

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Don Nicolson
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

Date Unknown

DN: My name is Don Nicolson.

LJ: Mr. Nicolson, where were you born?

DN: I was born in Birtle, Manitoba, on the 10th of August 1921.

LJ: Is that a province, a town, a . . .

DN: See Manitoba is a province because in Canada, they have provinces versus states in the United States.

LJ: How big was big was it?

DN: A very small town. My mother was on vacation in the summertime out there because my oldest sister was matron of the hospital when I was born there. And so I was born in Birtle and then after my birth, I was taken back to Winnipeg where I was raised and went to school in Winnipeg.

LJ: What did your father do?

DN: My father was a caretaker in a school in Winnipeg.

LJ: And when did you move from Winnipeg?

DN: Uh, I got to get this straight. What happened is I didn't move down to the United States until of course after the war was over and I was back home and served for a long time in the Air Force in Canada. And on my retirement, I moved to Brandon, Manitoba, and expected to retire there. Only two fellows approached me and said they were going to open a restaurant in America and they wanted me to manage it. And it was to be a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant.

I didn't know anything about chicken or restaurants so I went to work in Brandon, Manitoba at the KFC restaurant. I think the pay was a dollar an hour in those days. To find out what happens in the restaurant when the manager isn't there. I didn't know anything about managing so I figured if I found out what happens when the manager isn't there, it would give me a boost.

LJ: Where did you go to high school?

DN: In Winnipeg. I left Calvin Technical High School when the Second World War was declared and ...

LJ: Did you graduate?

DN: Not completely. I was in the eleventh grade and I left and then decided to enlist in the Air Force because the country was at war. I enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and I was going to be a straight air gunner. But what happened is after manning depot, which is where you go learn the basics of marching, etc., they called out a draft of pilots and so when they called out the names, they were short four people. So they just said, "you four at the end line, fill in." And I was one of those four and so, I wound up going for pilot training.

Well, we started and fortunately for me, one of my friends was a school teacher. And we went to Brandon, Manitoba, to start our ground school and I thought I'd never get through this. But this fellow tutored me at night because we were all confined to barracks anyway. So he got me through all the stuff and I went overseas to England. I went to Sutton Bridge in Lincoln.

LJ: First of all, how long was your military training and did you say Brandonberg?

DN: Brandon, Manitoba. I think it was about a month or six weeks in Brandon.

LJ: That was everything?

DN: Yeah, we got uniforms and everything else. Then we had to go on guard duty at isolated places that they were building airports and air force bases. We were used as guards until they had a draft of pilots readied. And I was sent out to the West Coast and in those days we flew in Tiger Moths, twin-winged small airplane. We were taught how to take off from land, then we were solo. When they sent us solo there was four-foot red ribbon taped on the tail of the airplane as a warning to all other aircraft. This was the first solo, everybody keep clear.

LJ: What was your first solo flight like?

DN: It was quite thrilling and a little scary but you know you just go on from there.

LJ: Is there a length of time on that solo flight that you were supposed to be up?

DN: No, it's just more or less to do some circles and landings. Once you could do the landings, that was the important thing, then you were sent off to Dauphin, Manitoba to fly AT-6's which was a low-wing monoplane. They spent a number of weeks doing that until we graduated. They had a wings parade where we were given our wings and then we were immediately shipped overseas to England and, of course, we went by boat. You didn't fly over in those days.

LJ: How long was your ship voyage over to the England?

DN: I can't remember off hand – but it was probably 10-11 days.

LJ: How many people on the boat?

DN: Oh heavens, it was loaded because they had bunk beds on the decks. We were on bunk beds until we arrived in England.

LJ: Was there plenty of food for that many people?

DN: Oh, yes. We had enough food in the mess hall. It wasn't bad. Then we were all fired up to get overseas anyway, you know. We were young and foolish.

LJ: Where in England did you report?

DN: At Sutton Bridge in England and we were converted to Hawker Hurricanes then.

LJ: And what's that?

DN: That's the name of an airplane that was the precursor to the Spitfire. To the famous Spitfire the British had during the Second World War. But just prior to the Spitfire, they used Hawker Hurricanes and that was used in the Battle of Britain with the Spitfires.

LJ: So were you in England for an extended . . . ?

DN: A few weeks. I was in England for a few weeks until I graduated from what they call OTU, Operational Training Unit. That's where we learned to fire the guns and that sort of thing and the airplane. And then we were shipped by boat to Africa and we landed somewhere in Nigera – I believe it was. And we went then by airplane – DC-3 across to Khartoum in Cairo.

LJ: How long was the ship voyage from England to Africa?

DN: Oh, it was a couple of weeks. It was a long trip, but

LJ: Was it again a full ship?

DN: Oh, yeah, it was a troop ship. Because at that time Rommel had pushed the British back to Alexandria in Egypt which is just north of Cairo and so we went by air. We flew in a DC-3 from Nigeria over to Khartoum in Cairo and then up to Cairo from Khartoum. At the time I was sent to a ferry command which was ferrying aircraft up to the front line to get ready for the Battle of El Alamein.

And there four Canadian pilots and we were to take four planes up one day and we landed at the airfield near Alexandria. We got out and threw our parachutes over our shoulders and were going to hitchhike back to Cairo to get the night runs. They stopped us at the gate and said the commanding officer wants to see you four fellows right away.

So we were four Canadians and we went over to see the commanding officer. He told us that we can't go back to Cairo because the Battle of El Alamein starts tomorrow and one of the squadrons was short four pilots. It was 450 Royal Australian Squadron and this was on 239 wing. The wing was comprised of a number of squadrons and so we had about six or eight squadrons in that wing.

LJ: How many in a squadron?

DN: A squadron would be 12 airplanes. We had more airplanes but usually flew 12 at a time. And then there are so many squadrons to a wing. And so we started off and this Australian squadron they said was just temporary. You just do this until some more Australians arrive over and we'd be sent back. But by the time more Australians come over, we had lost some aircraft so we didn't get back, we just carried on four Canadian pilots in an Australian squadron all across North Africa and into Malta, Sicily and Italy.

LJ: What was that like working with the Australians?

DN: Those Ausies, they were a wild bunch, I'll tell you. But they were pretty good guys and we had a number of losses of course.

And what we did since we didn't use cash, everything was charged in the officer's club. We just had a pilot's club and it didn't matter what rank you were, we all lived together in the Australian's club and the pilot's club and we had to charge. But then what happened was a couple of fellows got shot down and killed. So the commanding officer figured this is a tough thing and we can't very well send a bill to the parents if someone who just lost their son. So what we decided was we'd all put so much money on pay day into the mess hall and bar and then we'd deduct everything we bought from it. We had an agreement with all of us, if any of us got shot down then the rest of the guys could use up the balance of that bar bill for a party that night. It was eat-drink-and-be-merry for tomorrow you were going to get knocked off because we had a lot of losses.

An interesting thing, we got to Sicily in Italy and we hadn't been in Sicily very long and the wing commander called me on the phone and he told me I was to report to his office right away, he wanted to see me. And of course my immediate thought was, what have I done wrong now. And so I headed over to see the commanding officer and the wing commander had just been up to Catania and he said, "By the way do you have a sister in the military?" And I says, "Yes, she's a nurse in the army." And he said, "Do you know where she is?" And I said, "No sir. She's overseas somewhere." And he said, "Well, she is at Catania, because her ship was bombed in the harbor here. They had to get off and so they've set up the hospital at Catania which is just up the road. He said, "You take my motorbike and you go up and see your sister and say hello and then you come right back because I need my motorbike." So I did.

LJ: How was your sister?

DN: Oh, she was fine. They were wearing Army battle dress because they had lost their uniforms and everything when the ship sank in the harbor. And of course there were so many losses in the hospital. They had patients laying in cots in the hallways even. And the nurses were just going around the clock.

LJ: It was good for you to know that she was okay?

DN: Oh, yeah. She's four years older than me, so she was sort of been my big sister and looked after me. But anyway, we had a wonderful time with them for a while.

Then we found a CANT-100, the Italian airplane, a two-seater, which is something similar to our Tiger Moths. Our ground crew fixed it up so it could fly. So we painted the crosses off and put roundels on the thing. We flew it and we could take the nurses up for a ride in the airplane. Which is highly illegal, I guess. But we did it anyway.

Then we went over to Italy and we went up to Bari. I was up in Bari and they called for a squadron of aircraft. We only had six serviceable aircraft so they picked the six oldest pilots. I was the commanding officer and we had to fly over to the other side of Italy to go after a German column that was going, heading north to Rome. We had to dive bomb them and strafe it because we had P-40 Kittyhawk's. Nothing could phase the Kittyhawk because we had six 50-caliber guns. The 50-caliber bullet was a big bullet. It's a big shell, so nothing would phase that. We used to strafe trucks on the road and it could blow them up and do a lot of damage. And we carried a 500-pound under the belly, so to cut a long story short, we made a mess of the convoy heading up. We were running low on fuel so the commanding officer said to go over to the beach head near the Anzio beach head where the Army had landed. We went over to land there and I went to lower my undercarriage only one [undecipherable] leg came down because it was jammed. I'd been hit by ground fire and you know things happen.

LJ: Nothing works?

DN: Well, yeah, before that I'd been shot down. We were doing escort to some bombers and we got jumped by some Messerschmitt's. I was one of the ones shot down. There were eight of us shot down and 13 Messerschmitt's shot down in that one battle. It was behind the lines so I took off and during the night I headed towards the coast. The next morning at first light, I noticed some people, Arabs, their women were out gathering little bits of roots and grass from the rocks. And they took me into their camp and I didn't know whether they were for us or against us.

But what had happened they were Muslims. They were working for an Italian military camp and were accused of stealing. And the Muslims took offense at that because they don't steal. And so they left and moved out into the desert. When they found out that I was working for the Allies, they were thrilled. They thought that I was great going and killing the Italians. And of course, the women all wear veils because they think women are all the same from the neck down but their facial features are different.

So the second day, the women took their veils off. That meant that I was accepted so I slept in the tent with the chief and his daughter. She was about eight or nine years old but she was still painted up. You know their faces with marks and tattoos and things. They live in the desert something like the Eskimos up north. They don't bathe. So it's hard to be up close to them. And so about the third day we heard some rumblings and then we see some dust coming. I was disguised as one of the Arabs, and so I stayed in the tent with just my eyes showing. And I stayed there until we saw these cars coming. We didn't know what they were. They were armored cars but they were all camouflaged with desert colors so they couldn't be seen from the air. Then all of a sudden we saw a jeep come down. And we saw the roundel on the hood, and so I signaled to have them just stop, that one.

They ran out and held up in front of the street to get them to stop. It was a British warrant officer. He was standing up on the thing, and I can still hear him to this day. He was saying, "What the bloody hell?" Then that's all I needed to hear was that English accent so I came running out and started peeling off my burnus, showing all my stuff dangling and my dog tags.

LJ: Oh dear!

DN: Yes, so he called the lead armored car and they came back when it was [undecipherable]. He checked my I.D. and then he radioed back to his base. They sent it back because they had already sent to my parents in Canada the telegram with the date of Air Force officer casualties overseas regret to inform you message. And so they sent a priority signal back saying that "your son has returned to his unit, safe and unhurt."

LJ: Greatly relieved.

DN: That sort of thing, it was quite an experience.

LJ: Can you tell us, Mr. Nicolson about some of the people you met during the time in the service? Any special characters that stand out?

DN: Oh yeah. There's some that are real characters. The Australians were a wild bunch. There were only four Canadians on that squadron and we never did get replaced because they'd lost so many. So the last time I was shot down was when I had to belly land and flipped over on my back, [undecipherable] dug into the ground and the beach head. I was on an extended tour of operations, because in those days you only fly 29 missions or 200 hours, but I had been granted the second tour because I was still healthy and all.

LJ: They needed you then.

DN: Yeah. So then we moved back to Sicily, then to North Africa, and then I was sent back to Cairo, Egypt from north Africa. I was sent as an instructor of the flying school there, teaching how to fly fighter airplanes.

LJ: How long did you teach over in Cairo?

DN: It was a number of months. In Cairo they had various places for us to rest. They have what they call Canada house in Cairo, they had a New Zealand house, and you know all these various Allied, and the American house. And so I went up to Canada house in Cairo and as I was going up the stairs, I saw this beautiful pair of legs going up ahead of me. And I arranged for the hostess, Mrs. Stewart, who was the hostess of Canada house to get me an introduction with this nurse, because I was quite taken with her. And so to cut a long story short, we got married in Cairo, a military wedding. We didn't know each other for long but it turned out that we were born only 18 miles apart in Manitoba in Canada.

LJ: What a coincidence.

DN: I know, it's unbelievable.

LJ: What are the odds of that happening?

DN: Yeah and my wife, of course, out ranked me because when we met, I was a second lieutenant and she was a first lieutenant.

LJ: What was that like?

DN: Well, what happened was we would get together on weekends because she was one of the 300 Canadian nurses that were loaned to South Africa during the war because they were short of nurses for the military hospitals. So she and 300 other nurses went down to South Africa by boat. The women left New York and were 32 days at

sea. Out of sight of land for 32 days until they arrived in Durban, South Africa. . So then they moved up to Cairo when they were going to start the big offense, whenever things were going well. So I met her in the Canada House and we were married.

LJ: How long after you met her did you get married?

DN: Oh heavens, only a matter of weeks.

LJ: How long have you been married?

DN: Fifty-two years now. I lost my wife four years ago to cancer.

LJ: Fifty-two years, what a milestone.

DN: Yes, it was absolutely wonderful.

LJ: How long were you in the service from the time that you went in?

DN: Well, from the time that I enlisted late 1941. And then I got out in 1945, when the war ended.

LJ: So four years.

DN: And then I went back to my work in the newspaper in Winnipeg; and I decided that I was going to move Ontario. We moved down to Toronto and then moved up to Haileybury, a small town in Northern Ontario, and opened a grocery store. And while I was doing that I saw in the paper where in North Bay, which is the biggest city up north in Ontario, Canada, they had new command of officers.

Docky Edwards was one of the pilots, one of the aces during the war on another squadron on the same wings that I was on. And so I went down to see him and visited with him. And he asked me how I was doing and everything. And the next thing we know, he said, "You should come back in the Air Force, we're short of pilots because at that time they were building up for the Korean War. So I went back in and stayed in and wound up as a flying instructor for a number of years. And then my last six years in the Air Force I got the job of all jobs. I had to take a ground tour. So I was working in National Defense Headquarters in Ottawa, Canada. And I was the executive administrative assistant to an air-vice martial. And I had a lot of helicopter flying, too.

He came in one day and said that he was being transferred to Washington, D.C. as the air attaché. He told me I'd be getting a new boss and he said that my tour had expired. He said, "I don't suppose you'd like to go back flying." I said, "Yes sir, I'd love to go back flying. You know, I don't like the desk job." That's when he

said, "Well, Air Commander Kerr was looking for a helicopter pilot. And so, I'll give him your name and see what he'll do with it."

So I was transferred to the greatest job of all, CP Central Experimental Approving Establishment in the Air Force. In Cold Lake, Alberta, which was hidden away and it's a big range that's 40 miles wide and a 100 miles long and nothing can go in there. When we had the range, we tested, like the Sparrow missiles when they first came out. The Americans, they brought them up there because we tested them up there. It was the last six years of wonderful years flying helicopter up there.

LJ: And to get that helicopter?

DN: Yeah and then I came back down to Brandon, and I'd decided we'd never been anywhere near my wife's home since we were married. My time was up in the Air Force and we moved to Brandon, Manitoba. Bought a new home, and we were going to settle down and I was going to look for a job.

At that time my younger brother, who was living in Winnipeg, came out to find me and said they'd been looking all over for me. They'd heard that I'd come out of the service. They wanted to open a restaurant in America, but they needed a manager. And so he said, "We've decided you should do this," and I said, "No, I don't know anything about a restaurant and I'm not too interested." But they talked me into it and so they said, "We'll pay you right now." They said, "What's the least amount of money you can get by with in a month." And I said about \$500. So he said, "Well that's what we'll pay you \$500 a month."

LJ: What year was that?

DN: Oh that was 30 some years ago. And I'd have to look back on the calendar. I met this other fellow and they got a franchise for the Kentucky Fried Chicken. We went to a little east of here and I couldn't find a site. They called KFC and told them we can't find a decent site so they said try Moorhead, Minnesota, and see if there's a place there.

We came to Moorhead and built the first KFC store. And then it was started and I went out to Cheyenne, Wyoming and we opened the first restaurant out there. And so, then we got another one and another one and another one and the first thing I know we had 41 restaurant in 10 states. That was a big corporation. And so, 30 years ago we bought this building and moved here.

LJ: So what was your final rank when you left the Air Force.

DN: I was flight lieutenant, which is equivalent to a captain. I was commissioned in the field.

LJ: Excellent. Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through while serving your country?

DN: Not really. We used to charge everything in the Officer's Club in the Pilot's Club on payday or at the end of the month and had to pay the bill. But then unfortunately we had two-three pilots got killed and the end of the month there was a bill. And so the commanding officer had a meeting with all of us. And said "You can't send that bill to their parents. That's ridiculous. So what we will do, we will switch this whole system. We'll put so much money on deposit in the mess/bar for the month. And then, you just deduct it." And then we made an agreement that if any of us got shot down, the rest of the guys that night could drink up the rest of the bar bill. You know, on the house sort of thing and that was the sort of thing between the pilots. Well we did that and so when we lost somebody we had a little party that night in remembrance sort of thing and.

LJ: Mr. Nicholson, how would you like to be remembered?

DN: Well, I have four granddaughters and two grandsons, I'd like to be remembered I think as a kind and gentle man.

LJ: Excellent, anything else you'd like to share before we are done with the interview?

DN: No, I don't think so.

LJ: Well, thank you Mr. Nicholson.

DN: Oh, you're more than welcome.