

Interview with Clayton Biller
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Central Minnesota Historical Oral History Collection
St. Cloud State University Archives
Interviewed by David Smith

Smith: When did you enter the service?

Biller: I enlisted in -- what was in the air corp on June 11th 1940.

Smith: And you volunteered?

Biller: Yes. That's before they started the draft.

Smith: Why the air core? Were you...?

Biller: I was always interested in aviation from as far back as I can remember. I had a friend here that had gone down to Chanute Field. He had gone through the aircraft mechanics course. That was what I was interested in until I couldn't get into flying. Flying was -- just seemed like it was beyond my reach, at that point anyway. So probably the only way that I could, possibly get into it would be with the air core which later became air force.

Smith: So you hadn't flown then before?

Biller: No, I had had a couple of rides in barnstorming airplanes but that was all.

Smith: So you went through basic training then?

Biller: I went through basic -- about two weeks. It was about all I had then before I started into the school. And school, was -- I remember six months long, both aircraft and engine. And as soon as I got out of that they put me into instructing in the school so I instructed them for the next year and a half, until I could get into the cadets.

Smith: Okay, where did you go through training?

Biller: That was at Chanute Field, the cadet training, went down to Kelly Field to start with, for that pre flight training. I took my primary training in El Reno, Oklahoma, just west of Oklahoma City. And to Enid, Oklahoma for basic, in Pampa, Texas. Well in Panhandle for advanced. It was twin

engine advanced. I kind of wanted to go to single, but they had some word on that or you went to.

Smith: I just going to backtrack and ask you what did you instruct in and what type of airplane?

Biller: This was mechanics you mean the -- as -- when I was still enlisted before cadets. I was instructing mechanics, air craft mechanics.

Smith: And then, could you tell me the airplanes that you trained in?

Biller: Yeah the primary training was a fair child pt19, basic training was called the BT-13, and 15 -- they were two of them: Summer aircraft, just different engines. Advanced, we had Beechcraft AT-10, and Curtiss CT-9, and the Cessna, called bobcat, 17 designations on it, was a 17...

Smith: Those were all single engines?

Biller: No they were twin. The primary and basic were single, and advanced was two engines.

Smith: And how long, were each -- how long did each stages take?

Biller: They were two months each. We got about 70 hours in each phase of it.

Smith: Oh, so half in your flying payment every day then?

Biller: Oh yeah. It was a very busy schedule. You had to do your drills and physical training and ground school, and flying. So it was a full day all the time.

Smith: And what -- after you were all done with you training, you were assigned?

Biller: Yeah, they came out and again with the assignments and I was immediately named and instructing again. And I wanted to go and to transports. Then, in the multi-engine, [00:05:00] I was about the first name read off for instructing. So we were down to Randolph field, then we were -- what they call Central Instructors School and went through another six-week course there, in instructing. And I was assigned a base in Turner Field Georgia. Montgomery I can't think of a name of. Anyway I was only down there months and I transferred up to just south of Indianapolis Freeman Field, Indiana. And I instructed there in the same type of aircraft, for a while. AT-10's and AT-17 and then we got B-25s,

and I started instructing take off procedures for carriers like build that all. Build on the carrier for bombing Japan. Instructed there until they close the base in early 1945, then I went through transition and old Martin B-26. They later named another, North American B-26. But the one I went through was Martin B-26. From there I went to a pool at Randolph again, waiting to go over seas and on the A-26, which later became the B-26. And while we were there, the production was a little too slow so they took the highest time people -- out of the pool, sent us down to Sebring, Florida for B-17 training. Then on to Montgomery Alabama for B-29 training. While I was in the training, they signed the peace over in Japan, so I didn't finish -- complete the B-29 training. But I was about halfway through.

Smith: I'm not familiar with the B-26...

Biller: B-26, the Martin B-26, was a very short going airplane. And it looked like a cigar; they call it the flying cigar, a couple of other names which I won't give. But the A-26, in North American, was originally designed as an attack, fighter, bomber type, and then it was later, given just the armor designation.

Smith: That was a single engine?

Biller: No that was a twin.

Smith: What's -- how large were they?

Biller: Some of it were B-25, just a little bigger maybe. The A-26 would have been a little smaller while the Martin B-26, probably just a little bigger.

Smith: I see. Were there any -- did you enjoy the flying?

Biller: Very much, very much yeah.

Smith: The instructing, did it get tedious at times?

Biller: No not really. You are always working with different student. And the program varied from -- I was teaching the twin engine flying -- they had just come out of a single engine and we go into instrument work and it was a pretty interesting program, yeah.

Smith: How many students would you have at any one particular time?

Biller: It's usually five, maybe six that will be in a class.

Smith: You were strictly their flying instructor or you did also the grounds schooling with them?

Bill: No. The grounds school was a separate department. They usually -- only would have -- there would be only one morning ground school session. And we would be flying with the other group while they were out. And in the afternoon, ground school session, will get the morning session for flying.

Smith: I see. [00:10:00] So you always stayed in the States, and you were never...

Bill: I never got overseas. I was training to go over -- unfortunately it ended before then. That's the time I wanted to go overseas but, I guess after it was over, I wasn't too sorry that I hadn't gone to overseas.

Smith: The B-29 was a new designer?

Bill: Yeah, that was the biggest airplane available at that time. Big four engine. It kind of reminded you of a fake train taking off.

Smith: Yeah? Was that quite of a transition? Were there a lot of new features?

Bill: Yeah. But I'd gone through the B-17, which is another four engine with -- and that was part of the training to go into the B-29, so -- that's a -- I was just getting acquainted with all instrumentation, way the thing handled. They all have little quirks that you have to carry.

Smith: Anything in particular that sticks out of your mind, any a little quirks?

Bill: The B-26, the Martin B-26, was a -- right at the takeoff point, if you lost an engine, you just didn't have any chance of being able to control of it. It will just roll right over on and so it was pretty critical, at that point. B-17s were very easy to fly. They're just a big old cub type airplane and they were easy to land and take-off. B-29 is a little more -- it didn't have the same flight characteristics. You had to be with a little more -- they all have different [unintelligible - 00:12:19] I guess you'd say. You just had to get used to them. And the systems on them you have to learn that in ground school. So that you know how hydraulics the electronics and everything in them work. They were always a little different.

Smith: Through, anytime of your training, do you remember anytime, like an engine out or -- when you once travelled?

Bill: Yeah. I had a few. One time, I had a student on a cross country middle level, cross country training. And we were flying it, at a hundred or two hundred feet. And the engine started going out on us. I could see it was going bad so I had the student climbing on up to a couple of thousand feet. And at that point it was starting to throw oil and missing really badly. So we shut it down and that was on the twin beach and it didn't really have enough power to maintain altitude one engine. You couldn't, you could stretch it and that was about all. You couldn't figure on going any great distance and that was why I had him climb up so we would have little altitude before we had to shut it off. And from that point on, it was a gradual descend with the one engine running. And to get to the airport, we had one or two auxiliary airports where we would shoot landings and things that we couldn't set down in. And we saw that we couldn't make the main one but we got it back alright. Then there were a few other occasions with bigger airplanes but that one was -- that was probably my first one where we really lost the engines or probably the most memorable. Really through my whole career, I didn't have very many of them fail on me. Later in the commercial flying airline, couple of them quit on me but [00:15:00] there I had four engines so there was no big problem.

Smith: When you were -- when you left the service, how many hours had you accumulated by then?

Bill: I had 1270 hours at that point. And...

Smith: Right away you were hired by an airline or?

Bill: No I came and I got here on the airport for a few years. Airport at that time was south of town and I was just running a flying service for some European lady smith. And that made me essentially manager of the airport and flying service.

Smith: Was it much of a transition than to go into commercial?

Bill: Not a lot but it was different. But I decided that I had to leave here and it was enough here to keep me satisfied. And we -- I went back to school and got my civilian license in mechanics. When I got that, then I went on the same school it was Spartan school of aeronautics in Tulsa, got my instrument rating. And I had gone to work down in Tulsa and over down in Tucson, Arizona over hauling P-51 engines on Rolls Royce. And while I was there, I got word that American Airlines was hiring so I sent in an application. And two weeks later, I was in school with them. And from that time 31 years, with American Airlines.

Smith: I see, you said that you had to get your instrument ready so the military didn't carry over until...

Bill: No, we got a -- I got a commercial rating through the military. And when I got out, just by applying for it. But they wouldn't give an instrument rating even though I had a -- what we call a green card that had gone through an extensive instrument training with the air force, air core, But FA -- it wouldn't honor that part of it.

Smith: Can you tell me a little about what planes did you fly in the air lines?

Bill: The first one I flew was a Convair 240, it's a twin engine, 40 passengers, and then I flew a DC-4, DC-6s. I had gone into four engines, with Douglas airplanes and Douglas DC-7 and jet started coming in. And I flew with Lockheed Electra, it's a turbo prop. And then into Convair 990, the Boeing 727, 707, and into the Douglas DC-10. I stayed on that until I retired.

Smith: What year did you retire?

Bill: 1982. We had to retire at 60, you can't go beyond that.

Smith: Was that enjoyable flying?

Bill: Very much yeah I guess I enjoyed. I just felt like I was so fortunate to get into the flying and be able to stay with it all those years.

Smith: And, you still fly?

Bill: Still fly on a smaller plane, one that I built. And anything else that comes along.

Smith: Do you get a chance to -- okay I think does it and thank you very much.

Biller: Very good thank you.

[00:19:51] [RECORDING STOPPED]/AT/jr/