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Interview with Raymond Roeske

Raymond Roeske

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview VHP #026
ROESKE, Raymond**

ROESKE, Raymond

Drafted: 1943 May - 1945 June

Interviewed: November 25, 2003

Interviewer: Ray Nielson

Indexed by: Ray Nielson

Time Coded by: Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard

Length: 00:42:27

Abstract: In his November 25, 2003 interview with Ray Nielson, Raymond Roeske details his training in the Army Air Corps and his missions overseas during WWII. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Army Air Corps, basic training, B-26, North Africa, Central America, South America, Submarines, Fort Snelling, bombing

Interview Session (November 25, 2003): Digital File

Time	Keywords
00:00:00	<i>Start of Interview/Interviewer's Introduction</i>
00:00:29	<i>Question:</i> How was it that you got into the Army Air Corp? <i>Answer:</i> I was drafted into the army in May of 1943 and went to Fort Snelling, MN for induction, was sworn in, was sent home for one week, and when we returned we had, took some exams physicals and different things, and then we were shipped out to various branches of the army, and I was selected to be in the army air corps for some reason, and that was down in Lincoln, NE where I went for my basic training and the first station that I served at.
00:01:25	<i>Question:</i> Was that bombardier school or gunnery school? <i>Answer:</i> No that was purely army air corps basic training, just like the army has only it's the air corps. They had other things on the field, a b-24 combat training program there and there was also an airplane mechanics school going on, on the same field, but I was there for my basic training.
00:02:04	<i>Question:</i> How long did your training take? <i>Answer:</i> I took approximately 12 weeks,

we were there during June and July, and into August, then we shipped out from there to various technical schools in the air corps, I was sent to Lowry field in Denver Colorado for a bombardment armament course, and that was in the fall of 43, Lowry field, Denver.

00:02:39 *Question:* Where did you go from Lowry then after that? *Answer:* We spent about 8 weeks at Lowry for that course in bombardment armament and then I spent a week as an instructor there after we finished our training, and then we shipped out and I was sent to gunnery school at Ft. Meyers, FL.

00:03:01 *Question:* How long were you in Florida then? *Answer:* We spent about 2 months there, the first part of our deal was, the first couple of weeks we actually didn't start school, we unloaded boxcars full of ammunition, boxcar after boxcar of 50 caliber machine gun ammunition, and then once we got into school, that work was done as far as we were concerned and we just stayed in school and we took a variety of gunnery training courses there, some were camera training, some were shotgun shooting, 22 cal. Rifle shooting, 50 caliber machine gun shooting, the final phase of our training was air to air firing from a B-17 bomber air tow target that was pulled from another aircraft, and they keep track of your hits on the tow target.

00:04:15 *Question:* Did you train at all on B-26's? *Answer:* No not there, actually after when we finished gunnery school we weren't sure what kind bombers we would be going on, it could be any one of the American made bombers: 17,24 ,26 ,25, or 820 even. It turned out that that particular group of graduates that I graduated with were sent to b-26 combat training groups, and the one I was sent to was Archdale field in Shreveport, LA.

00:04:55 *Question:* How long were you in LA? *Answer:* Well when we finished gunnery school we left and were given a 10 day delay in route, so we were able to go home for a few days, so I jumped on a train and got up to Jacksonville, FL, and then I got on another train and went up to Chicago, and then a train home to St. Paul, MN, and we had a 10 delay in route, I guess I was home almost 10 days, then I had to provide my own transportation down to Shreveport.

00:05:34 *Question:* Then after you received your training in Shreveport, where was it to after that? *Answer:* Then we were assigned to a crew at Shreveport, we were assigned to a B-26 crew, and we met the guys we would be flying with and training. Their names were Lt. Rathneson, Lt. White, Lt. Sloan, radioman Tom Jennings, and engineer gunner was Cleatus Tight, and myself, I was the on-board gunner, and we took I think it was \$300 of combat crew training to teach the crews there how to fly in close formation and all this different stuff.

00:06:20 *Question:* And that was on B-26's? *Answer:* Yes, that's all we flew on then. We

finished up, but had a lot of bad weather down there in the early part of the winter, so we had to fly in a lot of inclement weather and we had a lot of mishaps down there, in fact about 30 men lost their lives off our field down there during that training period, because of mid-air collisions, trying to teach crews how to fly in close formations, and most of these pilots were young and didn't have that much experience yet on B-26's, but after we finished the training program there, we got our required number hours in as a flying crew, then we were ready to receive duty, we left by train at Shreveport and left for Savannah, GA to pick up an airplane, and we didn't know where we were going, but we were sent there to pick up an airplane in a country field in Savannah, then we flew down to FL made a couple stops in Florida, one in W. Palm beach and the final one was at Morrison field at Homestead air force base. That is where we left the U.S. from.

00:07:51 *Question:* And this was the same crew you trained in with? *Answer:* Yes, this was the same crew, you were what you would call a replacement crew because when we left hunter field, went to Florida, got orders that we were going overseas, and we were going to fly overseas and bring the airplane over there, the one we took was a b-26, stripped down no armament and they put extra fuel tanks in the bomb bay, we left from Morrison field and after we left the U.S., homestead air force base, when we were in the air we were allowed to open up our orders and that told us which air force we were being assigned.

00:08:49 *Question:* So you didn't know? *Answer:* No, we figured we were going to the European theater, but we didn't know which part. In the air, Co-pilot white opened them up and read the news to us and that that we were going to England and we were going to fly out of Adrash and in order to get there we had to go the southern route because the northern route was a bad time of year it was April there was a lot of fog and they were having a lot of collisions and crashes in Iceland on the way over to Europe, so they decided to send the crew on the southern route for a while.

00:09:41 *Question:* That had more to do with the weather up north rather than the lack of fuel? *Answer:* We would have made it with the extra fuels supplies, but it was the weather conditions.

00:09:55 [no question] The first place we went to after leaving Morrison field was San Juan, Puerto Rico and the next place was in British Guinea, and then two places in Brazil, Balem and the next one was Natal, and from Natal we flew across the Atlantic ocean to ascension island, which is about halfway across between SA and Africa

00:10:39 *Question:* Did you have to stop there and refuel? *Answer:* We had to stop there overnight and refuel, every place you stopped you had to refuel and the next day you fly on, one day at a time, one day you would fly and then refuel Long days of

flight with extra fuel tanks, we were in the air, must have been 8-10 hours at least, because we were on such long hops.

00:11:07 *Question:* Could you move around in the plane? *Answer:* Yes, we also had a celestial navigator with us because there was more planes besides our planes, there was a group of them, we were the plane they chose for the celestial navigator and as a consequence the other planes they would follow us because he knew where we were going, he would be taking his calculations from the sextant, checking his maps and drawing and diagrams it was quite a thing to watch that guy operate the navigation.

00:11:47 *Question:* Was that very accurate? *Answer:* Excellent, when we left Natal, Brazil and headed out over all that water in the Atlantic ocean, we flew for hours and hours and didn't see any land period, just a lot of water, but when we got to Ascension Island he hit that right on the nose, no problem.

00:12:18 *Question:* After you left, then were? *Answer:* Then the next hop, we stayed overnight there and swam in the ocean there, gassed up, jumped on the airplane the next morning, incidentally that field was started by the British government years before and they gave up on it, it was all rocks, and then before WWII the Americans decided that needed that base and they made it so they could have runways, and then there were guys there that had not left for two years, they were stuck there doing maintenance. Next stop, was French West Africa, Monrovia. We stopped there and then flew north towards Europe, stopped two places, one was Dakar and the last was Marrakech, that is near Casablanca, you all have all heard about that. For Marrakech, we had to fly around Portugal, and up to southern England, and that was an extremely long flight, and we almost ran out of fuel, some airplanes the engines we cut out, they just made the runway.

00:14:13 *Question:* What was the range, how far could a airplane go? *Answer:* Average plane would go 4 hours, but then we had extra fuel tanks in the bomb bay strapped in there, I don't know how much hours we could do with those. We used up practically all the fuel, using it all in that last hop to England. We left the airplane there, I think someone else took it up there to Northern Ireland, because that is where we went by train and ship and that part of my trip there is vague, we were moving around so much. One place we went was called Stone in England verifying it with guys at reunion, where this place is it can't be too far out of southern England. It was a place called Stone. It was a distribution center for the army air corps in Europe. Everyone went through that base for assignment, and everyone going home went through that base, later on at the end of my tour of duty I went back to the same base. I should now where it is.

00:16:06 *Question:* That period in England, training? *Answer:* No, but in northern, Ireland, it was a week or two weeks, don't know what day. When we got to Northern Ireland,

we were there approximately a month, we left in April, the US, it took us two weeks through SA and Africa, and up to England. This was probably two weeks over to Europe, about a month in Ireland. On D-Day December 6, 1944, we were in Northern Ireland, and we had just about finished our training up there and we were notified that the invasion had started and we were told to get out of the barracks and go down into the slit trenches outside, and we stood in the slit trench all night long in the trench because they were afraid that the Germans would retaliate because of the invasion and send bombers over England and Scotland, it didn't happen, but we were in a slit trench all night long because of that invasion. Didn't know what was going to happen, so then, shortly after that we were sent down to England to join a bomb group that we would be flying with, we were sent to the 344 bomb group, which had been over in England since approximately March in 1944, they had come over from Florida where they trained, and we joined them as a replacement crew. We went down to this group and met our squadron commander and his name was Lt. Col. Bentley, he was probably one of the best B-26 pilots that I ever saw, that guy could do tricks with that airplane, he was our squadron commander, the first thing he told us when we came into the squadron, the very first day we all had a meeting outside, there were several other crews besides us that joined them, there were about half a dozen crews there that came down from Ireland and he got us all outside in a big group and he said, "Well fellas welcome to the 344 silver streaks bomb group and this is the 497th squadron, and I know some of you guys will go into town on tasks sooner or later and if you do we observe military courtesy in calm, if we see you on the street we expect you to salute, but when we are on the field, there will be no military courtesy, because we are here to do a job and that's the way it's going to be. We are going to forget the formalism of military courtesy and all that stuff on the field. So, I liked this guy right off that bat.

00:19:40 *Question:* This was when? *Answer:* Spring of 44, June actually when we joined the squadron, we flew our very first mission as a crew on the 14th of June, 1944 on Flag Day, it was a mission to France, we went after...we went to a place in Bogensia, France, to a railroad bridge and dropped two 2000 pound bombs and the results were considered good and the hits and flacks were weak. We had pretty good results

00:20:26 *Question:* How many planes in the squadron then? *Answer:* There were four squadrons in a bomb group, we were in the 344-bomb group, and our squadron the 497th would put up either 6 planes or 12 for each mission.

00:20:45 *Question:* All B-26s? *Answer:* Yes, nothing else...

00:20:54 *Question:* What kind of protection did you have, did you have fighter planes? *Answer:* When we would leave the coast of England, there was coordination between the fighter group and the bomb groups and they were notified to meet us at a

departure point off the coast of southern England, where they would join us, sometimes late, they would catch up with us because they had much more speed than we had. They would meet us before we got over the target, we would be on the way in you could expect the time you crossed the channel, when you entered occupied Europe, whether it was France or the Netherlands, you could expect, from that point on, either flack or fighters, and that's why they would always have fighter escorts join us as soon as they could,

00:22:00 *Question:* Did you run into problems or flack on first mission? *Answer:* It varied on every mission; sometimes you could go in and not have hardly any flack. What the air force would use to do, they would plot what they felt were locations of guns based on past experiences, they got a lot of flack around a certain town or checkpoint, they would chart that so when we went to briefings before we would leave on a mission, we would always have briefings early in the morning if you got called, they would have it posted the night before on a bulletin board what the time the briefing was and which crews were flying and which airplane they were going to take, an then the squadron commander and operation officer would get up in the front, would get up and would show you on the map where we were going to enter on the continent at what point, and then point out hottest gun positions were, and then where they were hoping to avoid as many guns as possible by flying a certain route into the target and back out again, and this was charted out ahead of time. Many times the gun positions would move because Germans had 88s, which was their favorite anti-aircraft gun and also their anti- tank gun, and their cannon, it was their all-around excellent weaponry that they had, they could use it for anything from ground artillery or ant-aircraft or whatever, but they would move them things around, so you couldn't depend on their guns being in the same place every time, but depending where the target was you would enter the target close to Netherlands or France or wherever you were going in, you were going at different points because of the proximity of targets.

00:24:05 *Question:* What was your location on the plane? *Answer:* I was in the upper-top turret because it was optional because we have three gun positions in the back of the aircraft, we had the two waste guns that you fire out of the bottom or side of the aircraft then we had two guns in the tail and then the two n the top turret. I was back their right to begin with at the start of the mission. Sometimes if the radio man didn't have anything to do, he would be back there. And the engineer gunner usually stayed up front on takeoff and would help the pilot watch gauges and air temperatures and oil temperatures. After were airborne and in friendly territory, if everything seemed like it was working properly as far as the plane was concerned, then the engineer gunner would come back. Well him and I had got together on this, and most of the crews did it this way, he decided it was easier for him to come through the waste position, past my turret, and get into the tail section, easier than it was for him to come back and climb up into the turret after he was up front, so I

was up in a turret before he got back there, and I would be up in the top turret.

00:25:41 *Question:* So you were in the turret for the whole flight? *Answer:* Yeah, I would get in before we left the coast of England I would be up in the turret, because you never knew what was going to happen once you got up there over the water or the channel, so he would come back later once everything was good up front and he would get into the tail section.

00:26:08 *Question:* Where were you flying out of? *Answer:* We were flying out of a town called Bishop Stortburg, it's about 30 miles northeast of London, it's up towards Cambridge, it's a bigger city and it was close to a field called Stanstead field.

00:26:27 *Question:* After the first mission over there how many more missions did you fly after that? *Answer:* I flew 65 all told, I flew, I don't remember where the breakup point was, we had about 25, when we moved over to France, it September sometime of 44 we moved up to France because the front was moving up and we were getting farther and farther away from the action with the range of our airplanes, so they found the field about 20 miles northwest of Paris, in a town near Pant was France and it was a field that the German fighter planes used to use before that got moved out of there, and it was pretty well beat up and shot up, there were a lot of bombings that had taken place there, but they patched up the runways and did what they had to do we moved our airplanes. I was in the advanced Escalon, I went over with a groups of guys to begin with to get things set up and we set up tents and got things organized for the rest of the group to come over, while I was gone my crew flew one mission while I was over in France before they got there, and then they came across and brought their rest of the airplanes over, and that were we operated out of then, In the middle of September 1944, I don't remember how many missions I flew out of England while compared with France.

00:28:15 *Question:* This all occurred after D-Day? *Answer:* Yes, the first one was the 14¹ of June, for my crew, but the squadron started back in march.

00:28:30 *Question:* What were some of the target areas that you were bombing at that time? *Answer:* Principally railroad bridges, to disrupt communication and transportation, and munitions people, wherever they were suspected and fuel dumps, and before we got there, they bombed what they called No-ball targets, which turned out to be emplacements for buzz bombs and V-2 rockets that they were shooting at England. They were bombing those before we got there. They didn't tell them what they were. They were places that they suspected we launched places for these buzz bombs and V-2 missiles.

00:29:38 *Question:* Some of the mission you flew on were pretty rough, caught a lot of flack? *Answer:* Yeah I remember one where went to Rouen France on one mission that was not too far into our tour of duty and then a bad one at Caen, we went in on this one

mission and I think the group commander was leading the mission, Co. Vance, and he went in and the weather got real bad, it was a dark stormy day, he keep taking the planes down lower and lower and we were down so low that we were getting ground fire of all description, I imagine rifles and shotguns and machine guns, but picked up a lot of holes at that mission and we lost a lot of planes on that mission, it was a real bad one, to get out of there, at that low level, the throw everything up there that they can find.

00:31:03 *Question:* Were there aircraft that were also chasing the squadron, any German aircraft? *Answer:* We didn't have much problems with fighters, that is one thing, they seemed, that late in the war the German air force didn't have the fuel or the experienced pilots that they had earlier in the war, the early guys that went over there had a hard time getting a tour of duty completed because of the marksmanship of the Nazi, or German I should say, fighter pilots. Later in the war they ran out of fuel and the experienced pilots had been lost in action and they got into the younger kids that didn't have experience, and the fuel problems, and they didn't bother us because they were after the heavy bombers, more than the medium and light bombers, because we weren't over enemy territory for that long, like the long range 4 engine bombers they went much deeper into Germany that we did because of their range, we didn't have the range to go that deep into territory.

00:32:15 *Question:* What is the top speed of the B-26? *Answer:* Cruising speed is around 170-180 miles an hour, straight and level flight.

00:32:29 *Question:* When was your last mission? *Answer:* The last one was on February the 9 1945.

00:32:48 *Question:* At that point you received your orders? *Answer:* At that point I had completed 65 missions which was considered a tour of duty on the medium bombers, at that point I was taken of flying status and they send you back to England to return to the states.

00:33:12 *Question:* How did you get back to the states? *Answer:* Well they flew us from Lebozhe air force base in Paris, we flew by c-47 and dc-3 and then back to stone, the assignment center, and then the stripped down, took everything you didn't need, and all your extra clothing, you were left with a minimum of stuff, when you entered the service they piled everything you could think of, overcoats, and raincoats, and blankets and when you left the combat zones they would take everything from you they could possibly take in fact they used to have shakedowns in Stone England they would get you up at 2 o'clock in the mornings and they would go through your footlockers and your hangers and your footlocker and your hangers in your barracks and you could only have one of those two of them, you got your clothing down to a minimum and your equipment. I don't remember how long I was in stone England, we were there until you get your shipping orders to go back to the states, I know I

served in MP for a week or so there, working around the theater there at night, the had to have something for you to do until you got shipped out, when we got shipped out we went to Southampton and they put us on a Army transport,

00:35:05 *Question:* Ship? *Answer:* It was a merchant marine ship, an army transport, with a merchant marine crew on it, they had a navy gun crew on it, with one anti-air gun on top, but along with the abled bodies people and their we had wounded people on their in wheelchairs and crutches, and I remembered one incident where they were rolling one guy up the plank, he died, and they turned him around rolled him right back down. I think at least 50% of personnel were wounded from England from army hospitals, Americans that were going back home to hospitals. But abled bodied people on board were able to do all sorts of things like guard duty and KP, it took us 18 days to get back to Boston.

00:36:12 *Question:* Any danger coming across ocean with U-Boats? *Answer:* You bet, we were in a convoy and we had a navy destroyer escorts, first of all when we left Southampton of the coast of England and you couldn't see it, and for three days we didn't move and inch, and we stood still, and then we decided to go and the convoy formed up and on the way across we could feel concussions under the water when the navy destroyers thought there was something in the neighborhood they would kick over theses ash cans of the side that they used to drop on submarines

00:37:10 *Question:* The demolition charges? *Answer:* Yeah, and if you were below water level in that army transport in the bunk, boy you could sure here the concussions from those ash cans when they exploded, but we were lucky because they didn't sink any ships in our convoy area, they must have been near or somewhere around because they suspected there were anyways and once in a while the navy gun crew would go up and practice.

00:37:53 *Question:* Where did you disembark? *Answer:* In Boston Harbor, it was about, well president Roosevelt died and we were at sea. We must have docked near the end of April.

00:38:22 *Question:* At that point did you know if you were being discharged? *Answer:* No we didn't know, but a lot of times they make you instructors to go over to another theater of operations.

00:38:54 *Question:* At that point was the war still going on in the pacific? *Answer:* It was still going on in Europe. We got on trains and went on our separate ways. We had a 21 day delay in route until we had to get back; I was assigned to go to Santa Ana, California, but while I was home on May 8, 1945 the Germans surrendered, but then I went to California, it was just like joining the army again, all the physical tests, a lot of civilians, get teeth checked and shots, and she saw how many points I had and

Raymond Roeske (VHP #026)

she said I had the option of staying until the Japanese surrender or the war ends with them, or you can be discharged now because your MOS is not critical, your Military Occupation Serial number is not in great demand, and mine was 612, a gunner, and they had a lot of crews training in the united stated that had never been in combat for different airplanes, and I felt when I came home I thought I would be assigned to the Pacific theater. But I had enough time because my overseas time and I chose to take my discharge. And my discharge was at FT. Snelling. And that was June of 1945. I got out early. I know a lot of the guys I served with served to occupy Europe since they didn't have enough points.

00:42:27 *End of interview*