

ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

FLORENE MILLER WATSON
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT
TUSCON, ARIZONA – 24 MARCH 2000

WRIGHT: Today is March 24, 2000. This oral history is being conducted with Florene Miller Watson, as part of an ongoing oral history project. She is visiting with us today about her experiences as a female aviator, which started when, Florene?

WATSON: It started after my second year at Baylor University [Texas]. That must have been in 1940.

WRIGHT: When did you first want to start flying?

WATSON: Well, to tell you the truth, I thought it was—I really never did consider it, thinking about wanting to fly, but I always loved the idea of flying itself. As I started flying, my first airplane ride was when I was eight years old. I was born in 1920, so this would be 1928, and, you know, in 1928 the planes were not just the most modern, as they are today.

My plane rides that early on were open-cockpit planes, and I remember the old barnstorming pilots with their jodhpurs on and their scarf about the neck and the helmet. The way this would happen, they would fly over the towns. Of course, the skies were really quiet in those days. So a plane would come flying over, why, everybody would run outside and see what in the world that was. Then the pilot, in order to attract attention, would start pumping on his throttle, he'll "burp, burp, burp," and everybody will think, "Oh, my goodness, what is that?" Then he'd wiggle his wings and go down and find a place to land, that people could come and take barnstorming rides.

So my father—this happened a number of times when I went grade school and high school—he would always come after me when it would happen. It's one of the greatest times of my life, I remember, with him. I adored him. The first time he took me out there and was so excited and holding my hand running up to the airplane, and he pulls out his money and he shells out the money and buys me a ticket and lets me get in the extra seat in the airplane, and we take off. I'd stick my head over the side and the wind blows through my hair, and I thought I was a bird.

Because, you know, in those days, like in 1927, we didn't have any TV or movies or anything else that would really indicate to me what it was supposed to look like from up in the sky. Now kids, from all kinds of ways, knows what that looks like, whether they've ever been up there or not, see. So the contrast of ground living and air was not that great, but it was really great to me, the immensity of it and the awe of what I saw and everything. So I would come down and then my father would buy himself a ticket, he'd get in and he'd love it, too. So then we'd walk away from the prairie, hand in hand, just giggling and taking on, you know, we just had more fun.

Now, I had two brothers, one two years older and two years younger, and my father would go get the boys, also, do the same thing for the boys, but he always got me by myself, and this was always a very special time for me. As I say, it happened a number of times.

Then I went off to college, in my second year at Baylor University, he called me in the spring and said, "Guess what? I have bought us a Luscombe airplane." I said, "Oh, my! Great!" He wasn't a pilot, and neither were my brothers, and neither was I, but he said, "I bought us a family airplane and we're all going to get to fly it." I thought, oh, hallelujah.

Here I am in the spring semester, and I'd always made straight As in school, and I thought, I can't even pass this time. I couldn't even get my mind on what I was supposed to get through with that semester. Somehow I got through it and I eventually graduated cum

laude with honors, but I thought I was ruining that semester for sure. I wanted to go home, get in that airplane.

So as soon as school was out, I marched myself home, got in that airplane, and, I'm telling you, the four of us flew that plane and I don't think we ever let the engine get cold. We were scheduled constantly. We'd have one up and one down, and that poor airplane, we just wore that thing out with the four of us flying it.

But we all got our private pilot licenses, and I got my commercial, and then I went on to get my instructor rating in the air, and then my instructor rating in all the ground school courses. Then I taught flying for—well, I taught flying to private pilots, but primarily the ones that really I had more—by this time, now this was in 1940, and the government, I guess, watching [Adolf] Hitler, was getting a little nervous, and they initiated some—I think they were more like advanced CPT [CPTP, Civilian Pilot Training Program] classes, I think of that type of thing, but they called them the War Training Program.

They had classes that you could enroll as many as fifty men in one class for ground school. The men would take the ground school and I don't remember how many, a few months, two, three months, something like that, for ground school. Then the men, ten of the men that got the highest grades on paper, got free private pilot licenses, paid for by the government, with no strings attached.

The idea was to stimulate interest in these guys so that they would volunteer for the Air Force, Air Corps as it was at that time, and volunteer for it. So I had three classes going all the time, and I don't know, I [do not know] where all those men came from, when I'm thinking about it, but they didn't have really tight age limits on it, and I don't know what the upper limit was, but I know I had many of them in the mid twenties, twenty-five up to thirty. See, that's getting old. You might say they weren't eighteen-year-olds, but some were in there.

But these men, for the most part, had jobs, and at different hours, and my night classes. Then I had morning, afternoon, and night, see, and they could come whenever they wanted to. In the classes, that was one of the most beneficial things I ever did in my life. Do you know why? I got a husband out of that. [Laughter] I got a husband out of one of those.

WRIGHT: Trained him well, huh? [Laughter]

WATSON: Yes. See, that was the best thing that ever happened to me. So we've been married very happily for fifty-five years, and he gets sweeter every day. It's just really good. A very low-stress marriage, very good.

He came in to volunteer to take the ground school, but he had already had six years of college and a couple of engineering degrees and working for Phillips Petroleum before I ever met him. So he came to me sauced and glowed, I didn't have to do a thing for him for his education, or anything else.

Then when the war came along, he did his thing, I did mine, and three years later we got together and married. See, so it worked out just fine, we had all this in between.

WRIGHT: Now, you've mentioned home, but you didn't tell us where you had this plane.

WATSON: Where home was. Well, home was in Odessa, Texas. I taught flying in Odessa and then in Lubbock, Texas for part time, for a shorter amount of time. But I learned to fly in Odessa, is where all this was.

But now the interesting thing was, when the four of us were flying that airplane, of course, the idea of a family owning an airplane was very unusual. So the reporters always need something to write about, and so one day my brothers and I picked up the newspaper

and here was an article that my father had been interviewed, and the question was asked, "Mr. Miller, whatever possessed you to buy an airplane?"

He said, "Well, I could have justified it for my business." Because he had five jewelry stores in town surrounding the Odessa area. But he said, "That's not really why I bought it." So we kids looked at that. This is 1940. He says, "I think that America's going to get in the war." He must have been watching Hitler. He said, "I want my children to be able to contribute to the war effort." And, boy, his children's hair stood straight up. We thought, "What is Daddy talking about?"

Daddy was always very perceptive, and when he would, we'll say prophesize, or think that something was going to happen, when he'd predict something, it nearly always came true. And that scared us. We said, "Daddy, you can't be right this time. We're not going to allow you being right this time." He said, "I'm afraid I am."

We all kept up doing what we were doing. Well, my father never did get to see Pearl Harbor. He and my older brother were killed in our family airplane. I was there at the scene of the crash, with my father when he died. My brother was killed instantly. I was dating my husband at the time, and my husband was with me at the time, and so that we had a little bit of a blow to the family plane ownership, as well as losing two members like that.

But we had as a family, I had a sister too young to fly, but we as a family had sat down, the six of us, and had discussed a number of different times, since flying was not that safe then, "What are we going to think about if one of us gets killed? How are we going to react to this if it happens?" So we decided that we thought we knew enough about Scripture that God deals with each one of us individually and not corporately, and so what would happen to one of us would not necessarily increase the chances of that same thing happening to the other fellow. So when this happened, my brother and I, survivors, looked at each other and we said, "Do we really believe that or not?"

So we got to thinking, "Well, we guess we do. We guess we really believe that's the way the Lord handles things," and therefore, we could just, as comfortably as we did before, get back in that airplane and just hope for the best.

So, scared out of our wits, we got back in that airplane again within a week's time, shaking like a leaf, and wondering what's coming next.

But he went on, he volunteered for military service in teaching cadets in the Air Force schools. Then I went on to go into the Ferrying Division. So my father did get his wish that his kids contributed to the war effort.

After I taught there in Odessa, and then was really asked to come to Lubbock to teach there also, and I did. I learned aerobatic flying while I was in Lubbock, which was a little different in those days, that you'd have anybody in the kind of airplane you could use, because your normal smaller airplanes, the Cubs and the Aeroncas and the Cruisers, and all that, were not aerobatic-type planes. But I learned aerobatics in a biplane Waco, which is sort of like the Steerman, which are good aerobatic airplanes.

Learning aerobatics at that time was a challenge to my skill, as well as enjoying it, but later on in the military it saved my life, what I learned as an aerobatic pilot. So I was always glad that that came along. You never know what you do in life that's going to help you or hurt you at some later date. But that was good that I got that aerobatic training at that time.

So I went on vacation with my brother and the wife of Don Teel, the man that owned the airport in Odessa. His wife and about a ten-year-old daughter, and my brother and I, all went on vacation to Florida, just to play for a while. And while I was there, Don came home from an overseas trip. Now, he went back into the war. He had learned to fly in Canada, and then he was with the Royal Air Force, and somehow I guess he went back to volunteer, or he was already in the reserve for them or whatever. But he was gone and was with the Royal Air Force and was flying big planes overseas.

He had come back through Washington and had heard that Nancy Love was starting this organization of qualified women pilots, that she was looking for them. He came through and just knew someone who told him that as he came through, flew down to Florida, told me. Well, in the meantime, they had sent me, as they had other girls, a telegram back in Odessa, but I wasn't there. So he told me about it, and so I got on the phone and called, yes, that's for sure.

So I got on a train in Florida and never did go back home, and I guess I didn't have to pick up a whole bunch of clothes or something, I had some clothes with me. But going to the military, you didn't need a lot of civilian clothes, anyway. So I just packed my little bag, got on the train, and choo-chooed my way up to Wilmington, Delaware, and went in and offered my services.

They were expecting me, which was really nice. They met me at the train. I wouldn't have had any idea where to go or what to do, and someone met me, knew I was coming. Then I had my interviews and everything, and then my check rides. And that started the first check ride, and all the time I was in the military I had check rides and check rides and check rides. I think that was one of the things, when I quit, one of the things I knew was missing, I didn't have a bird dog watching me what I'm doing. [Laughter] No check rides. I had so many because I flew so many different kind of planes, and so you would go through this routine over and over and over, see, then they'd come back and check you again.

WRIGHT: What were those basic requirements that they were looking for?

WATSON: Okay. He had told me some of the requirements, but the Ferrying Division, it was supposed to take airplanes all over the United States and the world, wherever they were needed. That was the transport command of the services. They didn't have enough militarily trained Air Force men, so they went to the civilian populace and asked civilian men, "Will

you please come, take tests, and volunteer to serve with us if you have 250 hours of flying time and a commercial license and a horsepower rating." I forget, 250 horsepower rating, I think it was.

So men would come and volunteer for that. Then when they got so desperate and they decided that they would look for girls, maybe they had some, then they said, "Yes, girls, we'd like to have you. We want you to have 500 hours with the horsepower rating and the commercial license." Twice what they wanted the men to have. Of course, if a man could do it in 250, sure we dodo girls ought to do in 500, you know, if they give us twice the class requirements.

So they finally, I was about number twelve, I think, of girls that came. Then it took us three months to finally get our twenty-five. They kind of dribbled in after, it seemed like there were just maybe one or two that came after I did and it just kind of stopped for a while and then some others dribbled in, in about a three-month period of time. But when we got together and averaged our flying time when we started, we had 1,100 hours each. So fortunately we started off with qualifications as being more experienced than they had even planned on our being.

It turned out to be very good, because with that much time, we had already pulled all of our dum-dums at home, and so we weren't pulling a bunch of stupid stunts when we got up there, because whatever we'd done, we'd done it some other place. So we, actually, turned out looking pretty good.

Now, one thing that was to our advantage, as I think back on it, for sure, is that the Ferrying Division wanted us, and so we were accepted very well and put to work. They had everything arranged to give us education and classroom stuff on how the military did it and everything. Now, I did not feel any resentment from anyone. Now, I'm a little bit, on that score a little bit naive, I think, and if somebody was trying to insult me, I'd be so dumb I wouldn't catch it. [Laughter] And I had no chip on my shoulder, so I wasn't looking for

anything, and I wasn't out to dig anybody else, or anything, and I wasn't looking for them to do that to me.

The interesting thing, too, is I think back on it, too, is that each one of us girls that got in there had gotten all of our flying time on our own in our own little area of the world, and all of our little area was full of men. See, I'd never seen another girl pilot, and all I'd been around were men pilots. That's all I knew pilots were, were men. We had learned how to conduct ourselves around men before we got there. When I got there, there was just more of the same thing. It didn't bother me that there wasn't any conditioning to the new circumstances, other than it was military and airplanes. So that made us a lot easier to blend into the group, because we had lived in that kind of an environment before we got there, which is not true to others who just started and never saw an airplane or a man's world or anything like that that you had to live in.

Another thing, too, I think, as I think about men, I always had the attitude that men were just great people. I grew up in a Christian family, and my father was one of twelve kids, and my mother just had one brother, so that offset that. But anyway, I had a lot of aunts and uncles and a lot of cousins. I never saw a man do anything I disapproved of. These men, all of them, being Christian men, were head of the household. Wasn't any question who had the last word in the household, but at the same time they gave their women all of the freedom that they needed. No one squelched anybody else. There was always harmony everywhere. So I thought men were absolutely great, and I adored my father and my brothers. So I never looked for anything adverse from a man. They were just wonderful people, and they were there to take care of me, and we were going to work together and all of that.

So, as I say, with my attitude, probably a lot of bad stuff went over my head from then on that I didn't even catch on, as far as that goes. I also learned early on that men have a very sensitive ego, and if we girls are smart, we don't mess with that. We just don't mess with it. And we don't smart off to them, and we don't try to give them the attitude that we

think we are as good as, or maybe superior to them. I always let the men know that I knew that I was in their territory. I understood that, but whatever they'd allow me to do that I was capable of doing, I'd be glad to do it. And if he got an opportunity to do something, I'd be bragging on him and thrilled to death that he did get it, and I was truly happy for that. But I was available if anything that I was capable of doing, if they'd let me do it, that'd just be fine.

As it turned out, I was extremely fortunate, and more so than nine-tenths of the girls, there weren't but two or three of them, probably got the variety of airplanes that I got, but I just happened to be at the right place at the right time with the skill level right for the airplane that happened to be there and the training that was available to me. Then to fly that airplane enough and get qualified with a higher skill level to go to the next something, and then to have the opportunity to do it. Even if you were qualified for it, the opportunity had to be there.

WRIGHT: You had a lot of hours. Had you flown in lots of different types of aircraft before you got to Delaware?

WATSON: Lots of civilian type. Civilian type were all small, but they were different brands and different types. Yes, I had flown whatever was available out there, really. I wasn't just a one-airplane person, because I taught some of the private pilots who had owned other airplanes. The airport itself owned several different kinds of planes, and then I taught several different kinds of men. So, yes, I would say that I'd had as good a background of variety that you could have. Then having had aerobatic training in the Waco, that put me a jump ahead of what normally, and what most of the pilots had really had the opportunity to do.

But I really enjoyed being around the men. I felt very comfortable, very comfortable around the men. The strange thing, I remember telling myself when I got on the base, well, during the first week, or first few days, with all these men and all the activity that was going

on, I told myself, "You are not going to do or say anything while you're here that you're going to be embarrassed about fifty years from now." When I said that to myself, I thought fifty years, that sounds like a 150 to us now. Right now it doesn't sound like very long. In other words, the ultimate future I'm not going to say or do anything I'm going to be embarrassed about. Now I can go back to all the reunions and everything else, I think, "You don't have anything on me, buddy." [Laughter] It's real comfortable. Real comfortable. Because I didn't know what the future was going to bring or anything, but that's what I told myself.

As it was, I went around and did stuff with everybody, but I never did drink any alcohol the whole time I was gone, not that I thought that was that much different or anything. I felt I don't need it, I am not used to it, I don't miss it, and what I don't miss I don't miss. I'm not deprived. I'm not deprived. I never did smoke, so I've been deprived because I didn't smoke. You don't miss what you don't have. So I never did do that. But I always thought that I always wanted to have a clear head the next day. All my life I never had headaches, to this day never had headaches or colds or anything. So I never did want to get a groggy feeling the next day. I thought I'm going to need all the brains I've got. I've got to use them.

So the guys that I'd be out with the night before, like several of them, and I usually paid attention who was doing the most drinking, and he was not the guy that was on my wing the next morning. If I was doing the leading and the navigating, which I did quite frequently with everybody hanging on following, why, to go across the country, at least it would not be with the one that I thought was going to go to sleep on the job and run into me.

WRIGHT: Tell us about the conditions when you got to Delaware. You said you took this train from Florida.

WATSON: Yes, a train from Florida.

WRIGHT: And you didn't hesitate when your brother called and told you that he had this letter? You just went? I mean, you were ready to go?

WATSON: Well, see, the owner of the airport, Don Teel, was the one that came back from this overseas trip, and he was the one in Florida, told me in Florida. I left from Florida.

WRIGHT: But no hesitation? You knew that this was what you needed to do?

WATSON: Yes. Yes, this is true. I called home and talked to Mother and my brother and my sister, and they knew. We tossed it around a bit, and they thought, well, yes, think that was okay. I don't know whether the fact that my father approved of it and had said such a thing, that he wanted us to contribute to the war effort, I don't know whether that influenced me at all, but I knew that here was something I was qualified for that, and I might as well do it.

WRIGHT: So you left sunny Florida and you went to Wilmington, Delaware. What time of the year was that?

WATSON: That was in October. October, and it was just pretty in Florida, and, of course, it got a little colder up there. But I remember going up on the train, the trains then burned coal. Well, there was one guy and I on the train, we decided that we wanted to go in between the cars and get a little fresh air, you know. Boy, we hung on the rods and stuck our heads out and watched up and down the track as you go choo-choo-chooing around. I'm telling you, we get back in the cars and our faces are black as—we had soot all over. I had to clean up my face before I could get on the base when I got to Delaware. [Laughter]

So then we got on base, they already had an officers' quarters. Either they ran off the officers, or maybe it was new, I don't know, but they already had it tagged for us when I got there. I had a place to live. In this two-story officers' barracks, the walls didn't have sheetrock on it like this, you just had the two-by-fours up and down and the two-by-fours across this way, all open. Of course, it was a little breezy and all. And an iron cot with iron springs. They weren't up and down springs, they were ones that stretched horizontally, the little flat ones that stretched horizontally, little iron headboards and little three-inch mattress, I think.

In the room was, I know, a wardrobe like a boxed-in closet, you know, with a couple of doors. I don't remember if it had—it didn't have a dresser like you were going to sit down and do makeup stuff, because I know I had my makeup on the two-by-fours. Oh, yes, the two-by-fours were just fine, good storage all the way around. [Laughter] Surely they had something else like a desk or something in there, but I really don't remember any other piece of furniture, but I surely remember that wardrobe thing, because that's where we stuffed the stuff and kept the stuff on the bottom, your suitcase and your shoes and stuff go in the bottom. And my makeup was all up and down the sides of the wall.

Then we had a bathroom that as soon as you walked into the open area, it didn't have closed doors, into the open area, the first thing you saw were men's urinals. Oh, we loved those things. There must have been about four of them or so, that we had to face on, you had to walk past them, and around the corner to get to the lavatories. All public use, there were several lavatories there.

The shower area, it seems to me that I don't think that we had curtains on the showers. I know that one end of it did not, because I remember that being completely open. Whether there was one or two little stalls with curtains, surely must have been, I don't know. But you soon forgot about being so modest that you couldn't undress in front of somebody, because that's all you had to do.

But we had our sinks and everything. We washed all of our clothes and stuff in the sinks. Apparently, we had a place to hang them up. I don't recall where we had a line to hang anything, but I remember so much scrubbing in the sink. As a matter of fact, *Look* magazine came up there to do a little deal, and you might have seen the February '43. February '43 *Look* magazine has a documentary of our group that started then. See, we had just been a couple three months old, I guess. Yes, it was an issue of February, but they took the pictures back in November, I think. And they've got a picture of me washing something out in the sink, I remember that. I had my robe on and doing that. [Laughter] I must have taken that robe—I can remember the robe very well. I must have had that in Florida and I took it up there. Must have been one of the things I took. There's several other pictures there. I think there's a picture of our barracks as we were walking out. But muddy all around the barracks and we had to get some planks to walk through the mud to get out of there.

But then we went to school, and it seems to me they gave us about a month of training, ground school paperwork and stuff. We had to learn how to march, and we went out hut-two-three. I remember after they sent me to Dallas [Texas], that I was leading those hut-two-threes, and I thought just sure as anything I'll give the wrong command we'll go clear out off to China, left whatever, instead of saying with a right flank and I would say left flank and we'd go clear out over here. But we never did mess up, we did just—they'd get out there with all this other military men and a just little old bunch of girls, a little blob of us and all these men. I'd have to see to it that we'd go where we were supposed to go, and I had the horror of thinking I'd have them to march clear off of the end of something. [Laughter] Not give the right instructions or they wouldn't interpret it right or something, but we came out all right anyway. But we had to get out there and practice.

We did that and then we would fly. They said that we were on a three-months' trial basis when we got there. We were not hired straight out; we were three months trial. I think one or two girls, I don't know when they so-called washed out, but they weren't accepted,

although they had the qualifications, see. So they were not just taking any old thing they could pick up, I'll tell you. They were pretty well picky.

And remember, the men, I think those that would check us out were a lot pickier than the men that we walked around with and ate with and stuff like that. But they were going to see to it, which is good. I felt that I had very good training before I got there.

I know that one particular skill that one of my special instructor when I was learning, what he pounded into my head, I think practically, not as much as aerobatic thing, but saved my life at one other time, and that is, when I would fly with him, or what he required of me, we had tail-draggers airplanes, which meant that you didn't land one until you stalled it. It quit flying on you before it got down. It's not like here that you fly it in on the wheels and then soon as it poops out then that's when it quits. It quits down the road somewhere.

Well, always before we flew, he'd have a place on the runway that he would say, "I want you to stall out right there on that spot. I don't want you stalling out down here, I don't want you stalling out down here. You aim at that and you stall out right there, and you figure out how to do it."

Well, he rode my tail for a long time, but that's what he would always do. I got to where—good practice on that. Well, when we were flying around, when he was teaching me something else in the air, he just kept the throttle on me. "Where you going to put it? Where you going to put it? Now, right now, where you going to put it?" Well, he'd scare you like that. Well, you got to where no matter what you were flying, you were looking at the grounds and, "Where would I put it if he did that to me right now?" And you'd get that all figured out. I always had in the back of my mind all the time I was flying, where would I put it if something happened. In those days, it wasn't unusual if something did happen.

I had an engine-out forced landings that actually happened to me. Well, he drilled that into me so much that when—and I thought it was a good skill, and I had had some forced

landings before I ever got into the military, so I already knew that that could happen, and fortunately got down okay.

Anyway, so when I was in the military then, no matter what airplane I was flying, I'd come into a new strange airport. Everything was new and strange going all over the country. You seldom got to practice in any one place. You were off some other place in a different kind of an airplane. But before I would land, I'd take a look at that runway and to myself I'd pick out a spot, "I'm going to stall out right there." And I practiced that skill the whole time I was flying. You got to where you did it enough that you had a relative degree of confidence that you could figure out how to do that, and you got to flying by the seat of your pants. You talk about flying by the seat of your pants, you could feel the speed, you could feel the height, you could feel the little sinking down and everything. You kind of had it in your hand.

Well, that skill saved me in an airplane at one time, which I may tell you about. But that was a very good skill. Now, I don't think they do that anymore, they've got these long runways now and wide runways. Shoot, I could land crosswise on one of these runways anymore. [Laughter] When you'd pick out a spot you're going to land, you could hit it, especially in a real light airplane you could.

But in those days we had narrow runways, we didn't have long runways. So you couldn't just la-di-da and hit it anywhere you wanted to. You'd better be hitting it pretty close to the back end of the thing. The faster your airplanes got, it's according to where you were taking them. Big towns have the longer runways, and the bigger and the faster the airplane you had, you were limited to where you could go. If you wanted to fly from A to B, you knew that B was the only place there you could get down. You did not have alternate airports around. There's alternate airports everywhere now. Well, there weren't any such thing, and if you were flying a fast one, then you'd better find B, because there's no place over here that the runways were long enough, even if there an airport over there.

The weather would get bad. The weather, we had little weather balloons that went up that had little instruments on them. You would get some weather information like that, but you didn't get enough weather information to tell you everything you needed to know, by any means. Really, your best weather report was, say, if you went from A to B, but you had to go to C, and you stopped at B and filling out your papers to go to C, and the weather was kind of questionable by what they thought the reports were, and a pilot opened the door of the office and started walking in, you'd run up, "Where'd you come from? Did you come from C? If you did, do you think I can make it?" So this was our best weather report, if you could just find somebody who'd just come from there. He'd say, "Well, yes. Yes, I think you can make it."

WRIGHT: Tell us about the first flight that you took as a WAF [Womans Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron].

WATSON: The first flight, okay, we'll go back to that. What we did as our first flying, they took us to—you know, we started on a big ferry base thing, and they had all airplanes, and big airplanes then, as big as they owned, were on this base. Well, for us to do our testing and everything, they took us to an alternate field. Now, the alternate field was not even paved. It was a grass field about the size of a postage stamp, and about as square, and it had tall trees all the way around it, all four ways. Here was this grass postage stamp and all these big trees around it. We were supposed to come in and land on that thing and then turn around and back up and taxi. We also took off on it and landed. Well, you could barely get in it and stop your airplane before you got to the trees on the end. Coming over the top of the trees, it's not like our runways now, it's clear, well, shoot, most everything that—they weren't runways like that.

Anyway, those of us who had flown a long time, we had already learned before a bunch of little tricks, and it's a good thing we did or we could have never gotten in there. But we were flying this open cockpit, low-wing Fairchild PT-19, a real nice little airplane. But you'd come in over the top of the trees and if you had come from way back here and judging where you were going, if you had much altitude over the top of the tree as you wanted to go down, that was too much altitude. I mean, you needed to be right on, scraping the tree to really get down and stop.

So you'd come off, you're a little bit high, then we'd do the slip. Now, you cross the controls and raise the wing and you slide down like this. That's an adverse kind of a thing to do, not a safe thing to do exactly, but you can drop altitude in a hurry. You just hit one rudder and jut the stick the other direction, you cross control, raise the nose, get the nose up, and you get all the weight and everything sliding down on this wing. So you'd come across the tree and raise it up, slide down like that, lay it out, and wham, and you'd get down on the other side of the trees without using all the runway. If you came in and did not do that, you'd hit, land way down here.

Actually, as I say, as I look back on it, we girls had pretty darn good skills. We had done quite a bit of flying before we ever got there. Some of us had been teaching flying. You learn a lot by teaching. One girl, I think the worse thing that happened to us, one girl turned an airplane up on its nose trying to stop at the end, see.

Also, another little trick we did to keep them sterned up on a nose, we'd ground-loop it. What you do, you slam on one brake and "zzzzrrrr," make the airplane go around like this, and hope you don't catch a wing in the ground. See, if you do it too harshly, when you turn around, the wing goes down, so you have to do it just right so you'll skid around and the wing doesn't dig in. That's what you call ground-looping.

WATSON: So we had to pull a few ground-looping stuff, if you get too far down the road. [Laughter] But we had already learned these things elsewhere.

Now, if we'd just come out of school, we'd have messed up everything. We'd have made women look horrible, which I think is wonderful that they made us have 500 hours. Now, we kept, the ones who had 250 hours, isn't enough to do what we did to start with, really, and not mess up. Somebody would have messed up now, because you don't learn all those things that fast or get good at it. You might have done some of it.

WRIGHT: What was the average age of that first group that came in?

WATSON: Well, it's a good point. We had from twenty-one to thirty-five. I was at the twenty-one end, and Del Scharr and [Betty] Gillies and Helen Mary Clark were just about on the thirty-five end. But then we went back, I'd say, twenty to thirty-five, I'd say maybe like twenty-six, twenty-seven. I think most of us were down close to the front end, most close to the front, and the middle to the front end. Yes.

However, there were three of us who were really the youngest, and we are the ones who are still on our feet right now, too, which is good. Teresa [D.] James is about five years older than I. She was one of the four. But, now, there are nine of us alive, and about three to four of us really on our feet. Out of the nine, six out of the nine, were in Birmingham, Alabama, last June '99. We really enjoyed ourselves.

But now, Nancy Batson Crews was in the young end, and Barbara Erickson, B.J., was in the young end, and I am on the young end. I'll be eighty my next birthday, so I'm really young. I told you I was young. I'm really young at eighty. [Laughter] And Teresa. But the three of us really are the ones that are really on our feet. Teresa goes a fair amount, not quite on her feet as much as the three of us are.

Anyway, Del Scharr and Betty Gillies at the farther end, Del died about three years ago at ninety, and Del Scharr and I have gone to every one of the WAF reunions, every two years, from the time we started in 1972, I think, we have gone together. Probably the only two. We've been the only two time and again, and a few of the other girls two different times came, one in San Diego and one in Seattle, that we had some of the others. In other words, that Del and I are each two, and then she died about three years ago and I continued to go. But she lasted till she was ninety. I felt that was pretty good.

WRIGHT: That's wonderful.

WATSON: Just really wonderful. She's the one that wrote the two big thick books, *Sisters in the Sky*. Interesting, I'm the only WAF here, and I'm the only WAF, now that Del died, I've been the only WAF many times. Well, since she died, I've been the only WAF.

WRIGHT: There is quite a distinction between what you original twenty-five did than what the WASP [Women Airforce Service Pilots] have, the fact that you came in and you were flying for how long before the WASPs?

WATSON: About nine months.

WRIGHT: Nine months. You were under a different leadership with Nancy Love. Now, did you have a relationship with her? Did you have a chance to meet her and to know her at all, or was she just there?

WATSON: We knew her quite well. She was one of us. No one disliked her. Every one of us liked her. She was very skilled, she was very diplomatic, and very firm. We knew that

what she said was going to have to be done, but she was very diplomatic and likeable. She was twenty-eight at the time that I started at twenty-one. That's where she was. She had been flying quite a bit and we knew that she knew what she was doing in flying. She had diplomacy with the men, when she dealt with the men, and she was well liked. We liked her very much, but we also knew she was the boss and we didn't mess with that part of it. But, again, very diplomatic, very friendly, but knew what she wanted and very firm, and we just fell right in line.

We had no disciplinary problems at all that I knew of. Now, I think there might have been a little—you always know that there's going to be some personality something somewhere. But as I say, I'm a little naive on some of this stuff that I don't pick up on like I should, or maybe that I could. But I never looked for anything, and therefore a lot of it goes over my head.

Anyway, there was never from us, or from anyone, I don't think, adverse anything spoken about Nancy Love, but, of course, this is not true about Jackie [Jacqueline] Cochran. You see, you've always heard about this, that, and whatever. Now, I was around Jackie Cochran a fair amount of time. I did not go to Sweetwater [Air Force Base, Texas], so I didn't know her under those circumstances. But when I was sent to Dallas as the commanding officer of the girls, in other words, a backup, the twenty-five of us were divided in four groups in January of '43. Now, we started like in—actually, Nancy and, I think, Betty Gillies started in September, and I came in the first part of October of '42. We did some ferrying before January, but around the very first of January we were divided, and I was sent to Dallas to be the commanding officer of that group and five girls.

Then Long Beach [California], Barbara Erickson, she and I both were the younger ones, now that I think about, we were the youngest ones of the group. She had Long Beach. Then Del Scharr on the other end had Romulus [phonetic]. Betty Gillies on the other end—I hadn't really thought about this before. Betty Gillies stayed in Wilmington [Delaware] and

had that base. So we had two of the youngest ones and two of the oldest, now that I think about it.

But anyway, when I went to Dallas [Texas], Jackie Cochran's girls started coming out to the Ferrying Division bases, the first few classes, I think maybe the first three classes, most of them, I think, went to the Ferrying Division, about the first three classes and part, maybe, of the fourth, but after that, the Ferrying Division didn't want any more. So the rest of them, for the most part, went to all the training command and everything.

But I had some of the classes that Jackie had, the girls, and so then she would come by and see about the girls and see me and everything. I never thought that I'd have any problem with her, but I told myself, "You're not going to mess with her and you're not going to get in any conflict with her. Give yourself a little speech first." So I got along with her fine, and I liked her just fine while I was around her. She did nothing to so-call threaten me nor try to tell me what to do or anything. Somehow another, she liked me and I knew she did, and we got along fine.

In 1972, maybe in '74, both, we went to Sweetwater for our national reunion, and I know that Jackie came then, and she came one other time. Well, it seems to me she was just a little more—she was nervous, kind of at odd ends with something and just wasn't quite—she wasn't calm and secure, I will put it that way. It came through to me very well.

While we were in Sweetwater, she asked me, from all the girls, asked me to go with her to her house trailer that she had bought, her motor home. She had two men with her who drove the motor home, took care of details and stuff. She asked me to go to the motor home with her and stay with her while they had an air show going on and some other stuff, and I was with her several hours, just the two of us with the men who were there. So I didn't think about it then, but I thought later, she must have felt more comfortable with me. Maybe she knew I didn't have any axes to grind and I wasn't going to have any conflict with her or anything.

Then we came back at another time and she spent time around me, kind of singled me out to be with her. Now, I don't know whether—she seemed to calm down some, but I watched her several times during the meetings that we had, and she kind of reminded me of like a little dog or an animal in a cage, and not being secure and being a little afraid of what's coming next, you know, this kind of a thing, or kind of a fear of the future, or for fear of her health, or for fear of something. It really came to me that way, and it seemed like she calmed down when we were together and everything.

I have thought many times later I would have—I don't know why the opportunity didn't come up or something, why I didn't talk to her about the Lord Jesus Christ. I do not know how I missed that opportunity, or why I did not, but, you know, any of us have a security in this world when we know who the Lord Jesus Christ is, what he did for us and the fact that we cannot get anywhere without him. I mean, he is our anchor and hang onto his coattail and the father takes us, and we know where we're going. But without the heart commitment and the realization of what's there and who we are and who he is and why we need him, if we don't have that concept, then we have no security. We are fearful and we are, well, at odds ends. We don't have a rock to hang onto.

So I still don't know why that I didn't maybe get to the point where I could bear down on this with her to get her security level up, or if she had no security level that she wasn't using, or something else. So I have no idea. I don't know how she stood on any of that. I have an idea that she didn't have the rock foundation that she should have, or she would have come through as a much, in the end, a calmer person.

But, you know, it doesn't matter what we accomplish on this earth, it's just absolutely a fly-in-the-night nothing unless we have the security of belonging to the Lord. If we don't have that security, we don't have anything to hang onto. We just turn from dust back to dust, doesn't matter what we so-call accomplished here, or who thought we were so wonderful and everything. We're like nothing, and it just comes and goes.

WRIGHT: Was that the last time that you saw her, at that reunion?

WATSON: Yes, that's right. I saw her the two times, and then the other times I have been where she lived in Indio, a couple of different things, we had the stamp and everything there, but she was already gone at that time. I really broke my heart when she died that soon. I wanted to see her again. But I don't know, I just flubbed it, that's all. I just flubbed it. Hindsight. Well, you kind of do what the holy spirit kinds of leads you to do, and I just apparently wasn't led to do it. I did not refuse to do it, I just let it slide by me like a dodo. [Laughter]

WRIGHT: Well, some of the accounts that you've told us about on your flying days, we understand now how you were able to get through so much, you had such a faith to hang on. I guess that was part of what you did while you were so up in the air. You felt like you could communicate.

WATSON: Yes, I guess you do more of that than you realize that you do. But I think through all of life, and the longer you live and everything, the more security you get by knowing that you know what God has told us that he requires of us and what he will do for us. When you know that and you have faith in that, then you get the comfort and the freedom and the ease and the lack of stress of just daily life. It helps you through your daily life. It's not just "Will I get to heaven?" It's a security in everything that you get right here, which is so wonderful.

It's like he says that you depend on the Lord Jesus Christ to cover your sinful nature so that the father will take you by his—symbolically his shed blood poured over you, that the father sees you through the blood of Jesus and you are just righteous and pure and he takes you. You're a dirty dog, but he'll do it, see. When you know that and you know you don't

deserve it and there's not a thing you can do to earn it, and you know that's where that comes from, and you know you have a heart commitment to that, you know you're secure, because he tells you in the Bible. First of all, you're going to take the Bible as God's document to man. When you eat the whole thing, you know what it says, then you have the security. It says you give your eternal life, that means it starts right this minute. It doesn't start after you die. So you do get the benefit of the security of this life, whether you're broke or hungry or whatever, you have a security that gives you the peace that you need. So, yes, I would say that that did help me through. A lot of times I don't know that I was realizing that it was doing it, and yet when the whole thing was over, "Oh, thank you, Lord." [Laughter]

WRIGHT: "I enjoyed being up there, but I'm glad to be on the ground," huh?

WATSON: Yes. But I never did promise the Lord, "If you get me out of this situation I won't do it again." I never did do that. [Laughter] I guess I was afraid I'd have to, I don't know. But you'd call on him a lot of times.

WRIGHT: Well, I can imagine some of the trips that you were—you were twenty-one and you were up in Delaware, someplace I guess you'd never been before.

WATSON: Oh, never been there. Well, I had traveled. I traveled a lot with my family. We traveled everywhere. Yes, on the ground I'd been there, but never to fly up there, no.

WRIGHT: Then you were training on this small postage stamp of a place.

WATSON: Oh, yes. Yes.

WRIGHT: Then you were up from very small aircraft to now these big planes.

WATSON: Yes. I started at the bottom, and felt my transition was very nice in that. I started on all the little ones on up to the next step, the next step, and I kept them in order. As I say, I was just lucky. I kept them in all order all the way. So every time I got something, I was kind of ready for that, rather than from down here and then all of a sudden jumping into something up here, you know.

WRIGHT: Did you have a favorite one out of all that?

WATSON: Yes, I think I did. Probably P-51 [*Mustang*]. I think most everybody who had flew that said the same thing. I wanted to fly a P-38 [*Lightening*], but I didn't have the desire to fly the P-38 until way along in my Ferrying Division stuff.

I'll tell you why the P-38 appealed to me, is the fact that when I was teaching student flying, we had to pass spins. We had to take the plane up. You had to do this to get your private license. You had to take the plane up and stall in, kick a rudder and make it turn over and then it'd start its spin and you'd go nose down, and wherever you went into the spin, you'd have to pick out something on the horizon that would give you where you went into it. Then you'd go three complete times and pull it out exactly where you put it in. So this would mean that you would be alert the whole time, you knew exactly where you were, what you were doing and you were going straight down to the ground, pull it out.

So I was doing this one time with a student, and as we were spinning around, here comes a P-38 right in under us, just "zzzp" right through, and he was far enough down it wasn't that we almost hit him, but he was pretty darn close. I looked down—now, this was 1940 again, could have been early '41—and this airplane has the twin engine and the twin boom tail back here, and it's a separate boom thing. I looked down, it's a silver airplane,

never seen a silver airplane in those days, and here this strange thing, looked like something out of Buck Rogers somebody dreamed of. I thought, "What is that?" It went "zzzzrrppp," right through.

Well, I never thought I'd ever see one again. Didn't know where it came from or where it went, thought I'd never see it again. Then later on—and I didn't see one in the Ferrying Division until quite a while down the line. Then I saw one and my eyes popped this big. I'd temporarily forgotten it, and I thought, "That's that airplane. I've got to have it. I've got to fly that thing." And sure enough I did.

As a matter of fact, it was the very last military engine I turned off was a P-38, and that was really, if you put it all together, but I never had thought that I'd do it any more than I had ever thought I'd ever fly an airplane all the time I was taken up in the years that my daddy would take me up. I never thought about doing it myself. I just thought it was wonderful, but I guess I felt it was over my head or something, that that was for somebody else. I don't know, I never thought about doing it.

WRIGHT: Well, what did you major in at Baylor University?

WATSON: Business and secretarial. Then after the whole military episode, married, after three years got this same guy. He got back from his stuff and we got together. Then we had two kids. I was a stay-at-home mom, but busy doing other stuff. I thought if the kids are going to go to the dogs, I'm going to send them. [Laughter] I don't want somebody else sending them. I'm going to do it, and I'm responsible.

So then when they got in school all day, there was a four-year school at Beaumont [Texas], and I thought, you know, it's just plain stupid for me not to go back to school, because I've already had two years, and here it is, I've got an opportunity. I don't know what I'll do with it, but I'll go back to school, just because it's there. So I marched back to school,

take a full load of courses, and got all As at the end of the semester and got a job opportunity. The head of the department says, "You go get your master's degree and we'll put you to work."

I said, "What do you mean? I don't even know what I'm going to do with what I'm doing. I don't know that I'm going to teach or what." Of course, I'd taught flying and I knew teaching, that was kind of my category, but I wasn't thinking about going to work or anything. So I said, "Well, I'll just go on to school here and then whatever."

Well, sure enough, I went ahead and got my degree and then I drove 200 miles a day to Houston on a two-lane road, not four-lane, two, up and down, and I got up at four o'clock in the morning and the fog and the trucks and I were the only ones on the road, dangerous as everything, to get over to make my eight o'clock class, and then turn around and come back home again. Well, I did that to get my master's degree.

Well, when I went to Houston, they said, "Oh, come over here. We'll give you a job at the University of Houston."

I said, "Oh, pooh on you guys. I've got a man over here in Beaumont and I'm not about to come over here to you. I'd rather go home to my man."

Well, we carried on like this, and do you know just as soon as I got my master's degree, Chris, my husband, was transferred to Houston. I went back to this old guy, I said, "I didn't mean those ugly things I said." [Laughter] "I didn't mean that."

Sure enough, they had like thirty applicants or something for that job, and I got it. The one they saved three years for me over in Beaumont I never did take. Isn't that something? That's the way it worked out.

But anyway, I started teaching at the University of Houston, and then my husband got a promotion to Big Spring [Texas], and I got there, the Lord opened it just the minute I got there somebody resigned and I fell right in that slot. Of course, nobody, for all the years that

we were there, they didn't add a single soul or anything, nor did they in Houston. The only job.

So then my husband gets another promotion, we go to Borger [Texas], and so I lose my job again, and go up there and they were just ready to add a faculty member, and the lord just put me at the right spot at the right time and I fell right into that job. So I had thirty years all put together of teaching.

WRIGHT: What area were you teaching?

WATSON: Business and secretarial.

WRIGHT: Still, all the way through.

WATSON: All the way through. Now, my daddy had interested me in business for all these years. I grew up on my daddy's lap, to the day he died. When I was a little kid, he would just hold me and love me. Of course, I was real close to my mother, too. She was precious, and died a month ago at ninety-nine, and she didn't have cancer or anything, just died in her sleep. So we were a very close family.

My father always talked business to me, and I was always just real interested. That's where I got interested in business. Then as just a young kid, he had let me work in his jewelry store, and my brothers, too. Boy, he had hard laws. "You don't mess around. You work while you're here and you do this and that." He taught me how to engrave, which is difficult. When I was like ten years, twelve years old, I was engraving stuff.

Then my daddy went on to make the world's largest watch, and nobody has ever made another one. It got in Robert Ripley's Believe It Or Not stuff and everything. To this day that watch still works. It stands about this high. But it's a watch, not a clock, which

makes all the difference. It's got the guts and the whatever that a watch has, which is much more difficult to do. He did that in 1933 and it's still the world's largest watch. It still runs. The thing still runs. It still runs.

WRIGHT: Of course. Did you fly any more once you left the service? Were you still flying?

WATSON: Did I fly? No, I didn't. I had already taught flying, and so I was on a new mama, new married deal, so I turned more into a housewife. But the thing that I had already taught flying and I had already flown the other airplanes, I thought, well, now, I have done that, and the need for teaching flying wasn't there, because men didn't need to know it and stuff like that. So I wasn't willing to leave home.

I have always been a lover of the home. Mother taught me when I was quite small, like four years old, cooking and everything. Mother had four kids. She was always insistent that we kids were independent, that we could take care of ourselves, that we need what to do. Why and how she ever taught us what she did, why and how she taught me what she taught me so early, I was in the kitchen on a stool doing stuff and she would let me do stuff. I remember making Eagle brand lemon pies when I was just a little kid four years old, and she'd let me just mess around and do that.

Then she taught me how to sew, and I was sewing on the sewing machine. I remember, at nine years old I made a dress all by myself. I can see that dress yet. I made other doll clothes and stuff.

Then when I took sewing in high school, I was the assistant to the teacher. I made lined suits and everything else. Then when my girls grew up, I made all kinds of stuff for them, made dresses alike for us, and with no patterns. Then all my maternity stuff, I just cut my own patterns and everything, because you couldn't find any then. Now you have everything, but there wasn't anything then. So I did all that.

Then every time we'd move, I'd make all the draperies. I'd do all the landscaping. I'd try out a bunch of stuff like—oh, I'm trying to say the gardening and horticulture and stuff. I was a National Flower Show judge. I had to go through all that stuff. Then I got my real estate license, as I still have, and I have an insurance license, and a mutual fund. Then I taught swimming.

WRIGHT: Goodness.

WATSON: Yes. I did that on an instructor level, taught instructors at the Red Cross staff. Then I've always belonged to a bunch of civic clubs of all kinds, and now I belong to a lot of aviation-oriented organizations that I keep up with. So I've got my schedule real full. Also I do a lot of speaking, and everybody wants a free program. Every organization needs this and needs that, so you get free programs.

My husband said the other day, "I wonder how long it's going to be before I quit having to shell out money for you to go entertain people." [Laughter] Sometimes I'll say, of course, if they're very far out of town or something, they'll send me a ticket and stuff. I've got several things I've got to do coming up here.

But anyway, sometimes I'll say, "Oh, I don't know if I want to do that or not." He'll say, "You're on your feet, now get up and go." [Laughter] He always just encourages me. We live fifty miles away from the airport in Amarillo [Texas], he always takes me, and he'll always be right there to pick me up. He'll never complain. I don't care if I come home at midnight or what. He is just really wonderful.

Another thing, he is not at home sucking his thumb and acting like a baby while I'm gone. And a lot of men do that. He is very emotionally mature and he's not whining and everything because I'm gone. He's just really encouraging like that. He's just a dear to live

with. So I've had a very low-stress marriage, very low stress. He is eighty-four, right at eighty-four, like I'm right at eighty.

Neither one of us has ever been sick in bed in fifty-five years. We've never taken a prescription from a doctor, either one of us. But we've spent all of our money at the health food store, and my extensive health library I have studied since—I've been interested in it since 1930, when my mother learned from a Mayo Brothers head surgeon, who said he was tired of cutting out of people what should have never been there in the first place. He said, "I'm going to go out and teach preventative medicine."

In 1930 he taught us the dos and don'ts, how to take care of your health, the same dos and don'ts that are right now. We have done that through all these years, and so I don't think there's any doubt that that's why we have good health. I can't see any other good reason necessarily. But we've always exercised, we've always tried with the water, keeping the colon clean, paying attention to what kind of food. I have never deep-fat fried anything. The oils kill you. It's the different kinds of oils that you get. But I'll blow it when I go out, just whatever I please, but I pay attention at home.

My husband will do all the health whatever. He's very good at that. He'll take a handful of vitamins all the time. He walks. He gets up at 5:30, 6:00 in the morning for the last thirty-five, forty years, I'll bet, every day, and he's out hitting the trail walking for two miles every day.

WRIGHT: Does he go with you sometimes on some of your speaking trips?

WATSON: He does sometimes. When we go maybe like a banquet-type of thing, he might go. But now for something like this, he won't go. He says, "I'm too smart for that." [Laughter] He won't go. He says, "You do not go to those places to see me," and he says, "I don't go to see you. If I want to see you, I'll take you off by myself somewhere." But he

says, "When you go to a place like this, you go to see other people and I don't want you worrying about am I happy, am I ready to eat, do I need to go to bed." He said, "I will be a sack of potatoes on your back. I won't go." But other times he will go where it's not this much, I say, a banquet kind of thing, where I'm a speaker or something.

WRIGHT: Now, are some of your speaking trips taking you back to some of the places that you flew planes to? Have you been to many of those?

WATSON: Well, probably, but I never have thought about that way, really. Now, I went to Cannon Air Force Base [New Mexico] about a couple of weeks ago. I got to fly the F-16 [*Falcon*] simulator while I was there.

Next week I go to St. Louis [Missouri] to...Washington University, I think is the name of it, and they said that I'm supposed to speak to about 150 engineers. I think maybe there's probably a lot of women in that. I don't really know. But anyway, there's going to be a boat trip up the river and everything. I think while it's in dock is when we're going to eat and have my presentation.

Then I've got to get up five o'clock the next morning to catch an early plane, I've got to be in Amarillo at 11:30 to be on a program in Amarillo. That's going to be to sorority girls, which is different.

I just got through talking to the Colonial Dames of a state meeting, and I had about eighty of those there just last week. Then after I come back from that, and I've got several other ones in between, individual ones, but the next I'm going to Whiteman Air Force Base, which is in Missouri, where they have the great big B-2 [*Spirit*] stealth bombers all in the world right there. They've got me scheduled for maybe like four different presentations. I said, "You better not let the same guys come over here, because I'll have to make up some new lies if you do." [Laughter] Anyway, we've got several different times.

Then they said that they were going to see to it that I got to fly the simulator of the B-2. I said, "I don't think I'm up to that. I don't think I'm up to that. I don't want to crash and burn one of those, even on the ground." [Laughter] I think that's a little too much, but that will be real interesting. At least I'll get to see what's going on. But I know about four pilots that fly those.

Now, back to the ferrying of the airplanes and everything, a lot of wild tales about the airplanes, maybe we'll go through some numbers if I can think of what they were. We started off on the PT-19, which was the Fairchild. Then from there we had *Stearmans*, which is the biplane, the PT-17 [*Stearman*], and there were [*Piper*] *Cubs* in the meantime, L-4s and 5s, and then we did go to the *Cub* factory. Now, those are the ones probably that I had while I was in Delaware.

Then I went to Dallas and we had the PT-13s, 14s, 15s, in that category, then the AT-6 [*Texan*]. Then the twin engine, the *Bamboo Bomber*, the AT-17, and the AT-9, which is a twin-engine silver plane, and the 10, which is a silver Beechcraft, I think it was. We got the twin engines on those three and then from there to the [*Douglas DC-3*] C-47 [*Skytrain*], twin engine, and the B-25 [*Mitchell*] twin engine, and then we had the 4 engines, the B-17 [*Flying Fortress*] and the B-24 [*Liberator*]. Then back to the single-engine fighters, and I did go to pursuit school, and we had the P-39, the *Bell Aircobra*. I never did fly one that I wasn't in trouble on this one.

Then the P-40 [*Warhawk*]. I got in trouble with that, too. That was the one that had the tiger's mouth on it. Then the P-47 [*Thunderbolt*], the great big jug we called it, with the big front you couldn't see doodly squat in front of you. Then the P-51 [*Mustang*], which is a neat little slick airplane. And the P-38 [*Lightening*].

Then I got the A-20 [*Havoc*], which I loved that one. It had big old wings out here and big old ugly guns out in the front nose, and you're sitting in there by yourself and you see those guns, man. [Laughter] I never did want to go to combat or anything, but anyway, that

was a nice—it looked, just sitting on the ground, with the guns sticking out, you knew you had them. Most of the others, they were all kind of concealed and you didn't really see them unless somebody's working them. Then we had the P-38, as I said, and that was the last one. So there are a lot of these different ones.

WRIGHT: Why don't we take a break for just a minute and we'll come right back, and you can tell us about some of your escapades on these planes.

WATSON: All right.

WRIGHT: ...start from where we're starting right now and that's about the hours. What kind of hours when you were first in the WAFs and you were starting to ferry these planes, what kind of days were you having? Were you up in the morning early until late at night? Tell us about those hours.

WATSON: It was a very, what I'd say, really irregular, you might say, but if the weather was okay and you had a plane to deliver, you are out at that airport ready to go by eight, which did mean you had to get up and get your breakfast and get your transportation to get out there. Although that was not a have-to hour, but you just knew you kind of had to, I guess. No one was there to tell you this is what you had to do, but that's just the way you did it.

Then you would fly through the day and when you could not make your last leg anymore until after it got dark, you didn't make it, because you were not supposed to fly at night. They didn't want you to do that. You were not night-trained or anything, and you weren't supposed to do it. So this was all of the Ferrying Command now, not just us, it was everybody. They were more interested, I thought—I guess they'd have less problems if they restricted instrument flying here in the States when it was not that necessary. But we were all

instrument-trained, so that if you had to fly for whatever reason, you were capable of so doing. But that's the way they did that.

Now, when you delivered your airplane, say that you delivered it at noon, and they didn't have anything for you to take back or any other direction, then the first thing you did was get on the first airliner to get back home, the very first one. You could dump and bump anybody on it. You had papers that you could—anybody but the President that you could get off of there.

You learned very fast, too, that when you would go—I remember I bumped a bird colonel, I think it was in Phoenix [Arizona], I think it was, about three o'clock in the morning I bumped him. See, you go to the airport no matter when it is and the next flight out, it was like three o'clock in the morning. He was the last guy on, I guess, with the last priority or whatever, and he had to get off at three o'clock in the morning. That's the way they did. When any of us showed up, we had first priority. The least-priority guy hit the road.

Well, I had already learned earlier than that, that you don't—I wasn't going to let him know that I was the one that bumped him until maybe after the plane left and he asked or something. So I'd hide behind the door and let him get clear out of sight, then I'd run and jump on the airplane right fast, so he wouldn't see who did that. [Laughter] This happened, that you'd bump people, and I never did want them to know that I was the guy that knocked them off of there. That's how they, I guess, treated the priority of getting stuff moved. Of course, we won the war, but, boy, we had everybody and his dog out working on that episode, you know, all the girls in the factories and everything else.

So I guess we never did kill each other with the rules and everything, but this is what we did. We went back to home base at the very first flight. When you got back to home base, they'd give you another plane, but many times it was according to how really fast and busy and how many pilots they had lined up that could do so and so. You may get a half a

day off, and you may even get a whole day off. Maybe if the weather got bad, you'd get two days. See, it's just according to what it was.

Then when the weather was good and more planes needed to be moved and the schedule went more one, two, three, then you may be gone for days and days before you ever got back to the base again.

WRIGHT: Did you know how to pack for these trips? What did you take with you?

WATSON: Oh, that's a good question. I'll tell you, you know how girls pack; they have everything that they own. We started off, we had what you called B4 bags, you know those canvas ones that look sort of zippered like, like we have now, except we've got rollers on them. They would hold a gob of stuff. Well, you leave home in a big airplane, a bomber or twin engine, or something that has some room in it, and your B4 bag with all your stuff. When you get to where you were going, they'd assign you something that you couldn't get that dumb thing in there. Well, you learned right fast you don't ever go anywhere with a B4 bag with anything in it. It got to where girls—we got to where we traveled really lightly.

Well, when we had got into the fighters, you're talking about traveling lightly, you really did. The fighter now on the right-hand side, most of them, I think, had enough room on the right-hand side, right down on the floor, that you could get—I had a little canvas bag, probably the bottom of it four inches wide, maybe, like a little cardboard bottom, and maybe like fourteen inches long, maybe, and a whole maybe eight inches high, that kind of rounded up and flat on the bottom. You could get that thing on the floor right between your seat and the wall, usually underneath kind of over here, and that was your luggage. You could get your toothbrush and some stuff in there. You couldn't jam too much stuff in there.

A lot of times you'd wash your shirt out at night and hang it up and hope it'd be dry the next morning. Wrap it up in a towel, get the water out of it, and flatten it out and hand-

press it and get your shirt the next morning. But you'd wear the same pair of pants and jacket like forever. When you got back, if you ever get the thing cleaned, if you ever got a bad day, bad weather or something, you'd go to the cleaners with it. But this is what you'd do.

Now, since we were civilians, although we wore uniforms, there was no regulation that you couldn't get out of your uniform at night. See, if you weren't on the job, you could get out of your uniform being a civilian. Of course, I always liked to turn into a girl when night came.

Especially like the fighters, most of those, you had to land them at longer runways, and the longer runways were always in the cities. The cities were the ones that always had the nice hotels. The hotels in those days, a nice hotel like at Dallas, we had the Baker and the Adolphus right across the street from each other. Downstairs there'd be dining and dancing and a live orchestra. That was just standard for all these nice hotels. Now, I don't know why they don't have them anymore, but they don't. Of course, maybe what the music they have right now would drive you crazy with a few little old string banjos, or something, you know. [Laughter] But we had good-quality music with the wind instruments and the violins and the stuff. I mean, really good music. Then there would be as the dining and dancing area.

Most of the time I was out with the men, because men were the ones that were on the road and I was with whoever's on the road. I'd never have seen them before, and maybe I've seen some of them before. We'd leave the airport and take the transportation, like you'd have airport transportation, and you'd take like five guys and me into the hotel for the night, then back up the next morning, go back out and would start our stuff again.

I loved to dance and, I guess, considered a good dancer. Well, here would be all this live orchestra music and stuff, and, of course, the guys were always wanting to party, too. So I didn't have any problem getting a lot of good dance partners and ones to go eat with and what have you. So if I wanted to turn into a girl and to enjoy myself then, where are my clothes? Am I going to jam them down here in the side? Well, I got to where I was looking

at wherever else I could get it on those fighters. The P-51 that I flew more than any, I loved that little bugger, because out on the wings, you'd crawl out on the wings with the right kind of screwdriver and you could open the ammunition box. [Laughter] If you didn't have—well, you weren't carrying full ammunition. There's a hole in there, and so you could put a nice pair of dress shoes over here. You could crawl over here and I could put my dress.

Okay. I had a black wool, lightweight wool black dress, short sleeves, and it had little silver nailheads, a pattern, all up here and around the neckline, a nice little pattern, and scattered little ones all over the whole dress, it had little scattered ones. Then a nice pretty band of nailheads, I think sort about down in here rather than on the tail. But little nailheads everywhere, all over. Well, I could take that soft wool and I could just roll it up in a knot, you might say, I'd roll it up, put it out here in the wing, and then when I got to the hotel I could hang that thing in the bathroom, turn on the hot water, shut the door, steam press, and, man, I was ready to go. I just came from the cleaners. [Laughter]

Go downstairs and we'd dine and dance and eat and everything, and I'd have my nice dress. That black wool dress went everywhere. [Laughter] That was a well-traveled dress, because it worked just great. It was lightweight and it wasn't too heavy, no matter what time of the year it was. It was short-sleeved. It had the nailheads on it, where the wrinkles wouldn't show if it did. But it kept it from being wrinkled, really. And the steam would do it and it was just really good.

The guys got to kidding me. They'd come up to you. The transportation at the airport would come around to your plane to pick you up to go on to the next one and all. I remember one time particularly a bunch of guys that already picked them up had a whole jeep full of them, I think. They come up to me and here I am crawling out on the wing, and they said, "Oh, good gosh, it takes you longer to get away from your airplane than it does to fly from A to B." I said, "Quit your griping, get up here and help me." A guy gets up here to help me, give him a screwdriver, he crawls out on the wing, opens the deal and pulls, "Oh, look,

fellows what I've got," and he's got the dress. [Laughter] He's shaking out the dress, "Look what I've got." So they kidded me all the time about being so feminine and they said they bet I had lace on my panties. That was a big deal for those days to say that.

Then I have a cartoon that went out to all of the—it was either the whole Air Force or the Ferrying Division publication that went all over the world. There was a cartoon somebody had drawn on that that shows a lot of guys bailing out with a parachute, bailing out, and one great big parachute down here in the bottom and it had flowers embroidered all over it. They said, caption, "I bet Florene Miller's under that one." [Laughter] My parachute had to be embroidered with flowers. I was, well, that's just about right. [Laughter]

WRIGHT: At some of those bases that you landed those planes, were men were surprised to see you get out of those planes?

WATSON: Yes. Yes, there were a bunch of them really surprised. Yes, I would say we were still so much in the minority that they really were not expecting that.

Now, another incident, I was thinking about this with the men. Like down around the table when you're eating, at night we think about, now, who's going where the next morning. The guys said, "Well, I'm all going to "C" over here." We'd say, "Well, I guess that's where, too." They may have come from someplace else, but here they're going over to "C." "Well, okay, let's go." They said, "Okay, now, Miller, you're going to be the navigator. You're going to be"—I was always supposed to be the navigator. Of course, I don't care who was the navigator, I'd be doing it myself anyway. As I said, I was a big chicken. Then I had to pay attention. I wanted to know where I was. The heck with what anybody else knew.

Anyway, I was going to be the navigator. I'd say, "And we're going to follow you. We're going to follow you." I'd said, "I don't give a hoot if you follow me or not, but don't be a dodo and sit on your map. Now, pay attention, because if I get in trouble, I'm going to need

your help." Somebody, one of the guys who'd know me, would say, "Oh, don't pay any attention to her. You just watch her. When she gets out her lipstick and her comb we're getting close." [Laughter]

That was true, because when we would get close, the guys would be close, I'd say, "Okay, back off, guys. Just back off, give me a little room here," and here I'd go just bumpity-bumping around, and I'd be doing all my thing, and just flying all over the sky. [Laughter] So I got a lot of kidding about that, too.

But now, talking about flying and navigating, you know, when the guys got out of the flight schools, I think they had maybe like, just like the girls, 222, 225, or something like that, hours, and very little cross-country, maybe one little route, maybe two at the most, cross-country that they had. The Ferrying Division did not really want any of the men graduates for that reason, because flying across this nation wasn't the easiest thing. And if you didn't have any experience, how were you supposed to know all the pros and cons? Then toward the end we were flying more fighters.

The Ferrying Division needed a lot of the fighters being flown, and they didn't want these new graduates taking airplanes. As I said, they didn't care if we killed ourselves, don't scratch this airplane. They really didn't want them, they didn't like them, but they did get some. I guess they must have had some degree of trouble with the graduates, because they came up with this idea.

So I found myself getting assigned to take some of the graduates on their first trips, as their navigator or as their leader, I guess you'd say, to be the one to see to it that they got it. But we'd all go together. So I would get called from the operations office and say, "You're on orders, and these guys, you've got about five guys going." Says, "Come over here first, I'll give you your orders first, and then I'll call the guys."

So I'd whip over there, get behind the door, so they didn't know I was there, and he'd call the guys, and the guys would come in like one at a time, and pick up their orders. "Hot

dog. Oh, man, we get to fly us a P-51. Oh, we get to fly this, just look at that. Man, where are we going?" They look on the map, "Oh, we get to go to Florida, hot diggity dog." They're really thrilled out of their mind and everything, and then pretty soon they'd say, "Oh, who's going to be the flight leader?" So they'd look up here and it'd be my name, a girl. "A girl?" Blah, blah, blah, blah.

Well, I'd be watching, and the operations officer gave me this, he knew, and so I'd say—Bill was the one that mouthed off the most and old Joe mouthed next best. And I'd have it all figured out before they ever saw me or anything.

Then we'd get ready to take off. Of course, as a flight leader, you were the boss. I'd say, "Well, Bill, would you like to lead this first leg out?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, surely would."

I said, "Okay, I'll bring up the rear, you go ahead and taxi off and we'll all go." So we all taxi out there, old Bill would be in front, and we'd take out toward our destination, and as you would expect, he'd start getting off course. Of course, just like when you're teaching, I always let a student go just as far as I thought I had sense enough to recover, see. So I just let him just keep getting off and I'd keep paying close attention to what we were doing, see, so I would know what I was doing. Pretty soon, maybe like an hour out, we'd just start really being off where we shouldn't be, and you could tell he'd start getting nervous and he'd start wiggling around and I'd call, I'd say, "Well, Bill, you getting tired? Would you like me to take over? I'd be glad to if you're getting tired."

"Yes, yes, that'd be fine, go ahead and take over."

I'd say, "Well, okay." So I'd pull up and get in front, and I would purposefully hold the wrong course for at least five minutes or so, same way he was going, I'd keep doing that. Then I'd have to have figured ahead of time how do I get from this point, should be over here, but how do I get from this point over here that I want to go, and what kind of heading

would that be to get over there. That wasn't too easy a thing to try to figure out, but I figured it out the best way I could.

I'd keep his wrong course for quite a while, and then just as dramatically as I knew how to do it, I'd just lean it over like this, "whrrrr," and I'd come over here and pick up a new course, just dramatically, and you'd see just how far off, how much I was changing that course. Of course, the closer you'd get to your destination, the bigger the change it would be.

So then we'd get down and land, and we'd get in the operations office, tooting around, and I'd never say a word to them. They'd get nervous. You'd see them walking around. They were used to the military, "The guy's going to cut my head off," that I'm just going to eat him alive. I'd just, oh, tootle around, I don't pay any attention to them, and pretty soon one of the guys, maybe not old Bill, but one of them would say something, "Well, we did a little—maybe you think we were off?" or something he'd say.

I'd say, "Oh, no big deal. We got here, didn't we? Don't sweat it, it's no big deal." Let them get off, never embarrassing him in front of his peers or anything, and you know never to embarrass anybody in front of their peers. Like in college or anything else, you don't ever do that.

Well, then we'd start off the next leg and I'd say, "Oh, Joe, would you like to lead this leg out?"

"Well, okay." [Laughter] He wouldn't be too eager, so he'd take off, same thing would happen again, see. He would get off.

Why were they supposed to be so knowledgeable? They had never done that stuff before, and so, to me, I wasn't expecting great things. The only thing I was expecting was to have sense enough to correct it before I got in trouble, because I didn't know what to do.

In any event, he would go and do the same thing, I'd pull the same stunt again. We'd get down on the ground and I'd just la-di-da, no big deal. It was just fine. They knew. The message has gotten through there wasn't a word I could have said that would have helped

anything, even if I had said it. But the fact that I didn't, and let them go and it's good old boys, just all right, make your mistakes, that's just fine, you'll learn, and I never said anything. Well, I'm telling you, by the time we got to deliver those things, those guys were your friends forever. You made new friends out of new guys like that without doing it. But you know, you don't have to be a sergeant and mouth off and everything to get a point over. They learn just as much without a word said.

WRIGHT: Now, in that case you were able to rectify the course because you had a radio, but for many years you flew the planes without radios.

WATSON: Yes, quite a bit without radios. But now, when I did this, I never said a word to them. I didn't use a radio, other than I told him—yes, that's right, see, I could contact him. Like when I was telling this other story, I couldn't contact anybody. I couldn't tell them what I thought about the situation, but I could contact him, yes. But as I was doing it, I didn't tell them what I was doing or anything.

WRIGHT: Were many of your trips by yourself? Were you flying by yourself ferrying planes, or were you flying planes with other groups? You mention about going with the men, but so were the majority—

WATSON: Well, many times I went a solo round, but you wouldn't go—more times than not, probably, you were more by yourself. When you got down on the ground, you might see some guys that had come in from some other place and then maybe you might want to go off together, but most of the time you were on single orders and you were alone most of the time, yes.

WRIGHT: You said one of the most valuable things you did was study your map. Could you tell us why that was so important at that time?

WATSON: To do what?

WRIGHT: To study your map before you left. Why was that so important when you went off on those trips, to have—

WATSON: Well, to study the map before I went?

WRIGHT: Yes.

WATSON: You always do your course on it, and you would get your compass heading. You would also look at what other things around it that you should see, and you'd kind of get a feel of it before you would go. But then after you got into the air, you very carefully watched everything as to where it should be, your relationship to everything on the ground. If you started getting off a little bit, your relationship to whatever this was, that you were doing it, whether it was contour lines or an item or a road or a little dry bed or a creek or something, then you'd kind of make your adjustments.

You used your watch a lot to check your speed between this point and this point. If you got this far from here to here and say it's ten miles, then the next ten miles you ought to be at this point by that same speed. Well, if you weren't and things didn't look quite right, you may be starting to move over here somewhere, you see, or maybe moving over here. But this would give you a point where I should be in the next ten minutes.

Or you could sit there thirty minutes and just hold a heading, or forty-five minutes, and see where you're going to be, and you'd maybe heck and gone over here somewhere with

the wind and so forth, although you were holding a heading that you drew on the map, because you didn't always follow the heading you drew on the map, because especially wind would get you off of that. Me, as I say, I was chicken enough that I paid attention all the way, and therefore I never allowed myself to get that far off, so I never did not find where I was going, but I never did know when I took off that I was going to be able to find it. So there's always that apprehension.

Then the weather—oh, the dear weather. As I say, again, if the engine starts acting up and you started getting nervous about your equipment, and then the weather started getting cold on you, and then you really don't know where you are, and you have to go to the bathroom, and, oh, my word, what a nervous pickle you're in. You're more nervous about going to the bathroom than the thing crashing and quitting on you. [Laughter] That happened a lot of times, and the weather would get bad and you get nervous and then you'd have to go to the bathroom.

The weather was always a big deal, because they could not predict it like they do now. Like now you'd take off and it wasn't so good, but you knew it was clear over here, see, you knew where you were going was going to be clear. Well, we didn't, see, it would be maybe like this all the way, or was it clear here and it was worse down there. So you didn't get the kind of information that you get now. You can even turn it on television and get such good weather reports.

Whenever they said a front was going to come in, in any length of time, if it was supposed in, let's say, a front's coming in in twenty-four hours. Well, if it got there in forty-eight it's okay, or it may be in there in twelve. You see, they knew it was out there somewhere, but that's about what we knew. You couldn't do that really that much careful predicting.

WRIGHT: Some of the planes that you flew had open cockpits.

WATSON: Yes, some of the early ones. Some of the early ones. Only the early ones. Now, I flew those, but when I started getting up in the others, then I didn't have anymore open cockpits. But the open cockpit ones were the ones that were without the radios and everything else, so that made the whole thing even worse.

I guess for the purposes of this I'll tell this story about the Steerman planes that we flew from Great Falls, Montana. In December, first part of December of 1942, they sent six of us girls to Great Falls, Montana, and we went on a train and changed trains in Chicago. I guess we spent one night or two nights, it seemed like it took forever to get all the way across there, choo-choo-choo. The trains were crowded and we had from almost seventeen to twenty men went on the same thing.

All of us were to take the PT-17s, the Steermans, all of them were painted yellow. I don't know why, but they were all like yellow. Biplanes, open-cockpit airplanes. So we get to Great Falls, Montana, and the weather just closed us in. We got snow and snow and snow. It gets colder and colder, and we were told that if it warmed up to 10 below zero, when it warmed up to that, then they could warm the oil in our radial engines to get them moving enough to get them started. Then we could go, if they could start them, then the heck with you, go out here and get in the sky someplace here and hope the things run.

Well, they had some barrels that they used, I don't know, it must have been some kind of a motor or something in the barrel. But they had big canvas hoses, you might say, as big as the engine, would go from the barrels up and to encompass the radial part of the engine. By this means they'd crank up the noise in here, whatever it was doing it, and huff and puff and the big canvas hose would go up to the radial engine and warm that oil.

So finally, there's six of us, we decided that we could go and it warmed up, and they went chug-chug, and "brmmm, brmmm," enough to get the engines warm. Well, we had brought with us, knowing this, warm suits from leather flying suits that had lamb's wool,

lamb's wool next to you, slick on the outside. We had boots that were like that and pants that were like that. Jackets, helmets, gloves, all of this slick on the outside, fuzzy on the inside to keep us warm. But that still left our faces exposed. And, you know, the higher you go, the colder it gets. If it's 10 below here, you think how below it is up here in the open cockpits. So we got our chamois-skin face mask, with little holes cut in here and a little hole cut in for the mouth and, I think, little holes here to breathe in.

They have to half lift us into the cockpit, we're so heavily loaded you can scarcely get in the thing. We all line up to take off. I am the navigator and all the gals go to follow me, and we take off, and sure enough, it's a clear day. Clear day, but snow everywhere, all on the mountainsides, all down here, and no towns around there, and very few roads or railroads. Of course, all the time I was flying in the Ferrying Division I wasn't above following a road, but they never were going where I was going. [Laughter] So I never did follow one, because I was always cutting across the butter or something else like that.

So anyway, we all six of us take off here, and we look really bright and pretty, all these yellow wings and all the white snow and kind of like blue sky. It was a nice day. I'm watching carefully, doing my thing. About an hour out, why, what happens? Wouldn't you know it, my map goes right out of the cockpit. So I guess I was folding it. I don't know what happened, but whoosh, there it went. So there's a lot of wind in that cockpit.

Well, my first thought was, "Oh, I'm ruined. What am I going to do?" Then I thought, "That's a dumb thing. You've got five girls out here. They'll take care of you. You're okay. They've got maps." I probably thought, well, nothing to it then, so I moved over real close to the first gal, and not having a radio or anything, and not being able to make ugly faces at her, I used my hand, the only thing, go on. Go on. Well, she wouldn't do it. I slowed down, she slowed down. What happened? All the others slowed down. We all was straight in a line here, sitting up here just stalling the airplanes, like this. We wouldn't dare

stall and the engine go out, see, you wouldn't dare do that, because if you turned them off too much, you'd go down here. You could [not] control it.

But in any event, I thought this won't work, and I thought, if they don't get ahead of me, I'll get behind them. Smart. So I turned to get behind them, and I go around here. The next thing you know that gal's not where she was when I turned, started turning around, and here all the gals are coming in, all in behind me. And here we are just going in a big circle. I was going like this. I thought, "Now, this could go on forever. I've got to take care of me, and I'm up here and Mr. Gravity always wins. I've got to come down." It's the manner I come down is what I was worried about. It's not when or if, but how.

So I had remembered a little landing strip that I thought was a little landing strip. It looked like that on the map. You know, me, nosy, I'm looking everywhere on this map for stuff. Well, it was about 90 degrees off course from where we were, and it appeared to be a landing strip that they were using for training on cross-country, because there wasn't any town there. They play like that's a town and they'd land it and go from there.

So I turned about 90 degrees off course, and decided I'd better go over there and find that little bugger. So it was no more than maybe twenty minutes, thirty minutes, off course, maybe, and I found it. There it was. I said, "Oh, happy day." Well, I look at it and got down to look at it, and they had used it, but they had snowbanks that they'd cleaned it off, real narrow, of course, but snowbanks on the sides. I thought, well, at least it's clear. So I come around and look at it some more and I thought, "Good, grief, it's got ice all over it, that's no deal. I'd better not be landing here. I thought, I'd better be landing here. I have to land here. There's no other place to go. I'm going to do it."

So I come around and make my approach, and I land on this ice, thinking it was going to get away from me and somehow or another, and those planes are real hard to handle on the ground, gears are kind of close together, and not too easy. Kept it straight down the runway, didn't hit any of the sides, got down to the end of it, so relieved, and kind of turned halfway

around, and looked up and here all the other gals were coming in right in behind me. And every last one of them came around and made good approaches and good landings, not a one of us hit the sides of the stuff. All packed up down at the end, none of us killed an engine. Which, see, somebody would have just stayed there, because we couldn't get out to help anybody or anything. No one killed an engine.

The girl next to me, finally with her hand signal, she gave up and finally she says, "Oh, okay, I'll do it." Like "What else can I do?" So she took off, we all took off and followed her and she got us to the next gas landing place.

Then from there we took them on around. We've got some pictures of this, that we landed in Amarillo, we landed in Wichita Falls. We've got a picture of all six of us lined up with these airplanes, all standing in front of them. Then, of course, we took them where they were supposed to go. But we're saying about the men, there wasn't a one of their group got there without incident. They had trouble along the way. So, so much for that one.

Now I'll tell you an episode about one of the most harrowing things that I had, I never tell, because it takes too long to tell it. It takes longer than some of these shorty tales. I don't know whether to tell it on this or not, but I kind of have—some people know, the word has gotten out that I had a real episode with a P-47. As a matter of fact, I think they got me to tell a little bit about it on Women of Courage, now that I think about it, so maybe I'd better explain it. [Laughter] But I seldom ever tell it, because it does take longer to tell if you really tell it as it happened. But so, let's go back.

This was actually the last day of November in '43, in Dallas, as a matter of fact. I've got Dallas newspapers with stuff on them, so that's the reason I know for sure what it is, because not too long ago I had to get out my scrapbook for something and I happened to see that date, like November 29, I think.

Anyway, I was called over to transition and was asked, said, "We have a P-47 here. We'd like for you to fly it if you want to fly it." Sure, I'll get a shot at it. Well, they gave me

a training on paper and I took some quizzes and stuff, everything about the airplane, studied what you'd have to do. They would not give you an airplane just because it was easy to have it out here, you just go do it. No. I always had to have a lot of check rides, I had a lot of paperwork, a lot of the tech orders. You had to read and study the tech orders, the emergency procedures, the fuel systems and the hydraulic systems and all that kind of stuff. Your emergency procedures were always the same on any of them. What's the maximum on your—when is it terrible on the fuel pumps, fuel system? Where are the danger points, all that stuff, so you had to learn all that.

Then the P-47 just has one seat, so you don't get to ride with anybody in it. But the pilots will tell you in training and you get in the airplane, you take a blindfold cockpit check. Where's the so and so? Where's this so and so? Where's this one? This one? This one? So you really know your cockpit and where everything is, because if you don't and you get in trouble, you say, "Oh, I'd better look and see." Well, by the time you look and see, "pffft," crash. So you better know just where your eye hits right over here. "I need this information and here it is. This information's down here." So this is why you do that, to get your cockpit just right.

So I did all that stuff and everything through a period of a day or two. So Sunday afternoon it was my time, I was going to get to fly. As I say, of course, you get from the pilot about flying characteristics and all that sort of thing, but you never get a ride in it before you fly it.

Now, the P-47 has the biggest one of all, the biggest radial engine, sitting in front of you. You're back here and there's this big engine up here, and a four-bladed prop that has a span above the engine way up here, all the way around, that is in front of the big engine and you can't see anything. If the propeller's not even running, you can't see anything. When the propeller's running and if there's any fog or haze or anything out there, you are really like this, completely blind in front of you.

Now, when you taxi the thing, you turn it sideways and peek out the side. Well, yes, it looks clear, I believe I can go, and so you taxi blind. Then you peek again, oh, well, it's still clear, okay, I can go a little bit farther. Yes, it's still clear, I can go. When you land it, you never see in front of you. You land it by watching the pavement here going by the side of you is where you line up like this when you land it. You don't ever see in front.

Anyway, this afternoon comes and so I get to take it off and fly in it. They told me to go out and do some touch-and-goes or land it, turn around and come back, practice your landings, come around. So that day we used one long runway, seldom ever used a short runway, east and west short runway, at the Dallas field. But the long runway had airplanes, new ones, wing-tip to wing-tip just stacked up like you saw out here, all down here that needed to be delivered, but they didn't let us use the runway because the runways were narrow then, and so these airplanes were just a little tunnel that you go to land in, in between them.

So we couldn't use that one, so we had to use the short one over here, and it was in the afternoon and the haze was terrible that day. I'd been making some touch-and-go landings, and the tower called in, "We're closing the airport. Everybody in the area come down. This is your last time. Everybody come in. We're closing the airport." Well, this was late, late right before the sun completely went down to get on the dark side.

Now, the Dallas airport at that time had all the way around on this short east-west runway, all the way down here it was highway and all of the traffic area, and then to the backside of Love Field, the whole thing, was a traffic lane, very heavy traffic, like this. Here's the long runway, here's the short one. Now, on the side of the short runway, there was all kinds of buildings right where this highway is, buildings just of all kinds there. Then right at the very, where the paving here, tarmac goes, right at the tarmac, here's the tarmac, here is a high-line telephone and whatever, they had high lines. Telephone poles with a whole bunch of crossbars like this on them, just all lined up all the way across. Here was the tarmac

and a short runway. You had to bring your plane in right over the top of the telephone posts and land right quickly on this side, or you didn't get where you were supposed over here.

WATSON: Well, I had been coming in for, oh, making several landings. I'd made five or six or so, coming around, so I'd gotten very familiar with all of the obstructions back there, all the kind of buildings. Okay, here's Susie Q.'s pigpen, here's the restaurant, and here's the something else, and here's the telephone pole, and here is the runway. Well, I had done this enough times, but always looking at the side here. You didn't see in front of you. Then with the haze, all afternoon it was real hazy, then it got really bad, no way, it was just blank here in front of me. The only thing I could see was like this down here. But knowing exactly where I was, I knew, here's this and here's the high line.

Well, this time that I came in, after the airport had been closed, I intended to pass, here's the high line and I was going right over the high line, well, sure enough, I was about ten feet lower than I wanted to be, I flew right flat into a post. And I hit the top of that post with all those crossbars and everything. Never did knock the post down, mind you. Hit that thing and it shoved that airplane nose right straight up and started to roll.

I say, here's where my aerobatic experience, ability, came in. If I hadn't had aerobatic training, I wouldn't have even known what attitude I was in, let alone what to do about it. But I immediately caught what was going on, and when I hit the pole, I knew exactly what I had done, there wasn't any question in my mind what I did, because I was expecting the pole to show up, but not to hit it. So I guess that's one of the reason that I could think my way through is that I wasn't surprised, "Oh, I wonder what that was." No, I knew exactly what I did when the airplane threw the nose up, rolling to the right.

Now, here I am just as high as the telephone post off the ground, and what a condition. As soon as I hit that, screaming in my ear, something screaming, and all of a

sudden that airplane starts shaking just like this, and me trying to control that thing, I needed to get the power on. Remember I have flaps down, power back, a minimum of power as you would when you wanted to land in the worst condition you could do anything in. Somehow I got the thing rolled out before I hit the ground. I wasn't any higher than a post to start with. Of course, I guess I got more altitude when the thing shot up like this, I got a little bit of altitude there, and as I rolled it out, it's a wonder the wheels hadn't hit the ground.

Then, of course, I was busy trying to jerk up the wheels, get the full power on, and then not only the screaming in my ear, but the screaming finally quit, but the airplane shaking violently, just shaking. Could not read an instrument, it was shaking so hard. So I rolled it up. By the time I rolled it out now, I was halfway down the runway and in the grass, over the grass, heading right into a hangar. Here's this hangar and this hangar door. I remember thinking like in a funny paper or picture shows you see where some guy in a little airplane goes through the front of the hangar and goes out the back end. You've seen that? I thought, "This thing doesn't have a back end. I can't go through it, I've got to get over the top of it." [Laughter]

By this time that airplane was just chug, chug, chugging and shaking like crazy, and all I could see was that hangar. I thought, "Oh, if I could just get over the top of that hangar, I'm getting the heck out of here." And all this time I was trying to pull up the gear, put power on, and the airplane just chug-chug-chug-chug, just didn't wouldn't get up and go, and shaking like whatever. But I got over the top of the hangar, and I thought, oh, thank heavens, on top of the hangar.

Then I thought I'm going out north of Dallas, because there's not that much people living out there at that point, going out toward Lake Dallas, and I'm getting out of here. So all this time, sundown, even this little short period of time, you know how fast the sun can go down and get dark on you. Of course, this was still in like wintertime in November, like December. So I go toward the north part. So I kept getting a little bit of altitude, still

chugging. I keep working on trying to get the gear up or down and it was just red, red, something's wrong with your gear. Wrong with your gear. It's not right. I couldn't read anything else, so you were just flying by the seat of your pants with low power, you're just kind of sitting it out.

So I go out and I look around and I see where I think I'll walk and it's just dark, I just barely could see. I had picked out a house, I knew the wind direction, and I had it all figured out, that I'm going to get out of here. But then I thought, well, I want to see what's wrong with this thing and I finally—now, all the time I was doing this, I'm having to cross controls, hard left rudder, and a right stick to keep the nose straight. The airplane wouldn't fly straight putting the stuff in it. So I've got to see what's wrong with this thing. So finally I got enough control that I could turn and kind of look around.

Now, in the meantime, there was a noise on the fuselage, just wham, wham, wham, just in rhythm. Well, there was a little piece, a strip of metal that had, I guess, come off of a flap for the back end of the wing that was still hanging on, but it was beating on the side of the fuselage, just in rhythm. Well, I thought, oh, well, that's okay, and I look out, and, oh, gosh, part of the wing's messed up. Finally, I got crossing the controls where I could handle the thing, I turned around and look at the tail and the tail's messed up. Part of that was gone. I said, "Oh, no, don't tell me that." I thought I am going to have to get out of this bugger. The gear wouldn't work or anything. Vibrating like crazy, dark.

Now, all this time I'm on radio, every frequency I can think of, trying to get somebody to talk to me. No radio, just no radio. They didn't have a radio, couldn't talk to a soul. Nobody on any frequency would answer me anywhere. So even if I have a radio, I can't use it sometimes, so I couldn't get a radio.

So here it is now getting dark, and so I thought, "Okay, I'm getting the heck out of here." So I open the cockpit, I get all unstrapped and everything, and I start to get out. I think, "Now, wait just a minute, this thing is not spinning on me. I'm violently holding it, but

I am holding it." I thought, "I wonder what I could do with this. I hate to leave it." You know, they always say, don't scratch this airplane. I thought, "Well, you know, maybe I can save this thing. I don't know what I can do with this." I thought, "Well, I'm going to see, first of all, if it's even in a landable condition."

So I got back in, sat down, and I thought I'm going to pull it up to do some stall. When you land, you stall it out. Okay, I'm going to almost stall it and see if I can control it, see if it just wants to get the heck away from me. So I pull it up to try to, and wouldn't dare pull back. I'd pull back just a little, because I'm just chugging along, see. So I pull it up and did a few little fake stalls, wouldn't dare stall it, but I'd get it just almost to the stall and let it back down again. I thought, "I believe I can control it. It's not doing this on me." So I got to playing with that a little bit.

Then I thought, well, I can't land it, the gear, it says something's wrong with the gear, I've messed it up. I thought, "Well, now, that's not too good." This time it's pitch dark, blacker than the ace of spades. I thought, "Well, I don't know, maybe I can land this. I'll go back to Love Field," because I'd gotten north of there. "I'll go back to Love Field. I'll think it over. I'll try it."

So I turn around 180 degrees to go back to Love Field, and I look, there is no Love Field anywhere. Then I get this sick feeling, I'm disoriented, I don't even know where I am. I know where I am, but I'm not where I am. Now, what's wrong? And I got this real crazy feeling of being—I've always had a decent sense of direction, and I thought, "I don't even know where I am. I've got to be here." But I remember that just really undid me.

I thought I saw some lights over at the side. I said, "Now, if I'm where I know I am and I have to be, it's got to be Dallas. I couldn't have lost my mind that soon. I'm going to go over here and I'm going to look and if there is a rotating red horse," this Mobil red horse, that was the checkpoint of the whole town at that time. "I'm going over here and if I see that red horse, I know that's Dallas, so I'm going over there to get my confidence up," and I march

over there, and by golly, there was that red horse just doing its thing. I thought, "Oh, praise the Lord, I'm in Dallas. If I'm in Dallas and I have any sense of direction, the Love Field's got to be here," and there's nothing but blackness everywhere. Not a light anywhere, a black nothing. And that's when I turned around and saw the black nothing, there was no Love Field. I thought, "I don't know where I am. Where am I? There's no Love Field here." I'd knocked all the lights out of Love Field. Not a single light anywhere. All over the airport, no lights. Love Field was there, but there was no light on it.

So now that shows what they had around this Love Field. The radio and the lights both I had knocked out when I hit that pole. So I thought, "There's no lights here now. What do I do? I can't get anybody on the radio." So I'm still just trying on the radio.

Finally a little old man says, "Are you in trouble?"

I said, "Hell, hello." [Laughter]

Somebody answered me. He said, "I am working on a radio down here at Lockheed hangar, and I heard you on the radio, and I'm answering you. Are you in trouble?"

I said, "Yes, I need some help." [Laughter] I said, "Telephone over to Love Field to the tower, see if anybody's there. See if you can get anybody on Love Field and tell them I'm up here."

So he calls over there. I don't remember how many times we talked back and forth, but I told him, I said, "I would like to know if I have any wheels, any landing gear. It doesn't show what. I can't tell." Finally I got to the point, I said, "Tell the tower that I'm going to try to fly by and see if they can shine their little red and green light on me and see if they can see if I have two wheels." Because I had it in the down position, but it was still red, red, red.

So I don't know how I found the tower, except I was very familiar with the area. I don't know if they had candlelights in it or what, there was something there that I knew where it ought to be. I don't know, maybe I could tell by some traffic over here that that was the right, the correct end of the airport.

Sure enough, I found the tower and flew by it. Now, keep in mind all this time I can't read any instruments, I don't know how high I am off the ground. I'd never flown at night before. Very first time I'd ever flown at night. I'd never flown the airplane before. So here I am in all this blackness, but I did find the tower, and I flew by it close enough that they looked and so they called back and tell this guy, he tells me, he says, "They think they saw two wheels."

I said, "Okay, two's all I need."

"They think they saw two wheels."

I still get the red. So then I told him, I said, "Well, I think that I might try to land this thing, if they will get some jeep lights out there for me." I said, "I'm not using the short runway. I'm going to use the long runway that I'm more familiar with, but it has all those airplanes on it, so if I veer off at all, I'll crash into those things." So I was taking a big chance on that longer runway, but the short runway is the bugger that I didn't like. It's too short, with the other high lines. I didn't want to hit another post in the blackness. I told them to get the jeep lights out there.

Well, finally they called back and said, "Yes, we've got the lights out there."

I looked, I said, "I can't see them. I cannot see them." I says, "There's too much traffic." See, there's traffic going out there. I said, "There's too much traffic, I don't see any lights."

Well, the traffic was right at the end of the tarmac and they put the jeep lights at the beginning, see, and the jeep was just right into all traffic lights. You couldn't see one from another.

So I was up there long enough with the conversation and everything, and so help me if the police didn't get out there and stop the traffic and turn the lights off.

WRIGHT: Wow! Wow!

WATSON: So they stopped the traffic and the lights were turned off, and then I said, "Yes, I see them. I see the little lights down there." [Laughter] Kind of black and here's two little lights down there. I said, "Yes, now I see them." I said, "You've got to get lights at the other end. Get me some lights at the other end."

But first of all, I said, "Get the smudge pots out." Do you know what a smudge pot is? Okay. So I had to wait, fiddle around and wait. Now, I knew I was running low of gasoline, but I didn't know just how low. I couldn't read anything. But I was getting nervous about my gas. So I said, "Get the smudge pots." Well, I had to wait a while and everything and then he called back, "The sergeant who's in charge of the smudge pots has the key in his pocket and he's out of town."

WRIGHT: Oh, boy.

WATSON: No smudge pots. It would have been so nice to have seen this. So here I've got two little jeep lights here that you can scarcely see. Two little jeep lights down here I scarcely can see in the whole thing. So I told them, I said, "Well, I'm going to try." And all the time now I'm crossing controls like this. My back was sore for two weeks, I was in such a bind. So I told them, I said, "I'm going to try to fly by. I do not intend to land. I'm going to make a pass over to see if it really is what I see, that I can get lined up. I want to make this pass."

So I came by and made the pass, saw all these airplanes. I thought, ohh, that is the runway, but oh, that shiny stuff, good gosh, if I hit that stuff. So I know just as I pulled up from my pass, the Lord told me or I knew without a doubt that I had just enough gasoline to either go up and bail out or make one pass. And I'm telling you, I got sick at stomach then.

That's when I really got scared, because I got that message loud and clear. Wherever it came from, I knew it for a fact.

I thought now, as I remember, it was just pulling up, I remember that to this day this decision, what do I do, do I bail out or do I chance the landing under these conditions. So I remember just kind of halfway just turning to the left to make my landing. I came back around, and to line up with this runway they had on the back, a little farther back than the telephone line, they had a high tension line that you've seen these that look like oil derricks, the big old high transmission lines that are real big fat ones. They're some skinny ones, but these were the big fat ones. There was a line up right across the back of this runway, but farther back from this.

Now, there was one thing, the only thing that I asked any help from anybody was I said, "Is there anybody in the tower that can tell me exactly which toggle switch the landing lights are on?" I said, "I know where they are, but I want to be sure."

So there was somebody there, said, yes, it was the third one from the left, or whatever that you flip it on. I thought, I don't want to be messing with these things, and I wasn't really studying where landing lights were. I wasn't even planning to use them, but I thought I knew exactly, and sure enough, I did, just exactly where. A guy said that's where they are.

So a flip landing, I saw when I came around, I didn't have landing lights on when I went by the other way, but when I came around this last time I checked on the landing lights, and keeping in mind now that I cannot see my altimeter and I don't know how high I am, I came down to line up and I was lower than I wanted to be, and my landing lights showed on one of these big old towers in front me. I remember then I went, [gasps]. Now, that scared me. Now, when I hit the post to start with, I knew exactly what I did and I wasn't that frightened. Then I got sick at my stomach when I knew what I had to do. Then this, when I saw that, that scared me.

But I came in and I had already figured out, if I pull back a third of the throttle, that thing would quit me. So I came in and got the thing in position to where I wanted it and I pulled back that throttle about a third, and man, that thing, that airplane set down just like a rock. I didn't bounce or anything; I just sat down. Of course, I got it in landing position with the tail and I went right straight down there, did not hit anything, got down to the taxi strip, and I remember when I got to the taxi strip, turned off on it and I just stopped there a while. I thought, "Oh, you got down. Now don't be a dodo and fall off of the wing when you get out of here and knock your teeth out." [Laughter] That's what I told myself.

Then all the time I was flying, I was scared to death of the commanding officer, that he was going to kill me, kick me out, this is the end of me. So as I sat there, I thought, "I'm getting out of this airplane and I'm running this way. I'm not going up to the hangar." [Laughter] Then I thought, "No, they'll catch me and they'll find me somewhere. I can't hide. I can't get away from here." But I remember I was thinking, oh, I would just run and get away from here. But I told myself to pay attention, you know, that I wasn't going to fall off the wing and ruin myself.

So then I started taxiing up to the hangar and then I saw everybody in Dallas lined up at the hangar. This had taken a long enough time that everybody knew it, the police knew it, everybody knew it. I was up there an hour and a half, I'll bet. Anyway, I saw all those people. I thought, "I'm stopping right here. I cannot go up there. I will not go up to that hangar." Pretty soon I think, "Well, what else can I do?"

So I finally taxi up there where everybody is, and everybody comes running out to the airplane. Well, before I even got the engine off, somebody jumps on my wing and sticks his head in and starts pulling the canopy back, sticks his head in, who do you think? Commanding officer. I thought, "I'm dead. He'll kill me." And the only thing he could do was brag on me for getting down.

WRIGHT: Wow.

WATSON: He was so happy, and I thought later, I bet he was, he didn't want anything to happen on his watch that he had to account for. And I got down safely.

Well, the next thing I heard people expletives, blah, blah, blah, look at this tail, and blah, blah, blah, look at this wing, and, "Look under this airplane!" Well, I had ripped the airplane from right behind the engine, the belly of it, clear back to the tail wheel. It saved the tail wheel. I'd have killed myself if I didn't have that tail wheel. I couldn't have guided it straight. I'd have hit the planes. The tail wheels was still there, but it was ripped open like a can opener underneath, and that's where a lot of that drag was coming from.

Then pretty soon somebody in the front of the airplane started really throwing a fit. I thought, "What's wrong with the front of this airplane?" Sure enough, it has four blades on the prop, has four things. About this much of one prop was gone.

WRIGHT: Eek.

WATSON: Had just been melted off, you could see. Now, when I hit the power thing, it just—I still don't know how that happened. But that is what the problem was, why this was all the time. If I'd had any idea that that propeller was in bad shape, I would have bailed out without a question, because the engine should have fallen out, but it didn't, it stayed in there.

Well, I got out of the airplane, telling myself, "Don't fall off." And the next thing I know, here comes a maintenance man, he jumps on the wing, he jumps in the cockpit, he's going to show off. Now, what he needed to be in the cockpit for, I don't know. But he jumps in there, his foot goes clear through the floor. [Laughter] And I just laughed to myself, I thought, "You deserve that." [Laughter] I thought later, if I had seen the ground between my

feet while I was flying, I would have held my nose and I'd have been gone. [Laughter] I wouldn't have stayed with that thing.

Now, then the guy says, "Well, come on, come on, we're going to the club. We've got to get a drink. You've got to have something to drink." So I go to the club with all of them and they order their whatever, and I ordered a Coke, and they just nearly fell apart. [Laughter]

WRIGHT: That's what you needed, huh?

WATSON: They needed that. They nearly fell apart.

Well, I went to pursuit school. I think the next day or the day after the next day, I went to pursuit school and ended up flying all the other airplanes. But do you know that I was never called back. I never went to the office to explain anything to anybody. I never knew what happened to that airplane, because I took out of town, see, just about the next day or so. Maybe they didn't want to make too much of an issue of it, they didn't want to explain anything to anybody.

But the very next day or two days—and I've got the newspaper article—"City Fathers Burying the Telephone Lines."

WRIGHT: All right!

WATSON: They had already been talking about it, so the article said, that that's what they needed to do, and since the little incident happened, they did it, and they did it immediately. So all of that, see, was gone from the very back. But no runway anywhere you ever have a deal like that.

You know, now runways are a nice clear approach, they have a clear approach way back here, there's nothing like that. Well, that's just like the little postage stamp with the trees, high lines and everything right there. I could have hit a tree a lot easier than I could hit that dumb thing. But with the haze and that big engine and the haze with the big prop, there was no way I saw anything in front of me. I was looking right straight down and I was checking how high I was off of this house and off of this deal and off of this deal. It was just like that.

But all the time I was flying, I was crossing controls with my body out of balance like you wouldn't believe. I mean, hard. I was holding it hard like this, and hard like this, see, and I wasn't just relaxed like this. I was like sitting up like this this whole time. I was pooped. [Laughter] My back hurt me for two weeks, because I was so crooked, crooked with it, you know. It was a wild tale, I'll tell you.

WRIGHT: I guess.

WATSON: But I got down.

WRIGHT: You did.

WATSON: And I didn't crack up anything else. I might tell you one other one. I don't know how much tape you've got on there. But one time with a P-51 that I was flying from St. Louis to New York in kind of questionable weather, but good enough, so I took off. Well, I got past the point of no return, and I always figured out how far can I go and still get back, no matter where I was. I had passed that point, committed to, I had to find B, and the thunderstorms and everything just expectedly were just everywhere and whoosh down

with—just sheets of water over the mountains. You couldn't see anything in front. You'd have to look down here and you could just see the tops of the mountains and all.

You're not supposed to be in kind of weather like that with a P-51, and normally today, if you'd had better weather, you'd know what it was going to do, but we didn't. I get in all this thunderstorm stuff with that P-51 and I thought, "I have no business being in here, and I don't have gas to get back." There's no alternate airports that I knew when I took off that there's anything big enough that I could have used. So I get desperate enough and I think, "I don't care if there's no airport I can use, I know there's an airport over here to the right on this map. I've got to go look at that bugger."

So I turned 90 degrees again off course, go over here to look for that thing, and with all the rain and looking straight down and everything, I went right to it and found it. Here I saw that, and I thought, "Ohh, I can't land on that thing, too little." So I went around and looked at it again and I said, "I don't believe so."

Then the next time I went around it, again I looked, I said, "Good grief, it looks like it has four inches of water on it." It was just, you know, sheets of water, just looked like water like everything, what I could see, because, as I say, I wasn't seeing in front of me, I was just looking down straight. That's the only place you could see anything up here was just like this only. When I looked at that thing, I thought, "I can't do it," and I saw the water on it and I thought, "I know I can't do it."

Then I thought, "Now wait a bloody minute. Water will slow you down when you hit it. That'll help me, that water. If I can control it, it'll help." So then I get another look at it again, and I think, "Well, well." When you're desperate, you really get to figuring out. It had fence, it didn't high lines, a fence back here and a fence down here, so I looked at what the perimeter was, what you'd have to tear up when you got in. So I decided, "I believe I'll try that, because I'm so desperate. I can't go this way and over those mountains." I was already just bouncing all over the sky in that thing.

So I came around and made my approach on that thing, and here's where this practice of always landing, picking out a place and saying, "I want to hit it," and practicing that deal. So I had practiced in this airplane hitting the spot I had picked out before. So I thought, "I'd better be able to hit where I pick out this time, because I got to get in the back end of this thing." Sure enough, I made my approach and I hit just where I wanted to hit, right in the very back end of that runway. But I tell you, when I hit that water, you thought Moses parted the Red Sea. [Laughter] I mean, the water, whoosh, and I couldn't see a thing, and I thought, "Oh, Lord, keep me straight, just keep me straight."

I had planned on ground-looping it whenever I could see or get down. I was just ready to ground-loop that thing, and the water came down and I saw the fence in front of me, and I did on the brakes and it started to work. The brakes were working fine. I did not have to ground-loop it. See, both brakes stopped me before I got to the fence, otherwise I'd have slammed one on and gone around like this, maybe put it up on its nose or wing or maybe gotten by without hurting any. But I intended to ground-loop the thing, but sure enough, I got the thing stopped. "It's going to stop! It's going to stop!" And I got stopped at the end.

So then I even was close enough I could turn around without hooking a tail, turned that thing around. That airplane was brand-new. Nobody had seen that airplane before, and I knew the people here at this little airport had not seen that airplane, and it has such a sweet hum to it and everything. It's different than any of the rest of them. So I taxied on up closer, of course it's still pouring down rain, and up close to the hangar and stopped. I hadn't stopped there very long until here there was a man jumping on my wing, and it kind of startled me, and I looked around and right into his face, and he saw a girl, and man, he nearly fell off the wing, he saw the girl, you know. [Laughter]

Then pretty soon he composed himself and he came back up and he started to open the canopy to help me, he's going to help me, and I said, "No, no, no, don't do that. Don't do that." I didn't want to get my hair wet. [Laughter] So I left him pouring down rain on him

and he finally left. I sat out there in the thunderstorm for quite a while before I would out of there. So whenever it had calmed down a bit, I got out.

Well, it so happened that the owner of the airport was president of the Chamber of Commerce that year, and they had a Chamber of Commerce banquet that night. Nothing to do but I would go home with the owner and his wife and spend the night and go to the banquet, so that's exactly what I did.

Well, in the meantime I had called on my base and told them my predicament, where I was and everything. They said, "We'll give you the authority to fly it out, but you don't have to fly it out. We'll crate it out. You make up your mind. It's your choice. You can do what you want to." So they asked me that night at the banquet, "What are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I know one thing I'm going to do. I'm going to pray a lot and I'm going to strategize a lot, and then whatever I do I'll do at eight o'clock in the morning, whether I don't do it or do do it."

Eight o'clock in the morning, everybody in town was out there, and so you know they wanted to see a nice crack-up or whatever, but I decided to fly it out. But I figured out, and prayed about it a long, too, but I figured out my little strategy. So I had four guys to go with me to the end of the runway. They puts chocks under the wheels and two guys on the wing. I turned on every bit of power I could get on that thing, "blblblblblbl," and I thought I was going to jump out of its skin.

Then when I got all the power going, I gave them the signal, "Let me go," and so they turned me loose, and I started sailing down the runway. I had figured that before I even broke ground, I was going to release the gear, so if I crashed, I was going to crash gear up by the time I hit the fence or that my gear wouldn't be down all the way, at least by the time I hit the fence. So I hadn't even broken the ground and I released the gear. Broke ground, and the next thing you know I looked and there was the fence. I thought, "I made it! There's the fence." [Laughter]

So I got over it, didn't hang my gear on it or anything, got across and, oh, it felt so good to go across the brush, and I was in the air. So after I got my composure getting in the air, I thought, "Oh, all those people back there, they came out to see something and they didn't see anything. They've never seen this airplane before," and I thought, "Oh, man, would I ever like to go and do cute little things over the runway, put on a little air show of my own." And I thought, "Boy, they'll kick me out, it'll be the end of me. I can't do that. So what am I going to do for these guys?"

Well, I decided I'd just make some real fast passes, so I made real low fast passes, went and pulled it up and did my little rollout at the top, see, then came back down and I did it again a few times, you know, and then just hit the road. So nobody turned me in or anything for even making low fast passes, but I didn't do any rolls low. I was scared. [Laughter] It wasn't too smart. And besides, I think psychologically I probably wasn't ready for it, I'd been too scared trying to get out of there. [Laughter] But I was so glad to get in the air, I could have almost shouted and done anything, you know.

WRIGHT: I'm sure that that memory of you doing that lasted in their minds for a long, long time.

WATSON: Well, it might have, since that's the first time they saw that airplane. I know that the guys that were there when I taxied up said that they heard that engine, "What is that?" And even in the rain, you know, looking and seeing that go around, and had no idea, of course, a girl would be in there. [Laughter]

WRIGHT: Well, I have no doubt that most of your life you've surprised quite a few people that you've met with your energy and all the talents that you have. As we close our session, we certainly thank you for taking this time to share with us some of those and we hope

sometime in the future that we can sit and visit with you again and more, because I know there's got to be more there that you can tell us about so that other people can learn about this time period as well.

WATSON: Well, I'll have to remember which wild ones I told so I don't repeat anything.
[Laughter]

WRIGHT: We thank you again.

WATSON: Well, you're just quite welcome. It was my pleasure. Thank you a lot.

[End of interview]