Air Force that went through the P-38 was Jimmy Doolittle, 8th Airborne. The 9th Air Force -

Oh that's right, they kept it in the Mediterranean –

John Zink: And the Mediterranean theater, that was their primary fighter.

OK. But out of Europe, at least out of the 8th Air Force, by this time had they withdrawn them?

John Zink: No. They were still, in fact some of the people I went through Murock with later on into ___ 8th Air Force flying 38's, and then they were on transitioned into either 47's or 51's.

So even though you were training on the west coast, you could at that time have thought that you might have gone to Europe.

John Zink: Oh yeah, I'd say out of 120 people or so that went into the P-38's out of my class, I would say 80% or more went to Europe or the Mediterranean.

Is that right?

John Zink: Yeah.

Wow. Did you in your own mind have a preference as to where you wanted to fight?

John Zink: I didn't -

Or who you wanted to fight?

John Zink: I really probably never gave it much thought. I was very happy to go to the Pacific, but I don't know if they told me I was going to Europe, I don't think it would have made any difference.

You just wanted to fly that airplane.

John Zink: Yeah, right.

And any trepidations at this time, now that you know you're going into a combat theater?

John Zink: Yeah, I'm sure there was, memory doesn't serve me too well anymore, but I'm sure that all of us felt that we were on our way, what's ahead of us? And anyhow, we got up to San Francisco and we were there a few days, and they put us on what was called a C-87, and a C-87 was a B-24 converted with passenger seats on it, like an airliner. You know, nice, it didn't hold too many but we had nice folding seats that leaned back and everything. We got on that and took off, and then I've forgotten, we landed about five times and ended up on New Caledonia.

Did you spend any time in Hawaii or were you just - ?

John Zink: Enough time to go up to the officer's club and get a meal.

And that was it?

John Zink: Yeah, and the strange thing was, the next table was a bunch of pilots that looked like they were combat weary, and we talked to 'em a little bit and they were P-38 pilots in the 13th Air Force.

Wow.

John Zink: And at that time, well I'll tell you later, but that was the only P-38 outfit, there was really only one P-38 outfit in the 13th Air Force at that time. Anyhow, we ended up, we landed at Canton Island and Fiji and ended up on New Caledonia which was a French owned convict island.

In the South Pacific.

John Zink: In the South Pacific, and that was the back face for the 339 fighter squad. And at that time, it was the only P-38 squadron in the 13th Air Force and with dual strength, twice as big as the normal squadron, and one section would be in combat and the other section would be on rest leave and then come back up and train with the new pilots and exchange into combat. So I ended up getting signed to the outfit that was on rest leave. Well, all of us did in fact. So we were sitting there on this, 12 brand new pilots on a P-38 base with about 15 or 16 airplanes and nobody there to tell us what to do, except we knew we had to have runway alert every day.

And what was runway alert?

John Zink: Well, it had two airplanes sitting on the edge of the runway, and pilots usually set either in 'em or on 'em, and if somebody would come flying into the area without their identification system on, we'd scramble and go out and intercept 'em to make sure they were friendly. And it was amazing how many people would come in every day without their IFF equipment. You know what IFF is?

Yes, that's for –

John Zink: Identification Friend or Foe.

Yes.

John Zink: So anyhow, these guys come in from U.S. and they wouldn't turn it on like they were supposed to 100 miles out. We'd get scrambled in. So we did that for several weeks because about that time they decided to convert all the 13th Air Force fighter outfits into P-38's, and previously we'd had the one P-38 double strength outfit, one P-40 squadron, and four P-39 squadrons, and that the was the 13th Air Force fighter command.

Now the 339th, if I'm not mistaken was not the 339th the one that did Yamamoto?

John Zink: Yeah, that was before my time, but yeah, they're the ones that shot down Yamamoto.

Did you know when you went there that they had done that?

John Zink: Yeah. In fact, some of the pilots we had talked to in Hawaii were on that mission.

Is that right?

John Zink: Yeah. Of course, you find out a lot of these things later.

When you went there, did you know about the Yamamoto raid?

John Zink: Not in any detail.

It had been made public?

John Zink: I think more rumor-wise than actual release of the war department.

OK. Did that give you kind of an extra sense of pride or what have you?

John Zink: It made you feel good that you were assigned to an outfit that could do that.

Yes, that was an amazing adventure.

John Zink: Yeah it was.

Were any of the pilots still there when you got there that had participated in the raid?

John Zink: No, there was one pilot still left that had been there at the time of the raid, but he wasn't on the mission. Malaria was a very bad disease over in the Pacific, and everybody was supposed to take what was called an atarin tablet every day, because it kept you from getting malaria. But this one guy had evidently failed to take his, so he was having some trouble with malaria, so they wanted to send him back to the States until he got cured. So that was the guy that was still there, and he had been a flying sergeant and was made flight officer and then made first lieutenant. Anybody that was a flying sergeant, they made 'em flight officer one day and the next day they'd make 'em first lieutenant.

I see.

John Zink: Because there was a whole lot, a lot of the P-38 ___ was flying sergeants.

I never realized that. I thought most of them were officers.

John Zink: Yeah, I always thought so, too, until I got over there and found out that all the flying sergeants in two or three classes, all went into fighters and most of them went into P-38's.

How did the non-officers and the officers intermix? Did they get along together?

John Zink: I never heard, I don't know because they were all officers at the time I got there. Talking to the people who were there including both the officers and non-officers, they had flying sergeants leading flights as well as first lieutenants and captains. It was based strictly on experience.

OK. So the rank was not -

John Zink: Rank was not important.

…really held against you, except maybe getting into the officer's club.

John Zink: Yeah, that did have effect. I'm not too sure. I think if you had enough money, ___.

OK, so here's an Ohio boy who was 18 years old when he went into the service.

John Zink: I was 19.

OK, well when you went into the service, you were still 18, right?

John Zink: 18, yeah.

OK, so you go through all your training, you're still only 19 years old, and you moved from Ohio to California to Arizona, back to California, and all of a sudden here you are halfway around the world on some Godforsaken island in the middle of nowhere.

John Zink: Yeah, well you know, New Caledonia was a convict island for the French.

Yes.

John Zink: OK. And natives were called Konaki's. K-O-N-A-K-I.

OK.

John Zink: And they were very statuesque people. All of them were, even the women were 6 foot or more.

Really?

John Zink: Very, very, they stood very erect and the only thing was strange about 'em, they used to put lime in their hair to dye it. So you'd see 'em with a lot of black hair and a lot of big white top on the top of their head. But I don't think I ever saw one of 'em was under 6 foot tall.

And was there much intermixing between?

John Zink: No. They pretty well stayed away from everything. You'd see 'em in the rural villages and stuff, but that was about it. And there was a lot of French still lived on the island. And there was some intermixing there. Of course the people go out to these little towns to eat and stuff like that.

OK, so here you are now. Tell me about your accommodations.

John Zink: Well, they were quantsun huts.

OK, so at least you weren't in tents.

John Zink: And we just had canvas cots and a lot of blankets, no sheets, pillows with no pillowcases, but good food, and always plenty of it.

So you were never hungry.

John Zink: Never hungry, and always seemed to be plenty of, I didn't drink in those days, but I learned to drink, and always plenty – we had an officer's club and there was one pool table, a dice table, and plenty of ___, a jukebox, we had music, and we had one of the best accordion players in the world was a pilot in our squadron, and in fact before the war, he had his own band out in California. Anyhow, we set around there, flew during the day, and played cards and other things during nights every night. And I was there about six weeks and probably wouldn't have been there that long, but they decided as I said to convert all the squadrons to P-38's, so instead of our group going into combat, another squadron went into combat. We only had enough airplanes for one squadron in combat at a time at that time. And so we set around and flew intercept missions and stuff for about six weeks, and then they said OK, we're gonna close Waltom and we're going up to Guadalcanal.

OK, so tell me what an intercept mission is.

John Zink: Oh, the radar spotted incoming bombers or fighters, some kind of unidentified aircraft, and so you're sitting on runway alert which means you're sitting close to your airplane and they tell you scramble, and you get in the airplane, start it up, taxi it, go down, scream down the runway, take off and then they'll tell you what your heading is to intercept. And they'll give you the heading, as much heading information, altitude information as you can, and you go out and try to find the airplane.

Did you ever find any?

John Zink: Oh, when I was in New Cal, we always found every one they sent us out to intercept. The radar people, you know, it was very basic in those days but it's pretty good, pretty darn good.

So were any of your intercepts of Japanese?

John Zink: Nothing that we could shoot at. It was usually a transport or something like that coming back in that forgot to – they didn't turn their IFF on, Identification Friend or Foe – and they were supposed to leave it off until they got within 100 miles and they turned it on. Well, they'd forget to do it. So they were coming in as an unidentified aircraft.

But you didn't know that.

John Zink: No, nobody knew it until you got out there and looked at it.

How did this feel once you got out there?

John Zink: Well, I guess there's a sense that oh shucks, and then there's a sense of well, I'm glad it was somebody friendly.

Now on these intercept missions, were these by yourself or did you have a wingman?

John Zink: No, we always, two of us always.

So it was always two. So at least there was somebody with you.

John Zink: And at that time, it was usually one of the people I'd gone overseas with.

OK, so somebody you knew and trusted.

John Zink: Yeah.

So you were there about six weeks on New Caledonia.

John Zink: Yeah, and then they said we're closing the base, so pack your stuff, and one of the things you said was well, what do we do with it? They said, well if you can't put it in your airplane, leave it. Now you ever see a P-38 didn't have a big baggage ___. You got a pillow, I even had my mattress. It was real thin and I could stuff it in the gun compartment area. And my pillow and sheets or blankets we had. And by that time, one other story we have is well, after we first got over there, they said well, we're gonna send back to the States for a black locker and everybody's got to make a donation of $20 or whatever it was. I said what's a black locker? They said you'll find out when it gets back. And what black locker is a big locker full of booze. So when we got ready to leave Guadalcanal, they said well everybody's got to take their booze and put it in their airplane because we're not gonna ship it for you because the stevedores will find out it's in there and gonna bust everything out. So now you can pack a mattress, a pillow, blankets, sheets, and 12 bottles of whiskey in a P-38.

I don't think that was written in…

John Zink: You cannot fire your guns because you got no ammo. No, I don't think it was ever put in an instruction manual.

I don't think so, but that was the reality of life. OK, so you go up to Guadalcanal.

John Zink: We go up to Guadalcanal and we're there about two weeks, and they said OK, we're gonna go on up to an island that had two names. One name was Treasure Island, the other name was Sterling Island, and that was a forward P-38 base in the Solomon's. And the other fighter squadron was up there and had been up there for six weeks flying missions up to a place called Rabaul.

Yes, a great Japanese stronghold in the South Pacific.

John Zink: So we went up there and they were very happy to see us, and next day we flew a mission and it was partly the 44 people and partly the 339 people, and we were supposed to escort, well, we did escort SBD's and TBF's on a dive bombing mission of the Japanese fleet in the harbor.

So you were escorting Navy planes.

John Zink: Navy bombers, Navy divers. TBF was a torpedo bomber. They used it as a dive bomber, too. Anyhow, and then the Navy, we were supposed to fly high cover because the 38 really was a high altitude aircraft, and the Navy was supposed to come over there F6F's and the

Marines were there ___ and fly low and the medium cover. Well, the weather wasn't very good, so they never showed up and so we got up close to the target, here we have 15, I think by that time we were down to 15 P-38's, guys were aborted for various reasons -

Did that happen often by the way, aborted missions because of mechanical failure and what have you?

John Zink: I think there was more, I really think we had more aborts for pilot problems than we did for mechanical.

Really?

John Zink: Yeah, you know, and we didn't have, that particular day I am sure it was mostly mechanical because I know some of the guys aborted and they were not people that would abort for any other reason. But most of my experience was it really had more, and it was very limited. I know one pilot we had in our outfit that never completed the mission. Never completed the mission.

He would always find something –

John Zink: He always would take off, and they'd find something wrong and come back and land.

Wow, that's amazing.

John Zink: And finally after a few weeks of that, the colonel group commander said we're gonna rotate you back and they sent him back to the States. Because you know, he sat on the ground and wouldn't fly the missions. Anyhow, we took off out of Sterling Island that day and ended up with 16 P-38's covering these 24 SBD's and 24 TBF's, and by that time, the Japanese still had about 450 airplanes on the six airfields at Rabaul, and we got up there and of course they were going in at about 12,000 feet and we stacked – low cover, intermediate cover, and high cover – and got 'em over the target and they started in there dive bombing run and we started down with 'em, and about that time, the Japs hit us from above and 8 out of 16 P-38's got shot down. And one guy we picked up seven days later in a life raft. He's still living, by the way. He's 93 or 94, and the rest of us struggled home. I mean and the guys, I'm flying on his wing, he shot down one airplane, but our main, our job was to protect the Navy. And out of the 24 SBD's and 24 TBF's, we lost one, and he hit a mast of a ship on his dive bomb. He got too low and hit the mast of the ship and tore a wing off and crashed. But other than that, we didn't lose an airplane. We didn't lose anything but P-38's.

And how would you account for the high losses of P-38's?

John Zink: Well the Japs, the weather that day was thin layers of clouds, and we went in under the lowest level, lowest layer of clouds, and the Japanese could see down and see the shadow of the airplanes down through it, so as I always used to express it, they were playing yo-yo on us, and just hide, pass, come down, go back up, come down another pass, and we didn't see 'em until they got right on us. And so anyhow, we got the Navy out of there and went on home and -

Now was that your first combat mission?

John Zink: That was my first real combat mission.

OK, Mr. Zink, this is a continuation of your interview that was disrupted by some faulty equipment we had last time, and the equipment terminated the interview about the time that we were talking about your first combat mission that you had over the island of Rabaul. And perhaps it might be good if you could just describe that again, what occurred and what you were doing, and then we can proceed from there.

John Zink: OK, Rabaul was a main base for the Japanese Navy and Japanese Air Force in the Solomon Islands. It was on that island, actually the northern end of the Solomon Islands, and it had a very good enclosed harbor. It was almost like a hook, and the Japanese had all of their Japanese fleet, no I don't say all the Japanese, but most of their Japanese fleet there. They had six air fields with over 400 planes on them, and the 5th Air Force had attacked it for a while and then they decided it was too far flown as missions for them, so they turned it over to the 13th Air Force which I was in, and the Navy. And my first mission over Rabaul, we were taking 24 SBD's and 24 TBF's on a dive bombing mission.

And these are Navy planes.

John Zink: These are Navy planes, yeah.

Single engine bombers.

John Zink: Yeah, well the TBF actually was a torpedo plane but they could use it as a dive bomber also. Anyhow, the weather wasn't too good, so as we arrived over the target, the Navy fighters that were supposed to also escort the planes couldn't find us. So as we approached Rabaul, the dive bombers started their bombing run and we were stacked up four airplanes at various altitudes up to about 16,000 feet.

And how many airplanes were there of yours?

John Zink: We had 16 P-38's on the mission, and as they started the dive bombing run, why the Japanese fighters attacked from above. We don't know exactly how high they were, but we were about 16,000, so they were probably 20,000. There was a thin deck of cloud above us and we couldn't see 'em. And so we followed the dive bombers down and as we went down, I saw several P-38's crash in the water. Now in the years since then, we decided that probably part of them got into what was called the compressed adobic dive. As you gain speed in a P-38, the lift point moved back on the wing, and it got to a certain point it would actually blank out the elevator and you couldn't pull out of the dive. Whether these airplanes got into compressibility or actually were shot down, we'll never know for sure, but we did see three of 'em go down in real tight formation and hit the water. Anyhow, so the dive bombers made their run and we came back off the target and now there were 16 P-38's – there was 8 of them shot down or lost. We picked up one pilot 7 days later, and by the way, he's 90 some years old and still living, and we escorted the bombers back out off the target, and then we headed home and then they went back to their base which was on another island.

Now you wouldn't have totally realized how many planes were lost until -

John Zink: Not 'til we got back, that's right, except for the ones we actually saw hit the water. Nobody knew for sure.

And once this came to realization, what was going on in your mind?

John Zink: I didn't want to fly the next day. No, you look around and about that time, that afternoon we got some new pilots in and so they assigned them to the various tents we had. And by the way, our tents were buckle and stilts and had wooden floors and we were living pretty good for a combat area. And these young men came in. They said well, I was assigned to this tent, where do I sleep? We said well, that guy got shot down, that guy got shot down and that guy got shot down, and so pick any bed you want. And it wasn't probably too good for the morale of those young pilots coming in. Well you say young pilots, new pilots was probably a better word. Some of them were older than the guys who were already there. But anyhow, we continued to escort the bombers.

I still want to get some of your reaction to that. That was your first combat experience. I'm sure you went into that experience with some trepidation, but with a lot of zeal and desire to accomplish some things, and essentially you came back I won't say whipped, but –

John Zink: We certainly weren't in very good morale condition.

Right, and at that time, what were your feelings?

John Zink: Well, other than the fact that I had lost some very good friends and people that I'd gone all the way through flying school with, we really didn't, I don't think we even talked about it that much. It was just realization that things were a lot worse in combat than we probably thought they were, and that the Japanese were far more numerous than we were, and their tactics, if we went in on a fairly low altitude mission, that they were going to jump us from above, and that was not something that you really could live with. So we needed to change our tactics, too.

Were you concerned at all about the equipment? Were you concerned about the planes you were using, the P-38 versus the Zero?

John Zink: No, because everybody knew that you did not try to engage in aerial combat with a Japanese airplane because they were so much lighter and much more maneuverable than the 38, so your tactics had been devised by people that had been in combat long before I was. It really worked, it was just a matter of we didn't apply them that particular day the way they should have been.

OK. You were too low?

John Zink: Well, we got too spread out, and following the dive bombers down probably wasn't, when all of us did that, that was not the smartest thing to do. We should've left some planes at a higher altitude to cover the people going down.

OK. So essentially most of the planes went down with the bombers.

John Zink: All 16 fighters that got over the target went down with the flight but were with the bombers.

So there wasn't what we call top cover left.

John Zink: We had no top cover left, and from then on, we always left at least one flying high.

So that was a very expensive learning experience.

John Zink: Yes, very very.

And I assume most of the learning experiences out there were difficult learning experiences.

John Zink: Yes, and as long as the Japanese had so many fighters up there, we had other missions that were where we lost planes, but nothing to that extent and a lot of the people got shot down, we would later pick up in life rafts. So we didn't lose as many pilots as the loss of airplanes, but we did continue to lose some pilots and airplanes.

So I would assume that you went on your next mission with some trepidation after that one.

John Zink: Well, it's hard to remember how I felt back then, but I'm sure I did. And I'm sure I did for several missions after that. But then as we became more mature in our – gained experience from the mistakes that we made, we actually stopped losing airplanes, losing our fighters to the Japanese fighters. And one of the things we've always been very proud of, we never lost a bomber we were escorting to the Japanese fighters.

Is that right?

John Zink: And that includes Rabaul and targets later. Now the problem that did occur was the 13th Air Force was very small, and the bombers started after Rabaul was neutralized, and the Japanese pulled out. They pulled us back out to two islands called Truck and Yap up further north in the Pacific Ocean, and the bombers started flying missions to there and they were about 800-mile radius missions, and they went without escort, so they were getting shot down or shot up and down pretty bad.

Would these have been what kind of bombers?

John Zink: We had, these were B-24's. The 13th Air Force had a B-25 bomb group which was a fairly short range bomber, and it was four squadrons sometimes and five squadrons sometimes, which is usually a bomb group is only three squadrons, but that was an extended group. And then we had two B-24 groups – the 307th and the 5th bomb group, and they were B-24's.

Those were four-engine long range bombers-

John Zink: Liberated bombers, made by Consolidated Aircraft.

And why would these bombers be going on missions unescorted?

John Zink: Because at that time, the powers to be thought that there was no fighter that could fly that length of mission. Now you know, the problem is, I don't know whether political or what, but when Lockheed started building the P-38, they were flying test flights, 2,000-mile range test flights. That was in 1941–42. In 1943, our group commander, Leo Dassard, was flying missions, test missions, they were not actually missions, but he'd go out and do long-range cruise for four hours, put it up to combat settings for 45 minutes, pull back to long-range cruise for four hours, and he did that several, probably 20-25 times to prove that we could escort those

bombers to Truck and Yap. And yet the powers that be never let us do it. But when Lindberg come over a year and a half later -

Who were the powers to be then?

John Zink: We were under ComAir SOPAC, and that's Commander Air South Pacific, and it was a combination of Army Air Corps, Marines, and Navy, and the commander rotated, but that group of people whoever they happened to be in the headquarters at that time, were the ones that made that decision.

Where would they have been stationed?

John Zink: For a while they were on Guadalcanal, and then they moved up to some of the other islands. I'm not sure just where. But at that time, they were probably on Guadalcanal yet.

But somebody was not either getting the information or accepting the information.

John Zink: I've always felt that there's two things that sort of inhibited the fighting of the war in the Pacific. It was inter-service rivalry, and the commander of ComAir SOPAC rotated through the various services, and there never was a cohesiveness in the command structure that said we will fight this war with the best tools that we have. Now that's an opinion that second lieutenants and first lieutenants aren't supposed to have, but I think most of us felt that way.

So you thought that the B-24's were being lost –

John Zink: Well yeah, sure, well, I'll give you an example. I went overseas with 12 B-24 crews, and got to know 'em a little bit. I didn't know 'em real well. I knew several pilots probably fairly well. And a year after I had gone into combat, I ran into one of the pilots down on Guadalcanal and I said hey, what are you doin'? And he said well, we're going home. And I said well, how are you all doin'? He said well, there's 13 of us here, and that's all that's left out of the 12 crews I came overseas with. 13 people out of 12 crews, and that's probably 120 people or more.

So only 13 had survived it.

John Zink: That's right.

That's not very good odds.

John Zink: And not only that, but I said well how many missions did you fly? And I've forgotten the exact number. It was well over 100 missions that he had flown as a B-24 pilot. Now in Europe, they went home after 25 missions.

Wow, and they were flying as many as 100 or more.

John Zink: Yeah, and he had over 800 some hours of combat.

Wow, and seemingly many of those without escort.

John Zink: Oh, I'd say probably two-thirds or more. That was -

What finally got the brass to understand the need to use a long-range plane like the P-38 to escort?

John Zink: Well, it really didn't happen until Lindberg came over there and demonstrated long-range missions to the Far East Air Force Commander.

That's Charles Lindberg?

John Zink: Yeah, Charles Lindberg, and that was 8-10 months after it had been proven by some people and two years after Lockheed demonstrated it, so I don't know why he was more believable than other people. I guess it was because he flew across the Atlantic and that was a demonstration of long-range cruise control.

So I among some of those who were not there but who have read somewhat about the Pacific war and what have you, some of the things you read were like Lindberg was the one who really showed and convinced that the P-38 could be used long range, and before that like nobody knew, or knew how to do it.

John Zink: I know that's the propaganda, and as far as I'm concerned, that's the best description I can give of it, propaganda, because I know personally that Leo Dassard, many months before Lindberg, showed it could be done, and I know a year and a half, two years before when Leo Dassard was still a major in the United States that the Lockheed test pilots had demonstrated it, and that's the reason Leo, who was probably one of the best people I ever worked for, was trying to demonstrate to the powers to be over in the Solomon Islands that we could do it. But names mean something sometimes.

OK, and the lack of that beforehand probably cost a number of people their lives.

John Zink: Oh, I would say, well I don't know that we could've kept the B-24's attacking Truck and Yap from getting shot down, but I'm sure we could have kept some of 'em from getting shot down.

Sure. OK. Very interesting because that's an antidote to history that really isn't the way it was normally written. So you had your first combat mission. It was somewhat disastrous, and – although you obviously protected the bombers.

John Zink: Yeah. Well anyhow, those type of missions continued for about five and a half or so weeks, and then all at once we went up to Rabaul one day and there wasn't a Jap airplane in sight. They all had pulled all out, pulled all their fighters out, and moved 'em up to Truck and Yap, so for the next several months, all we did was dive bomb the various target areas in the Rabaul area to keep the airfields inactive and to attack any other, like ships in the harbor and stuff like that. And we did that for five or six months.

So they were using the P-38 as a dive bomber?

John Zink: Oh yeah, we started out carrying two 1,000-pound bombs up to Rabaul, and we ended up a few times carrying two 2,000-pound bombs, not very often but once in a while. And my first dive bombing mission, we were hitting one of the runways up there, and we had 12 P-

38's and 23 of the 24 bombs hit the runway, and I don't think any of us had ever dive bombed very much before, so we thought we were pretty darn good.

Was that something that you enjoyed as opposed to interception?

John Zink: Oh no, I think all of us would much sooner do aerial combat than dive bombing, but we continued to keep their runways on the airports inactive and primary the Japanese would fix 'em up and we'd go back and dive bomb the next day.

And did you do much strafing?

John Zink: We had did, I would say maybe one out of every five or six missions, we'd go down the strafe area. Now the Japanese on Rabaul had some antiaircraft guns that they hid in the hospitals. So for months, we didn't dare attack because they had big red crosses on top of the building, and all of a sudden they decided if they're gonna keep antiaircraft under those buildings, we're gonna start attacking 'em. And so we started dive bombing the hospitals as well as the airfields, and that was probably only about two missions when the buildings were destroyed. We were pretty darn good with our accuracy of our bombing, for not having too much experience at it, well I thought it was amazing how well we did.

It's got to be kind of scary though to be going low like that, knowing that there's somebody down there aiming right at you.

John Zink: Yeah, that's true, but well, you know, I guess being young and you didn't worry too much about the fact that people were shooting at you, whatever the mission was, that's what you tried to do, and I, in my almost 20 months overseas, we only had one pilot that never completed a combat mission – no, two pilots. I'll have to take that back. Two pilots that never completed a combat mission that were supposed to fly combat – always had some kind of airplane trouble.

With that kind of percentage, you would have to attribute that to just plain cowardice.

John Zink: Yeah, I guess so, I think so. One was our first group commander I had over there, and the other one was just, he was a pilot went over about two months ahead of me, and real nice guy, but you know, he'd always have some kind of problem, the engine would run rough or something would happen and he'd take off and then come back and land before the mission was completed.

How could somebody get to be a group commander if he never completed missions?

John Zink: Oh, he was a colonel before the war started.

Oh I see, so he had his rank before combat.

John Zink: Oh yeah. Anyhow, once that happened, once he finally took off on a mission and then aborted about five minutes after takeoff, they removed him as group commander. The powers to be were not too kind to people who aborted all the time.

It didn't happen that often, did it?

John Zink: No, we actually did not. Those two instances are the only ones in all my whole 19+ months overseas that we had people that – you know, once in a while some guy would abort and you'd say ah-h-h, but most of the time, that was an occasional thing, not consistent.

I assume though that there were a number of abortions based upon mechanical problems and what have you.

John Zink: Oh yeah, sure, you know, maintenance was good but it wasn't perfect.

Did you ever have to abort because of engines - ?

John Zink: I aborted one mission. I took off around Middleburg which was our next base after the Solomon's, and we were taking off with napalm bombs, and I took off and pulled the gear up and just got up about 300 feet and the cockpit filled with what I thought was smoke, so I dropped the napalm off, made a 180-degree turn and went back in and landed, and actually what had happened, the nose gear filler valve had a long stem, and after they checked the air pressure in there every day, they were supposed to safety wire it back to the rim, and they forgot to do it that day and when that gear came up, it cut the hydraulic lines in the nose wheel and instead of smoke, I had hydraulic fluid spraying out. So well it's a good thing I aborted because I never would've got the gear back down otherwise. But that was my only abort.

So you flew missions carrying napalm.

John Zink: Yeah, we started carrying napalm, I think we carried napalm once in the Solomon's but most of our napalm missions were when we moved over to the, off of New Guinea and started flying up into Mauritai and then Celebes and those areas. And we didn't do it too often. I probably flew maybe six or eight missions with napalm.

Now you got to get pretty low when you drop that stuff, don't you?

John Zink: Yeah, you go in and we did napalm bombing, we also did skit bombing with the regular bombs.

Used predominantly against shipping?

John Zink: No, against, we did I would say probably more against targets just onshore. We weren't expert at it, but we would, we did pretty good.

It had to be pretty scary getting down that low.

John Zink: Well some, I always said one of the things you do when you go in to target something like that is you go as fast as you can and as low as you can, and it always worked out.

OK. There was also I think a rule of thumb that if you go on a strafing mission, you never go back and do the same run the second time?

John Zink: One pass and get the heck out of there, and that was obeyed probably 95% of the time, and the other 5% of the time it usually caused somebody to get shot up. Well, one of the missions we went on after we went over to Middleburg was we'd go out on shipping sweeps because the Japanese used these little coastal steamers and stuff to keep their various bases

supplied around the islands, and there's a lot of islands out there as you probably realize. I'm gonna change phones real quick. Hello?

OK.

John Zink: OK, the phone was getting low on battery I guess. Anyhow we had this one target, we went around and looked at the island one day and we ran across this little cove and it had a ship tied up at the dock, so we whipped out in trail and started strafing, and about that time that whole hillside around that area opened up with antiaircraft fire, and so we, I just yelled break and we went four different directions and got out of there, and we went back and reported as Black Craft, and the next day another flight went down there and had three airplanes shot down because they went and tried to shoot down, shoot up this ship tied up at the dock, the same one we tried to shoot up. So you had to pay attention to what the briefer said.

So somebody had good intelligence but somebody didn't follow it.

John Zink: They did not listen, yeah.

And cost somebody some lives.

John Zink: Anyhow, after Rabaul was pretty well bombed out and everything, it's when they formed the Far East Air Force and the 13th Air Force became part of it, you know, the 13th and 5th became the 5th Far East Air Force under the ex-5th Air Force commander, and we moved over to northwest New Guinea on a little island called Middleburg.

Almost sounds like somewhere in Pennsylvania or something.

John Zink: Yeah, well they put a strip on the island. The island was 4,000 foot long and 3,000 foot wide, and we put the 347 fighter group there on that with a night fighter squadron that had at that time about four airplanes. That's all they had in the night fighter squadron. And one C-47 to haul supplies for us. And then on the island of New Guinea at Satsfor, they put another fighter group with P-38's, and so we stayed there for about 9 months flying missions around the Celebes, the East Indies, Borneo.

That's a long time to be in one -

John Zink: It was, well, see that was before they invaded the Philippines, and then finally they opened up Mauritai, and Mauritai became a 5th Air Force forward base. They moved it there and then we were supposed to take the next move, we were supposed to wait for all each other, but when they went in the Philippines, the 5th Air Force moved up there and we moved to Mauritai, and we were there for about, flying missions, flying fairly long-range missions. We were flying a lot of 8-9 hour missions out of there.

Now how long would that be distance-wise?

John Zink: Oh, 800-, 900-mile radius.

Wow, so you were getting out there.

John Zink: Yeah, there was a couple flew over 1,000 miles, but I never flew one of those. That was thank goodness.

I guess you were happy you had two engines.

John Zink: Two engines and good, reliable engines. You know, a lot of people thought the Allison engine wasn't a good engine, but I never had engine problems that caused me to have to abort a mission or feather one because of an engine problem.

And how many missions did you fly in the Pacific?

John Zink: 157.

157 and you never had engine failure.

John Zink: Never had any.

That's pretty good.

John Zink: Yeah, in fact I really only know about two or three people that actually had an engine fail from a mechanical problem.

Is that right? Wow.

John Zink: Most of them they've had to have another engine, it was because it got shot up.

So you must think that we had some pretty good equipment then.

John Zink: I was doing what I wanted to do with a piece of equipment I wanted to do it in. I don't know if I told you, but I had seen a P-38 before the war.

Yes, when you were working as a civilian.

John Zink: Yeah, OK. Anyhow, so we went to Mauritai, and then they finally moved us down to Palawan, which is the southernmost island in the Philippines, and we were flying missions over to Indo-China. I never flew one of those, but a lot of missions to various targets on Borneo, and at that time, I was, well I promoted to captain about the time we went to Palawan. And I flew missions for about three months and then one day I think I started getting combat fatigue. I started flying the missions all night for the mission and wasn't sleeping good, so I went to our commander and said I think I'm about ready to go home. He said well, you are, put your wings on upside down. Come to the club and we'll send you home. And in the last part of April '45 -

'45 or '44?

John Zink: '45. I'd been over there about 20 months.

Wow, so I could see why you were –

John Zink: Anyhow I went in with the wings upside down. He said you can get on an airplane tomorrow and go home. I said no, I want to get my May flying time because this is the last, I

think it was about the 28th, 27th of April or so, so I stayed over for four more days and got my May flying time and then I came back to the States. And you know, the funny thing was, even though I really was getting chicken if you want to put it that way, about flying combat, I still slept good. And most people couldn't sleep when they got combat fatigue. But yeah, I came back, I left the Philippines and flew back to the States most of the way on a plush C-54 with regular passenger seats instead of bucket seats, and got back to the States and went on rest leave, and was assigned to, ended up being assigned to Van Nuys, which was one of the two P-38 bases in the States. I flew there for about a month and went back home to get married, got back to Van Nuys and they were closing it down. They sent us all out to March Air Force Base, March Field at that time, and we got out there and there was about 700 pilots in a pool out there, and they said if you guys want to get your flying time, go do it but don't bother us about it. Well shoot, they'd haul us around the B-17 and the bogus four hours of flying time in the B-17 and I'd never been in the cockpit yet.

I'll be darned.

John Zink: The first jet outfit was on March Air Force Base and I went down there and talked to some pilots and they said hey, we need pilots, why don't you transfer down here? So I went back and said hey, can I transfer down to the 1st fighter group, and they said you aren't even allowed to go down there and talk to those people. What are you doing down there? And so that was, that went on for about three or four months and nothing to do, every day they'd call you in the theater and give you heck for sitting around doing nothing.

The war was still going on then, right?

John Zink: No, this was – this was right after the war was over. Yeah.

It ended in August, so this must've been –

John Zink: Well, yeah, and anyhow, so I finally got discouraged one day and went down and signed up to get out, and went back to Camp Adderbury, Indiana and was discharged, but did stay in the Reserve.

Now you were discharged, when would that be?

John Zink: I think it was February of '45. No, I'm sorry, April of '45. No, can't be April.

The war was still going on.

John Zink: Let's see, it was February of '46. Yeah.

OK, I'm gonna pull you back into combat for just a couple of minutes. I know you wanted to get out of there and had your wings turned over and what have you, but there are just a few questions I wanted to ask about your combat experience, and one of them is were you ever shot down yourself?

John Zink: No, in all the missions I flew, I never had, never got shot down. In fact I, believe it or not, I never had a bullet hole put in an airplane.

157 missions and you never had a bullet.

John Zink: Never had a bullet hole put in the airplane. Now the other guy that flew the airplane on every other day, in fact he and I are still good friends and he's supposed to come by and visit me here one of these days, every darn time he'd fly he'd get the plane shot up.

Is that right?

John Zink: And they'd patch it up over night and the next day I'd take off. Real strange, but -

Was that luck, or - skill?

John Zink: You have to say it's luck. Skill's got some of the same letters, but it was all luck.

How about did you shoot down any Japanese planes?

John Zink: I was credited with shooting down one Japanese plane. We were on a mission down over Celebes, and we had come down and we saw this airfield that had a bunch of planes setting on it, and just as we were ready to peel off, I looked ahead, I was the lead flight, you know, when you say you led missions, but I was the lead flight on that mission, and we started to peel off, we looked ahead and here was three twin-engine Japanese fighters coming at us. So my flight stayed up and I shot down one, my alumnate leader shot down one, and the third one peeled off to try to land, and he was shot down by the flight that was attacking the airfield. Four other of the airplanes took off and went down to see if any other fields in the area had planes on it, so we ended up shooting down the three in the air and 17 on the ground were burning, and the others probably didn't burn because they didn't have any fuel in 'em, and also the hangar had some planes in it and they were burning in the hangar, so the hangar was probably destroyed, too.

Was that your only experience of a one-to-one combat situation?

John Zink: No, when we were escorting bombers over Rabaul, we got attacked by the Japanese fighters practically all the time, but the idea was keep the Jap fighters off of the bombers. It was not to, we did not go in there to -

You didn't go chasing or trying to earn the victories. Your job was to protect the bombers –

John Zink: Protect the bombers and get them off and take 'em over the target, bring 'em off the target, and then head for home.

So you shot at others -

John Zink: I always said that if I had been – you know, funny thing was when I was in training, I probably had the best score of the pilots I was in training with shooting at the sleeve targets that they towed around. Somehow or the other I lost that capability when I was overseas. Well, things happened fast in combat. You know, when you're shooting at a towed target, why they just fly along in a nice straight line. Well, those Japanese didn't do that for us.

I assume not.

John Zink: And we didn't do it for them either, by the way.

OK, so 157 missions both flying escorts for bombers and strafing and bombing missions -

John Zink: Search and rescue missions, a few of those.

And some of them very long range.

John Zink: Yeah, we were flying, I think my longest mission was probably a little over 700-mile radius. Now later on, some of the guys flew up to 800-mile radius, but I never did that.

Was that enjoyable to do that, or not?

John Zink: Well, you know, the old saying was hours and hours of sheer boredom followed by moments of terror, because you know, you're sitting there or chugging along getting to the target, and then you get to the target and then you have the few minutes of combat, whatever it was, then you come back off the target and fly long hours getting back to your home base.

I assume there had to be a lot of trepidation that way, the further away you are from home.

John Zink: Oh yeah.

The longer it takes to get back, the more things that could happen.

John Zink: Plus the weather didn't always stay kind to us.

Yeah, I remember reading a number of books back about flying in the South Pacific during the second World War, and oftentimes, that was the problem – weather changes on the way back.

John Zink: Well, there's one day in the 5th Air Force history called Black Sunday, and I don't know if you read about that.

Yes, but go ahead, tell us about it.

John Zink: Anyhow, they had gone out with a whole bunch of bombers and fighters on this mission and the weather turned real bad, and they had to, you know, coming back home the weather got so bad and when they got back down to NADZAB which was the base, they were all so low on fuel they were actually landing planes from the same runway from different directions at the same time. And they killed a bunch of people in the middle of the runway running into each other, and you know, we lucked out and didn't ever happen to get that bad. But I did come back one day from a mission and we were flying along and the weather, and it was down to about 50 feet off the ocean and we finally got close to our home base and we let down on the water and figured if we didn't see the home base in about 10 minutes, we were just gonna head on down to Theack, which was the next island south, and hope we had enough fuel to get there. Within that 10 minutes we come out and here's this Samoa Island of ours, 4,000 foot long, 3,000 foot wide, with a hole in the clouds right over it.

Now that's luck, right?

John Zink: No, that was just excellent navigation. No, it was luck. You know, you're flying along there and you got the tip of New Guinea up there that's mountain ranges and here you are flying along at 10 or 15 feet over the water and hope that you stay out of the water.

OK, so you completed 157 missions, said that's enough, my nerves are shot, I need to get out of here. And you came back to the United States.

John Zink: Come back to the United States, got back to San Francisco and they gave you orders for rest leave. They called it rest leave, four weeks, or 30 days actually. And I went home and spent the four weeks at home, met my soon to be wife at that time, and then after rest leave was over I went back to Van Nuys, California, and P-38 base but they didn't have any flying jobs. Of course the war was pretty well over and there just wasn't that much training to be done.

So you were back in the States when Japan surrendered?

John Zink: Yeah.

And the A-bombs were dropped. Any of that surprising that it was coming and happening?

John Zink: I think we all realized that the Japanese were not going to last too long, but we also thought that they, in fact we were all told that if we invaded Japan, we were all going back overseas. And they had actually flown enough P-38's in there to, I think they had about 100-150 airplanes more than they had pilots at that time ready to go.

So you were glad to hear it was over.

John Zink: I was glad that they decided to use the atomic bomb I guess.

And so was every other American.

John Zink: Yes, I'm sure.

And I assume that looking back at that, that you have no qualms about the United States using that type of weapon to end the war.

John Zink: Absolutely not. In fact I always told people they decided to use it on that day because they were celebrating my birthday.

Really? That was your birthday.

John Zink: Yeah. My 22nd birthday.

And that would be August –

John Zink: 6th, 1945.

August 6th, right. Wow. OK. So you got back alive and the war ended, and you were stationed in California for a while.

John Zink: Visited Van Nuys, California, and then I came home and got married, and when I got back out there, they closed down Van Nuys so I ended up at March Air Force Base, and -

Let me go back to your marriage stuff. Was this someone you knew before the war?

John Zink: No, one of the fellows I went through high school with was in the infantry over in Italy, and when I went to visit him, he'd lost a leg in a land mine over there, when I went to visit him he'd married this young gal that he'd gone with long before the war. I knew the family, I didn't know her. And my wife to be was babysitting their new baby. So I started babysitting the new baby, too. And we went together during my rest leave period, and then I went back to California. In December, I took leave and came back to Ohio and we got married.

Wow, so that was somewhat of a short -

John Zink: Short, yeah, it's lasted 63 years now.

Wow, that's amazing, terrific. And your wife is still with you?

John Zink: Yeah, she's at her garden club right now, but she's still with me.

That's terrific, 63 years with the same lady and you only had such a short period of time to meet her.

John Zink: Yeah.

Things were different back then, weren't they?

John Zink: Yeah, I think so, and then you know, most of the people I knew back in those days married once and stayed married.

OK, so you settled in, you got married, and you mustered out and about -

John Zink: We went back to California and stationed at March Air Base at that time, and they had, I'd forgotten how many hundred pilots stationed there with no way to get flying time, and no place to live. It was really hard to find a place to live with all that number of people because of not only the pilots, but there was also all the crew members. And so we stayed there about two months and decided oh, the heck with it, we'll get out of the service and go back to Ohio. And so I took my wife home and then I went back to Camp Adderbury and got discharged into the Reserves, and went back to Bright Pat and said here I am, I've got rehire rights, what are you gonna do with me? And they said oh well, since you're a pilot, we'll make you a mechanic. So they put me in flight test division, the fighter section, at Bright Field, and that's where they did the flight testing for all the new airplanes coming in, and that was when they started bringing jets in. The F-80 was there. The F-84 was coming in.

Was that where Richard Bong was killed?

John Zink: No, Bong was killed at, oh, that's another story. He was killed at Lockheed in California. I was stationed at Van Nuys when he got killed, and I heard about it, heard about the crash, so I went screaming over in my car to his crash site, and he'd taken off out of Lockheed air terminal in this F-80, and evidently the engine flamed out right after takeoff, and he actually

crash landed along this power line area, which was a nice, wide area, and he was sliding down through there on the belly of the airplane, and for some reason he got out of the cockpit before it stopped, and when he did that, he got thrown under the wing of the airplane and it skidded over it and killed him.

Is that right? Wow, I didn't know that.

John Zink: If he'd have stayed in that cockpit, he never would have gotten killed.

And the person we're talking about, of course, Richard Bong was a P-38 pilot in World War II, and was the highest -

John Zink: He was a leading ace -

Yeah, World War II, American ace with 40, I believe it was 40 kills. Did you ever meet him overseas?

John Zink: No, he was in the 5th Air Force.

Oh, he was in the 5th, that's right.

John Zink: And the interesting thing was when he had 25 airplanes, they sent him back to the States and he and our leading ace in the 13th Air Force who had about 21 airplanes, went down to Texas and they had a gunnery school down there and they went down there and did some demonstration gunnery, and then they both came back overseas and Bong, that was when he was just going to the Philippines and Bong called this friend of ours and said hey, come on up, the shooting's fine, and of course that was when he got his last 15 airplanes, and my friend said I ain't eager. So he stayed down there and you know, Bill Harris is one of the gentlemen that I think in the Air Force had in those days, and he thought it was more important to stay with us and make sure that we learned the combat techniques that he'd used all his life, and he became our, he was squadron commander for a while, and then he actually took over one of the fighter groups. And Bill is still living.

So he was a different kind of hero.

John Zink: He was. He was the kind you didn't know was a hero unless you knew him personally.

And his name was - ?

John Zink: Bill Harris.

Bill Harris, OK, and he had 21 kills?

John Zink: I think he ended up with 25, I'm not sure.

Rather than go after the rest, he decided to stay and -

John Zink: Stay and lead his fighter group he was commander of. And I'll tell you in my mind, the techniques and stuff that he taught all of us probably saved a lot of pilot's lives, and he thought that was more important than shooting down airplanes.

I'm sure those pilots thought the same thing.

John Zink: I don't know, I've never heard anybody say anything other than the best praise for Bill Harris.

OK, you got out of what was still the Army Air Corps then, in February or so of '46, and how long did you stay out?

John Zink: Well, I went back to the flight testing, made crew chief, and then later on they made me an inspector, and I was flying with the Reserves there, and also the commander of the flight test squadron that I was in, he would take me, if he could take me up in an airplane, he would, so I got a couple of flights in F-82's and SBD's, and flew two 6's in Reserve, and I kept applying for recall. You were allowed to apply for recall every six months, so every six months, I put in paperwork to get recalled, and the flight test division people were interested in getting me there, not as a pilot, you know, test pilot so much, but maintenance, part of the maintenance crew. And in fact, my last request before I got recalled was endorsed by a four star general, and they called me one day and said well, your request for recall has been turned down, but wait six weeks and we'll send it in again, and I got home that night and I had orders to go to Randalph Air Force Base, or Randalph Field in those days. So I called the next day and they said you better take it because the Pentagon doesn't know what the hell they're doing, words to that effect. So I went back in the service and went down to Randalph and went through T-6 instructor school. And after I graduated there, I went up to Waco, Texas, which is now James Connelly Air Force Base, or was James Connelly, and instructed in T-6 for about a year. And then Louie Johnson was the Secretary of Defense, and Congress had passed a budget to increase the Air Force to 40 groups, not wings in those days, we were groups, and Louie Johnson said no, we only need 25, so he started purging people out. We were graduating guys from the flying school and the day they graduated, they got kicked out of the Air Force.

Is that right?

John Zink: They did this, at the end of every month they'd come out with a new list, and the last month they did that, they came up to me and said well, you either have to get out or get grounded, and I said well I'm gonna take grounded because I said if I ever got back from the South that I would never volunteer to leave again. So I got grounded and ended up going to Keisler Air Force Base to radar school, training school. The reason I went to Keisler for radar school was because that was the only thing I could do. I had no idea that I was gonna be in electronic maintenance the rest of my life. Anyhow I went through radar school and got assigned to a radar station at Cape Charles, Virginia, and Cape Charles, Virginia is right across the Chesapeake Bay from Norfolk.

That's not a bad place to be.

John Zink: Oh no, no. Oh man, and the clams and all the seafood there is wonderful. Anyhow, I was there for about 20 months as I remember, and the Korean War broke out and they finally come along and said we're gonna send you back overseas. And I said what fighter outfit am I going to? And they said oh no, you're going to a transport outfit.

So you hadn't been flying planes for a while though.

John Zink: Yeah, we would go over to Langley Air Force Base or Langley Field, and I was their T-6 instructor pilot because I had flown T-6's.

OK, so you were at least getting some flying time.

John Zink: That, and we flew a lot of their freight missions. They'd have a mission to go down to all the Mobile and the various depots to go down and pick up freight for the groups at Langley, so they scheduled a couple of those for a month for the people over at Cape Charles because we had several pilots.

So you were getting multi-engine training then.

John Zink: I was getting checked out in a C-47. Anyhow, the Korean War broke out and they decided I needed to go back overseas, so I went over to a C-46 outfit. There was 315th Air Division, 315th Troop to Air Wing, and I was in, I can't even think of the number of the squadron anymore. Anyhow so I checked out C-46's and I flew C-46's for the rest of the Korean War, and -

Where were you flying them?

John Zink: We were flying out of Brady Air Base which was down by Itazuki, Japan. It was a little TSP, two-runway strip, 4,000 foot long. If it rained much, we were under water. Anyhow, my job was nice. I was flying passengers and mail, so it was almost like an airline – take off, pick up passengers and mail, and go up to Korea, hit the various air bases in Korea and then come back to Japan.

What rank were you by this time?

John Zink: A captain. And still a captain. Anyhow, so I flew that for about eight months, and then the Korean War was over and I had about 650 hours in the C-46 by that time.

Wow, that's a lot of time.

John Zink: I only had one month I flew over 100 hours. Most months were 80 and 90 hours. So they asked, said well the war's over, what are you gonna do? And I said well, I'll see if I can stay in Japan and bring my family over. And I applied, there was a radar station next to the base at Brady, and the commander of that radar squadron was going home. So I applied to stay over and take over that squadron, and the next day or about a week later I got orders and it said OK, you're going to go to this AC&W site, and I said where at? And they said well, northern Japan. I said I thought it'd be the one right over here. And they said no, you're gonna go up to the 511th AC&W group in Masawa, Japan.

It's kind of cold up there isn't it?

John Zink: Winters are not real nice. And you know, the funny thing, I got up to Masawa and I didn't realize at the time, but guess what fighter squadron was there? The 339th fighter squad.

Is that right?

John Zink: Yeah. They were flying, well from World War II, the 339th went from P-38's to F-82's, let's see, no, I'm sorry – P-61's and then F-82's, and then F-94's, and by the time they got to Masawa, they were 94C's and then right after that, they went to F-86 dogs. And I was there a long time and they were there a long time and I didn't realize they were the 339th.

Is that right?

John Zink: I just knew there was a fighter outfit there. Anyhow, the project I was on putting the air defense system in for northern Honchu and Okaido, we put in 12 radar stations through the Japanese, and I flew mostly C-47's while I was there. T-6's some, but mostly C-47's. And at the end of my tour, I signed back to Keisler Air Force Base and I took over a communication and electronics staff officer's course, the electronics side of the house. And I taught there for four years.

Where was this?

John Zink: Keisler Air Force Base, Mississippi. And so we, I taught primarily programming and budgeting. That's a title course that tells people how they have to do their planning, to get their programs planned, and then get the cost amount and try to get the money through the Air Force budget system to do the job. I taught that for four years.

Four years, wow.

John Zink: And was also in charge of the electronic branch all that time. And then while I was there, I was taking college courses because the University of Mississippi and Mississippi Southern both had night schools in the Buloxi area. And I took enough night school that I had over two years of college credit, and I applied to go to the Air Force Institute of Technology. The program is run out of Wright Field or Wright Air Force Base, but they send you to either a school there or the various colleges they have ___. So I ended up getting accepted and going to Texas A&M.

Is that right?

John Zink: IR and 80.

Wow.

John Zink: So I went there and took the last two years of college and got my degree in electrical engineering.

At College Station.

John Zink: At College Station, Texas. And that was when it was still an all-male, all ROTC.

And what years would that have been?

John Zink: It was, let's see, '61 and '62 if I remember. I graduated with the class of '62. And my next assignment there was to Air Force Headquarters, except the outfit I was assigned to was

at Norton Air Force Base, California. It was in 1002nd Inspector General Group. That's the IG for the Air Force. And so I went out there and became one of the inspectors in that outfit and spent my last four years there. And we inspected, I never got overseas, most of the inspection trips I went on were all state-side. And the only nice thing, I say nice thing, every trip we went on, we had to go to the Pentagon on our way out and then brief, and then on our way back we had to go to the Pentagon and debrief. So we got a lot of trips back and forth across the country. And I was looking primarily at the Air Force had a maintenance system under Air Force Manual 66-1, and it was primarily a way of documenting what maintenance was done and then putting all that data in the computer and find out what was causing the problem and coming up with fixes, various fixes to fix the problems so you wouldn't have so darn much maintenance that wasn't scheduled. You had to schedule maintenance, but this was unscheduled maintenance we were looking at. And it was a good system. I think the Air Force still uses a variation of it, not that it simply had data, it was a data gathering system and computerized, you know, go through the system and sort out all these reports, and our job was to try to get people to utilize the data because some people, this one young man I went to one day and I said you know, what is wrong with the system, that you know, we're here to find out and make the system more usable. And he said well, it doesn't do this, it doesn't do this, and kept going, and I said OK, now go get me these reports, and I called in several reports, and I showed him in those reports where all the things he said it couldn't give him was all available if he looked at it. Of course, people don't want to change the way they do business. Anyhow I did that for four years, and then I retired in June of '66.

OK, so what have you been doing with yourself since then? How did you get back to Texas?

John Zink: Well, I stayed in California after I retired and went to work for a company called GRW, and I was the head of material support group for the engineering people, and our job was just to, you know, when they come up with they needed something, our job was to get it for 'em as quick as we could, and one of the people I had working with me developed a system, we could call the local supplier and order it over the phone and send somebody down to pick it up the same day we ordered it, and that made everybody real happy and they gave us a couple of pats on the back. I did that for 12 years and then I got into what was called new business activity or proposal bids, and first I just had the group that did a lot of the pricing for the materials side of the proposal. You know, engineers would come up with a parts list and then we had to price those out so that when the proposal was submitted, why the people could find out if we knew what we were doing. I did that for four years, and then I got into what's called the Black Area, highly classified area. I'd been supporting them before but I got assigned to it and then I finally after a couple of years of that, I decided ah, the heck with it, I'm gonna retire again. So I retired and went to Colorado. And the reason I went back to Colorado, we had been there, we bought a house there one time and we decided to go back to live in that house, and that's when I got into the synthetic fuel business.

Whereabouts in Colorado was that?

John Zink: Grand Junction. And the Peonce Creek Basin is about 60 miles east of Grand Junction and that's where a lot of the shale that they could get oil out of is located in that Peonce Creek Basin.

So you became an oil man.

John Zink: Well, I really did the same thing I was doing. The DOD people, and I had been to Oak Ridge and worked with the problems, but they became, they adopted some of the same cost control systems that the military had, so I had worked at Grand, at Oak Ridge just for a couple of years. I forgot about that. But anyhow, teaching them the various systems and helping their contractors. And then when I got out to Grand Junction, why that's what I did for this company I worked for. And we were ready, well our company was building a pilot plant, and it was, we were about two days from having it ready to test it, and Exxon Mobil was starting to produce shale oil, and several of the other companies were almost that way, and Jimmy Carter come along and said everything's canceled. Pack up and go home. Now, if you want my opinion of Jimmy Carter, it wouldn't be very high.

I think a lot of business people have that same -

John Zink: I tell you, well, I always tell people OK, my daughter bought a house when Jimmy Carter was president, 20%.

20%, I remember those days.

John Zink: And my military pay was tied to cost of living, I got a 17-cent pay raise one year. Anyhow. So I did that for four years and then I decided aw, the heck with it, I'm gonna pack up the bags and go just enjoy life for a while and I've been doing that now for, let's see, 21 years.

How did you choose Smithville?

John Zink: Well, our daughter had gotten married and moved to Austin, and we decided we were going to get out of Colorado because license plates cost $400 and the income tax rate was extremely high, so we looked around and we thought well, we could go back to Ohio where we came from, and we checked there and they had an extremely high income tax. So we started looking at states that didn't have an income tax, and you know you have Florida and Texas, and I've forgotten some of the others, a couple of 'em were too far north. And by that time our daughter was living down there, so we decided aw the heck with it, we'll just go to Texas. And we came down and moved to, we bought a house in Austin, actually it was in the suburbs of Austin, it wasn't really part of Austin, and lived there and liked it, but the City of Austin decided they'd come down and annex us, and then we had a private water supply company, we had septic tanks, we had Pedernales Electric, and so when they were gonna annex us, we went down and said if you're gonna annex us, what are you going to give us? And they said well, let's see, I think we'll put a traffic light in your street. And we said well, what about taxes? They said well, they'll certainly go up.

So will your utility bills.

John Zink: So well you know, the funny thing is people in that little area that we lived in still have Pedernales Electric. They don't have Austin. And they still have this private gas company. They don't have City of Austin water, they don't have any utilities from City of Austin except that traffic light there in the street -

And the taxes.

John Zink: Anyhow, so we started looking around and we were looking around the Fredericksburg area, and one of the things we soon discovered looking out there is everybody's

got water problems. Of course you know, they have that tremendous amount of limestone, and they drill wells and they'll have pretty good water flow. Well, somebody comes along and drills one next to 'em, and their water flow goes down. We looked at a lot of houses where the water flow was under 10 gallons a day. We still didn't know where we were gonna go, but we saw this house advertised in the Austin paper one day, so we thought oh, let's go out and see what Smithville's like, and we come out and drove around and looked at the town. Oh, that's a pretty nice little town and we came by the house and looked at it, went home that night. Our daughter called up and said well, what did the house look like? We said well we couldn't tell because they had all the blinds closed and it was so dark we couldn't see anything. So the next day we come back and we opened the blinds up and it was a big house with big rooms and extremely well built, and had this horrible carpet on all the floors, and I mean horrible. So we thought well, let's see, we were thinking about it, we went home and said well, let's make an offer. So we made an offer and the people accepted it. So first thing we did is come out and after we signed, cleared on it, we pulled all the carpet up and got rid of it and it had beautiful hardwood floors under it. And -

Now it's home.

John Zink: Last three homes I've owned, I've had one wall of bookcases and storage units built in, and we redid the kitchen, raised the counters up because the counters were – this was a Casey ___ home, and he was short. So all the counters were 4 inches shorter than normal kitchens. So we raised the counters up to a normal height and redid a lot of things and it's been a very comfortable home and extremely well built. I don't think I've ever seen a home built better. If you ever want to come out and visit us, call up and drop by.

I would like to do that and hopefully we'll have the opportunity to do that because I live out just south of Elgin, so I'm not that far away.

John Zink: Oh yeah, you could drop by on the way home some day.

OK, I'd like to ask you a couple of other questions, just general questions as we finish up, but that will help people in the future who listen to this interview understand what you went through. So the first one would be as you look back, how do you think the military service affected your life? Obviously it was a very big part of your life because you were in it for a long time.

John Zink: Well I think two things I think it teaches you, discipline which I think's good. I don't think everybody thinks it's good. It taught some types of things like the programming and budgeting things that I learned and taught. I think that would be something that everybody ought to learn to do because it helps run the business, it helped run the military, it would help run a household, and I think the most important thing is the friends I made. And I'm going down to Mercedes, Texas in a couple of weeks and visit with one of 'em, and I have another one that's coming through from Florida one of these days, and visit with him. And I'll tell you right now there's not too many of us left.

I understand. So I guess one of your greatest memories of your military service is the friendships that you created and developed over time.

John Zink: Right.

What are some of the things that you would most like to forget?

John Zink: Jimmy Carter.

How about the war years?

John Zink: You know, I think the things you'd like to forget are the things probably in other ways are probably the things that you're gonna remember all your life like the first mission over Rabaul, the many good people you flew with, and then the few that you probably would just as soon forget, and there's very few of those. I think you didn't always want to buddy around with everybody, but you had a lot of respect for everybody.

Yes. You weren't afraid to get up and go out with them and do your thing.

John Zink: If they were scheduled to fly the day you were, you wouldn't worry about it.

OK, this will be our final question. Is there anything else that you'd like to add so that the future generations will have a full understanding of what your generation went through?

John Zink: Well, I think the thing that I believe is most important is that the United States is a unique and different country in this world, and it's going to stay unique and different as long as the people are willing to do what's necessary to maintain it, and I'm not too sure that we're going down the right path right now, but I'm not gonna get too much into politics, but people got to be ready to serve, and that doesn't necessarily mean the military, it doesn't necessarily mean working for the government, but it means doing the things that are right when it's called on. And I've tried to, I'm not too sure I've even brought my children up to do that.

But you certainly do.

John Zink: Pretty much like I do.

OK, John Zink, it's certainly been a pleasure and an honor to talk to you, and to explore some of your experiences.

John Zink: Well, I hope I haven't made it sound too much like writing, but it is.

To some extent, for a guy like me who was born years after, I spent some years in the military but never in combat or what have you, and I was always wanted to be a pilot since I was a little kid, and I was color blind and that killed me for that, but my favorite reading and my favorite admiration goes to you guys who flew, so it was a genuine pleasure to sit and talk to a gentleman who went through it and flew one of the best available machines we had back then, and experienced it and was able to convey some of those things. So for that I want to thank you for allowing us to interview you on behalf of the Commissioner of the General Land Office Veterans Land Board and so forth, again, thank you and thank you for your service to your country and really appreciate it, and I'm gonna close this off now, but I hope you'll hold on for just a second because there's a couple of other things I'd like to talk to you about.

John Zink: OK, sure.

[End of recording]