

Robert Inserra

Interviewer: Alright what is your name and when were you born?

Inserra: I am Robert Emil Inserra 2/23/24.

Interviewer: Now where you born?

Inserra: New York City the Bronx.

Interviewer: That's where you grew up?

Inserra: Grew up and born in New York City yeh.

Interviewer: So describe what it was like growing up in the 30s and 40s in the Bronx.

Inserra: The Bronx in the 30s and 40s was wonderful for a kid. I don't know about a grown up but for a kid it was wonderful. It was exactly like if you walked out the door in this rural community there were trees on everybody's front yard there was grass there was a sidewalk the was grass you know it was like being almost like being in the country in the Bronx back then. So it was great it was safe.

Interviewer: What did your parents do for a living?

Inserra: My mother oh do we want to really go into that my mother and father could not get along did not get along they broke up and separated and I mostly lived with my mother and the rest of the family. My father showed up once or twice a year that's through my entire life so I got nothing. He was a salesman a traveling salesman. And he sold advertising type materials all over the country he was never home never in the city as far as I know I never saw him see.

Interviewer: What was your schooling like? Did you like school?

Inserra: It was great it was great and New York has the best education system I think I've heard of since I grew up you know I haven't heard other people talk about their school systems like I do mine. Today school means you play football you play basketball you play soccer you play baseball in New York city we had no campus we had an entire block was the school building five stories high there was a concrete sidewalk on the iron fence around the school. No campus no yard to play in no grass no sports. But you did get educated that's why New Yorkers go so far we got educated everybody in those days everybody was good at it.

Interviewer: How would you say your family or your community was affected by the great depression?

Inserra: Well we were in it we were in it the worse of it no father supporting us my mother had to support us and go to work and we had to live in my grandmother's house for at least the first ten years of my life. In her house there was me there was my aunts there was my uncles there was my cousins we rented a big seven or eight room railroad flat. You know what a railroad apartment looks like and we all lived there everyone had one bedroom. Other wise we'd have had to live in the streets there was no money and there were no jobs.

Interviewer: No during the late 30s maybe the early 40s there were you aware of the like the political developments overseas such as the rise of Hitler and that sort of thing?

Inserra: My first political campaign as a kid was Roosevelt Theodore Franklin. In 19 what 32 we were out there with placards and flags and ribbons and marching up and down the streets I don't even know where we got the stuff they must of been people handing them out and that's what we did. Roosevelt was my first contact with politics.

Interviewer: What about the things happening overseas were you how did you know about the rise of Hitler and Germany and that sort of thing?

Inserra: Obviously we had good radio service then I went to the movies every other day you know the movies was a nickel for me in New York City. And we would see 7 or 8 features you know Popeye, cartoon, cowboy at least 7 and of course we watched the new reels and that's where the news came from mostly. New reels were realistic about the war going on over there about politics that's where I learned it.

Interviewer: So did you have a sense that war was inevitable or it was on the horizon?

Inserra: Of course of course when the war first broke out we weren't in it you know but the news paper printed maps and we got colored pins and we stuck pins in it. The Germans were here today the Germans were here tomorrow and the Germans were here and the next day and the Americans were the allies were retreating. We played war on the maps as a kid.

Interviewer: Now what are your memories about hearing about Pearl Harbor for the first time? What was your reaction?

Inserra: It was I was home we were having a birthday party for one of my aunts or uncles I don't recall. I was listening to the radio and I was the first one that heard it because I was the only one listening to the radio. And as soon as I heard we were attacked at Pearl Harbor I ran to the rest of the family I says we were attacked in Pearl Harbor we are in war. And one of my uncles was a Navy currently in the Navy from way back from WWI and I told him that they said all Navy personal were to report to wherever their supposed to report. That was my first experience with it.

Interviewer: What was sort of the reaction of your family or your community?

Inserra: No reaction just like me I should the you know your at war but we had no idea what war is really. I mean our life didn't change here all of those two or three years at England and the rest of them getting beat all to hell life was good here. Everybody in my family was able to get a job cause unemployment disappeared so we were living good at that time. So there was no dread of a war. I was 14 or 15 I don't recall I'm not going to figure it out I wasn't even thinking about being drafted. I didn't realize that wars going to go that long that they pick me up to you see.

Interviewer: Now you mentioned earlier that you were drafted.

Inserra: Yeh

Interviewer: When were you drafted like what year?

Inserra: 41 I think it was 41 yeh. I was drafted in 41 January not in January let's see January of 41 yeh January something of 41 was when I got notice form the draft board to come down. When I went down they gave me a week to clear everything up and report to duty on February let's say 4th or 5th or something I don't remember I just picked that.

Interviewer: What was your reaction about being drafted? Were you surprised were you anxious?

Inserra: No I was glad to go really I had tried to enlist earlier but I couldn't pass the physical believe it or not. I don't know where I went I went down someplace I don't remember it wasn't Army it was either Navy or probably Navy just a guess it might have been Navy and they found something in my physical and they says you have to go see a doctor first. Whatever the hell it was obviously I didn't go see a doctor we couldn't afford to go see a doctor at his whim you know how it is. Even in those days doctors we couldn't never afford doctors.

Interviewer: How did your family react to you being drafted were they worried were they

Inserra: Of course not only were they now my brother who was a year older than me he had Joined the Navy already. He enlisted for 6 months 6 years rather and at the time of Pearl Harbor believe it or not he was on an escort ship for our carriers you know they didn't catch our carriers they were all out at sea. He was there with them with however many carriers there were and he was on a light cruiser part of the escort shield for our carriers. And heading for Pearl Harbor shows you how lucky we were they hadn't gotten there yet. So there was a reaction we knew he was somewhere out there dangerous especially with Japan now you know.

Interviewer: Now when you were drafted how did you end up in the air force? How was that process?

Inserra: I oh I believe I was drafted actually into the air force ordinance. Yeh everybody was picked up a 1,000 people go to ordinance 1,000 go to artillery a 1,000 people go someplace else. Anyway I was assigned to air force ordinance was the group and at the base I didn't like air force ordinance. I don't know why I just didn't so I asked to if I could fly and they says well you fill out the paper work and we'll see. And I passed and I became an aviation cadet. And I had about two years possible two years of aviation cadet before I washed out.

Interviewer: What was that training like? What were some of the things you did?

Inserra: Oh it was wonderful I don't know what you mean like basic training for the grunts when you first get drafted was miserable. They got you up in the middle of the night you had KP two or three times a week starting at 4 or 5 in the morning and you worked until 9, 10 at night and you cleaned up the and there was scrubbing barracks and marching and guard duty. Guard duty is simple job right anybody can stand someplace with a gun well we had to do that winter and summer stand someplace with a gun no ammunition not allowed you might shoot somebody. But boring, cold, frustrating I didn't like it basic

training. But the air force was another story all they did for me was I went to school. I went to one school after the other I some colleges I went to college courses they taught us. Well we were supposed to be officers and gentlemen you know so.

Interviewer: Right

Inserra: They tried to make us officers and gentlemen so I had nothing but good schooling.

Interviewer: Where were some of the place you went to do the training?

Inserra: I was in St. Paul it was Macalester College up in St. Paul I spent about maybe 6 months there. And I went to I can't get the order correct but I was in Santa Anna air force flying schools I as in Santa Maria air force flying schools I went to oh boy what a memory. Those are the two big ones cause I did my basic I learned to fly my first airplane and the second air base Maria I think was a steerman biplane. I soloed in the steerman I was on my way to being a pilot.

Interviewer: Right

Inserra: Let me see Santa Anna, Santa Maria, San Bernardino it looks like I was all over the southern California dessert I guess you can fly there if you crash you won't kill anybody except yourself. Anyway I was in Yuma, Arizona gunnery school we went to I went to lot of places. We went to someplace in Kansas to pick up our new air plane and from there we flew the damn thing all the way to Italy.

Interviewer: Really?

Inserra: We got a brand new airplane and flew we went someplace after Carnes to train in it and then we flew it all the way up to New Finland and New Gander Field down to the Azores over to North Africa and eventually into Italy.

Interviewer: Now you mentioned earlier that you had washed out of the pilot training how did that happen?

Inserra: I destroyed my shoulder on the obstacle course. Every morning the first thing we had to do was get dressed get out there winter or summer you know it didn't matter and run the obstacle course. And stupidly I was gung hoe like all 18 year olds you know. I'm not satisfied with running the obstacle course and getting through it everyone of us had to be first and second and third because some stupid sargent was over there threatening us with something. So anyway in going underneath I had to dive underneath a barbed wire what you want to call it tunnel a barbed wire covered tunnel. I threw my self down to get in there and I dislocated my shoulder it hurt like hell but I twisted it back in shape and I hobbled on back. And I tried to get out of basic training obstacle course. The next morning no sir you've got to do it again and I couldn't do it. When I got to the ladders you know the hanging ladders as soon as I put my arm up there and let go of the other one pulled right out again. So two or three days of that and they says go to the hospital. And the doctors in the hospital decided it isn't worth repairing they got 5,000 other recruits out there we're not going to take one who has a bad shoulder. Wash out so

Interviewer: What were you reassigned to then?

Inserra: Gunner soldier I went to well more than besides humor is where we did our sure firing and sure flying and I went somewhere else gunner school to learn the guns we had to learn. And then Yuma to practice with them and the shooting and all that nonsense.

Interviewer: Now what type of aircraft did you fly on during the war then?

Inserra: Believe it or not very little B17 very little. Because we were new and B17s were getting shot all to hell and at that time somebody designed this new airplane you probably never heard of it. A B17 have you ever flown an old airplane a DC3?

Interviewer: I know what you're talking about.

Inserra: The original twin engine big wide wing. Well that's like being on a kite every little ripple in the air and your bouncing you know. So the B17 is the same way you get on a B17 and if you can stand the bouncing and the bumping and the thumping and the noises and everything you could get away with it but it was terrible. So somebody by the name of Davis some engineer in some air nominal company invented a new wing it's called a Davis wing. And it was put on the B24 it was the first airplane it was put on. Now the difference is the B24 had to fly faster because it wasn't a big wing it was smaller narrower you see. You had to fly faster for the same lift but it was a smooth as could be it would be like you're in your car.

Interviewer: Really

Inserra: And it was fast so they sent all of their new gunners and their air crews everybody not to B17s but to the new airplanes. And I was lucky you know it was all the luck of the draw I could have been in the worst of it but I got the best of it. I got this airplane and flying it was great absolutely great I mean I'm sitting in the chair just like this up in the turret there's whistling noises air you know smooth as could be. If I wanted to paint I could paint if I wanted to take care of brain surgery I think I could have done that. Just luck luck of the draw so we got this beautiful new airplane the best they had and we went all the way with it went through the whole war and brought the damn thing back. I think we parked it in Kansas too. Where is that aircraft where all the dead airplanes go? Its' in Arizona I think.

Interviewer: I'm not sure somewhere out west I don't know what the name of it is though.

Inserra: They flew the damn thing back there and there's 10,000 airplanes on the ground out there everything you can think of. And we parked ours there and drove away went through the whole war with one airplane.

Interviewer: Now when did your unit first move overseas so you remember what year it was?

Inserra: No I don't they were they were there a long time before me they were in Italy before me. I arrived in North Africa and we flew some mission there because no you know North Africa all of Europe is so small we can cover everything. And then we transferred to Stwater was the name of the county or

province and the city was Ceregnola, Ceregnola that's where our airbase was. IN an olive field an olive whatever you call it not a field an olive grove. Everything around us was olives.

Interviewer: So how soon after arriving overseas did you fly your first combat mission?

Inserra: Three or four days.

Interviewer: Really?

Inserra: Yeh right away we were trained. And they were getting beat up I mean in front of me they were getting beat up. So they had to have replacements they had to put in new airplanes and people didn't come back. They took a beating but then again the luck of the draw I was younger I came in later everything was prepared for me it was easier. We got hit a couple of times with little flack holes but that's about all they got to us.

Interviewer: So you remember what your what the first target was you went after?

Inserra: Well I can name a lot of them our favorite and actually our worse one was a ball bearing factory at Regensburg.

Interviewer: Sure

Inserra: You've heard of Regensburg?

Interviewer: Oh yeh

Inserra: We used to I don't know why we went back so many times but I guess they found out we missed it no but we kept going back. And Regensburg was a long haul its in Czechoslovakia isn't it? But anyway it was a long haul and we took a beating on that one and we also went to Innsbruck I think in Austria and I went to I've got all that at home listed all my targets are listed. Let me think for a second my worst trip was Munich.

Interviewer: Really?

Inserra: Yeh yeh it's kind of humorous. My pilot was good he was the best and my navigator was immaculate you know. If you told the navigator to go here on this little pen spot from half a mile away he'd be right here on that little pen spot. So we because we were good, they were good we were just sitting on our back sides here, they wanted us to go to Munich. Because they had heard that Hitler was switching from 88s you know the antiaircraft guns with the big black puffs?

Interviewer: Yeh

Inserra: He was switching from 88 to 155s millimeters. That's almost double the size.

Interviewer: Right

Inserra: Which could shoot higher and we didn't know how accurate they were going to be. So intelligence says somebody is going to fly to Munich and let them shoot at you. It sounds funny that's what they did your going to fly to Munich and tell us what its like. It was we didn't mind we were happy because Munich where the school was the flack school was was just a hop skip and a jump from Switzerland. We knew if we got hit got into any trouble at all we were just going to glide right into Switzerland and spend the war in Switzerland you know who cares patriotic you know that.

Interviewer: Yeh

Inserra: You're always patriotic until their shooting at you. But anyway we says okay we'll take the trip that sounds good and everybody knew that we're flying here and Switzerland is right there. Anyway I'm top turret and I'm sitting up there you know we're all by ourselves this was a single airplane we didn't want to attract any attention and have them come after us with fire so we were a single airplane. I'm sitting up in my top turret and all the way out there I'm sitting on the wing by the way the wings of the airplane are on either side of me. So all the way up there on the end of my wingtip there's a little white puff just a little one a cotton ball out there. So I says on the radio I says there's something out there on 9 o'clock yeh it was 3 o'clock take a look. And as we're moving along we're flying along another little white puff only it was closer and it got a little bigger and we're flying along and everybody is looking out the window on the right side and then the next puff came along and it was bigger it was a puff. So captain says oh oh the next ones going to be right in this airplane because they had our speed they had our direction they were just moving over. Single shots so any rate he decided I'm not waiting for the next one cause it will get me big very big you've never been through an 88 flat burst in an airplane. You've seen it in the movies you know there's and airplane here and there's a puff and a puff but we flew through one which went off right in front of us and we flew through it. And it got dark it covered the whole airplane blocked out the daylight. Uh oh that is no toy that is a big explosion you're finished. So we were looking at this 155s you know they are getting bigger. So the pilot says let's get the hell out of her the next ones going to be in this cockpit and we swerved away and as we swerved away the next blast came. So we went back and told them their very good their very accurate and we were flying high they wanted to test them. Munich is I don't know 5 or 6 thousand maybe 10 thousand feet up there in the mountains in the Alps or wherever it's very high. So we had to fly even higher almost maximum 36,000 feet or something to stay away from this little house fire down there. And they still reached us and they probably could have gone higher. So that was an interesting one and we just beat the hell home. They found out what they wanted to know. These guys are good their guns are god they get up there at 36,000 feet we have to be careful now.

Interviewer: Did you always have a fighter escort on your fighter missions?

Inserra: No I only saw a fighter escort through the whole war for me through the whole war which was close to a year probably maybe maybe twice. But actually beginning late into the theatre I would say that Hitler was already in a lot of trouble and he couldn't put those planes up there. But we could we had the P51s we had the colored outfit the checkered 51s I spotted them once. They actually came close enough that we could see them once nearby. Once before I saw airplanes way of in the distance they were just dark silhouettes you know but they were our planes. And I couldn't tell you who or what they

were. But evidentially our fighter pilots were doing a good job. Or Hitler ran out of airplanes or pilots you know I'm not into intelligence there.

Interviewer: Now was did you ever have a mission were a German fighter actually sought your plane in particular?

Inserra: Well you know you can't predict that you can't say that because they swoop in from all kinds of odd angles. And if they're smart they don't shoot at one airplane we're in a formation we're in a very tight formation. They swoop in and they shoot at this airplane hoping that if the bullet misses it this airplane it will hit that one or maybe the next one.

Interviewer: Right

Inserra: So you never know you have to see them and you see the flashing from their cabins but you don't really know who their shooting at that angle is deceiving. And we're moving at 300 miles an hour and their moving at who knows what their moving at. You can't say he's shooting at me he could be shooting at anybody around me or near me and I see the flash you know. But we did have some flack, flack was something else again we did have some flack holes in the planes. So that means them other things them little puffs we close.

Interviewer: Now was anyone in your crew ever wounded during the war?

Inserra: No no but we did go down once. We went on a trip to it wasn't Regensburg where is Ploiesti?

Interviewer: Romania

Inserra: That was a maximum run for us it was over a thousand miles I think it was a maximum run for us. And on that mission we ran into head winds and bad weather and stalling and if you something blocked the formation from dropping bombs maybe a cloud came through what we had to do (he stops to talk to someone else, what? She says: you going to eat? He says yeh yes I am) what we had to do was and that's suicide was go around and come back again now their waiting for you. So anyhow we had to do that and when we got finished with the second run around we didn't have enough fuel to get home. And of course you don't wait until you run out of fuel to bail out. They had emergency procedures and the navigator knows where places to go and we had to land in Yugoslavia at that time. MiKlovich General MiKlovich was on our side in a sense he wasn't a communist general. He had freed up a piece of property there that was his in control of and our engineers went down and put a run way in there. They scrapped a nice runway in there with metal plates. You scrape the ground level and you put the metal plates down and attach them and you've got a runway. And we landed there the whole squadron practically landed there. And we had to stay there one or two days until somebody could get up enough gasoline to get home and we came home.

Interview: Now did you have like a quota of missions you had to complete before you could return to the states?

Inserra: Yeh it was it was let me think what was it? It was I think it was 30 or 35 missions' actual combat missions and then you could go home. But we were flying almost every other day for a year so I might have a hundred missions but if we didn't complete it if it was abandoned if the target closed in if whatever reason that counted. If we went there and dropped a bomb on something that's a mission. Anyway I only ended up with 23 missions myself. So I don't know the guys had 30, 35 I remember in the movies the British that was the most dreaded flight of all that last one. You had to get home and you was safe and you really don't know.

Interviewer: So after 23 that was when the war ended or was that

Inserra: The war ended this was November. That's another reason why to help end the war they put up maximum efforts every day. They wanted 1000 bombers in the sky everyday and then they went to they wanted 1500 bombers in the sky everyday. Everyday every single land base in Italy and in African and any where nearby took off made formations and flew to Germany. Hitler got he message you see he was beginning to realize if we're going to put a thousand up there every day there's not gonna be much left in Germany and I guess all these generals wanted to kill him.

Interviewer: So you remember how long after the war ended before you returned to the states?

Inserra: Very quickly very quickly a week two weeks when did the war end in November?

Interviewer: May of 45.

Inserra: In May was it in May okay oh November was Japan okay. May of 45 I was home a month less than a month because we flew back the same way. The same way we went we're in our airplane it was in good condition we flew to Africa we flew to the Azores we flew to Gander we flew home. And we landed in lucky for me New Jersey whatever that air force base in New Jersey is its not Fort Dix it's another field anyway I was able to go home and see the family.

Interviewer: Wow

Inserra: Yeh

Interviewer: So had at the time you had been gone did you think America had changed any? Did you notice any changes?

Inserra: No no it was about the same. Everybody was working everybody was working we were definitely better off and well off I mean everybody had a job. Now before the war there were there were no jobs for women in particular. My mother had to support me and my brother on her own with no skill no education of any kind beyond whatever they do in Europe at the time. She would get jobs for about \$12 a week she had jobs for less I remember she had jobs for \$8 a week that was a six day week by the way. And women weren't allowed to work they could be secretaries they could open mail they could do this you know crap. Men did all the work and then all the jobs with money we men's but after the war when we came back they were all making money close to the men. And it was much better much better we got a good place to live on our own we got you know it got much better.

Interviewer: So how long were you back before you were discharged from the air force?

Inserra: After VJ-Day which I think was in November I was discharged November 5th that was my discharge date I believe in 45.

Interviewer: Did you had you had any thoughts of maybe staying in making it a career?

Inserra: No no cause the air force is the one part of the military as glamorous and as wonderful a job as they do you know they go wing with and they blow the hell out of everything. And they win the war right? But when the war is over why do you need 2,000 bombers?

Interviewer: Right

Inserra: Why do you need 20,000 pilots and 40,000 gunners and on and on and on and on we were the first ones discharged. There was no place for us when I went back to New York City and was looking for a job I sit down and there was an interviewer there and he says well what's your experience? I said I can shoot a gun I can take a 50 caliber apart blind folded with mittens on. I can do this I can load I can unload I can I can hit anything you want with a shot gun. Well they would all say well there's not much need for that here. What can you do? Nothing so for us jobs were tough we had to go to school. Luckily the GI bill was there we went to school everybody I know went to school I went to school.

Interviewer: So looking back after almost 60 years now how do you think WWII has affected you in the long run? Has it affected the way you look at things think about things?

Inserra: I don't know what to say it improved our standard of living our family everyone in the family was richer more comfortable more educated you know on and on and on. It was better the war did good for us got me you know when I went out for a job even though I had no skill what so ever there was 500 jobs there. I mean the interviewer would have a list of jobs from A-Z what would you like to do? And he'd name them off you know where would you like to go? A stupid kid where would how would he know where he would like to go?

Interviewer: Yeh

Inserra: At the time I didn't know I didn't know I floundered around a lot then I went to school and that helped.

Interviewer: Yeh well is there anything you'd like to add or maybe anything I forgot to ask or anything you'd like to elaborate on?

Inserra: No I don't have any no the GI bills a good deal and today's kids in the service whether their grunts or officer material they had a college education guarantee they have I say that's good. They should all enlist its worth it. It's worth it, it sets up the rest of your life it's a good deal. I wish I'd have had it.

Interviewer: All right

Inserra: Thank you.