

**Interviewee:** Collins, J. Howard  
**Interviewer:** Robin Sellers  
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**Sellers:** Okay, the tape recorder is running. Mr. Collins, do we have your permission to tape record this interview?

**Collins:** Yes, you do.

**Sellers:** Fine. Why don't you tell me a little bit, then, about where you were born and where you grew up.

**Collins:** Well, I was born and grew up in southern West Virginia, in the Appalachian Mountains, in the coal field – southern West Virginia coal field. I had eight brothers and sisters. My father was a coal miner. He was born and raised in Virginia and my mother was from Kentucky. I grew up and went to school in West Virginia, a little town called Twin Branch (that's two words). We went to elementary school there in Twin Branch, we went to junior high school in Davy (D-A-V-Y), West Virginia, which was about a mile up the road. Then they had one high school for the whole county and that was in Welch, West Virginia (W - E - L - C - H). I went to high school and I was drafted — well, let me — I was drafted into the Armed Forces in 1944.

**Sellers:** Is that right after you graduated from high school?

**Collins:** No, I'm going to back up here just a moment. That was in my senior year of high school. That was in April of the school year.

**Sellers:** They didn't even let you finish, huh?

**Collins:** Well, you have to understand that things were very, very differently back then than they are today. Every draft board back in those days had a certain quota that they had to supply for the draft, and that draft system supplied the Navy and the Army and Marines all at once; you were divided out once you got your notice to appear. Well, being that the coal industry was the vital part of the energy system of the United States. In fact, it was probably the only one that was well-known, and the primary source of energy. Well, anyone that worked in the coal mine back in those days were exempted from the draft because it was a vital, vital part of our existence and war effort. Consequently, when they got down scraping the bottom of the barrel, they got down to the high school level.

**Sellers:** So the people that were older were exempt.

**Collins:** Well, not necessarily exempt, but if they worked in the coal mines, they were exempt, yes.

**Sellers:** They were not eligible, and so they ended up grabbing you guys. So had you turned eighteen?

**Collins:** Yes, I turned eighteen on December 3rd, and April 18th I was completely inducted into the service. Now, later on, anyone that was past thirty-eight years of age was totally exempted, regardless of what you did. So that settles the draft issue. I'll never forget that my father took me from Twin Branch to Welch, which was the closest railroad station, eleven o'clock at night, put me on the troop train to go for my induction.

**Sellers:** Were any of your brothers older?

**Collins:** Yes, I had two brothers older, yes.

**Sellers:** Were they already in the military?

**Collins:** No ma'am.

**Sellers:** Okay, they were in the coal mines.

**Collins:** They were in the coal mines.

**Sellers:** So you're the first one to be drafted?

**Collins:** First one out of the family to be drafted, and ended up being the only one.

**Sellers:** How did your family feel about that?

**Collins:** Well, I'm sure that — my mother was a very sincere Christian lady and, in fact, I've always said if there's anyone in heaven, she's there. I still say that her prayers brought me through it.

**Sellers:** Could very well be - I've heard that opinion before.

**Collins:** So anyway, I'm sure it really helped, and really, she was very saddened about it. But men being men, I guess I can't relate to you what my father thought about it. But anyway, I still at this day and time consider that that was the most traumatic thing that ever happened in my life, because transportation back in those parts of the mountains was practically nothing. And nine miles away from home — I had never been away from home a day in my life.

**Sellers:** This is a whole new experience for you.

**Collins:** I had never been away from home a day in my life, and I can well recall putting me on that troop train at eleven o'clock at night. I woke up the next morning; we were getting off the train in Ft. Thomas, Kentucky — and how I laid awake night after night in my bunk, crying myself to sleep.

**Sellers:** Oh, no - homesick?

**Collins:** Homesick. I still say that was the worst thing that ever happened to me. But anyway, I survived it. And I'm sure you've seen the Walton program that used to be on TV?

**Sellers:** Yes.

**Collins:** Remember how Jim-Boy always wanted to be in the Air Force and liked to work around aircraft and stuff like that? Well, that was me, that was me. I had my mind set that I wanted to be in the Air Corps. So when we started the process there at Ft. Thomas, Kentucky, I started asking anyone that looked like they were someone - "How do I get in the Air Force?" Well, I never did find out until a couple of days later we were fixing to ship out and go to Shepard Field, Texas, and I asked the sergeant, I said, "How do I get in the Air Force? Where am I going?" He said, "Son, I can't tell you where you're going but you'll be looking down the runways this summer." So I knew at that point I was in the Air Force.

I entered in the Air Force and we went to Shepard Field, Texas, for our basic training. After a few days in the process at Shepard Field, Texas, the chaplain needed someone to run a motion picture machine at his services. So he got me out of basic training and I ran his motion picture machine for him.

**Sellers:** Why did he pick you? Did you know how to do it?

**Collins:** Because I knew how to do it.

**Sellers:** And that's something you'd learned in high school?

**Collins:** I learned that in high school, yeah. So I more or less did not have any what you call "real" basic training. In the eight weeks that we were at the basic training, I served as the chaplain's assistant, doing that. Then we were assigned to go to different places and different people was going to, for instance, aircraft mechanic school and they were going to radio school and they were going to continue into the different branches of the Army Air Corps. Well, I was somehow — I guess through aptitude tests that we took (we took many of those) selected to go to Madison, Wisconsin.

**Sellers:** What was there?

**Collins:** There was the place called the Truax [??] Air Force base, and it was a radio school. So they were going to teach me how to be a radio operator.

**Sellers:** Was that okay with you?

**Collins:** Well, I proceeded through radio school and that ‘dit-dot-dit-dit-dit’ in my ear all day got to be more than I could handle. I mean, I just didn’t want to do it – I could tell that wasn’t my cup of tea. So I started figuring out how am I going to get out of this mess, you know? I talked my way out of it. The guy said, “Well, there ain’t no way that I can let you out with the grades and the achievement that you’re doing.” I said, “Well, we can handle that,” you know. I commenced slacking off on the exams and stuff. Anyway, I got out of that and I went to aircraft school back down in Amarillo, Texas.

Well, let’s go back to Madison, Wisconsin, for a moment. While I was in Madison, Wisconsin, I was still — we’re talking about in a three month period — I was still homesick. My mother and my oldest sister came by bus from West Virginia to Madison, Wisconsin, to visit me. Boy, how glad I was to see them. Of course, Madison, Wisconsin, was very, very beautiful city and a big city, and I could well remember it because later on in life, in fact about four years ago, my wife and I — I wanted to go back to Madison, Wisconsin. I wanted to relive a part of my life like that. So I got on the internet and made arrangements through the Air National Guard unit there to tour the base, which my wife and I did. But, Madison - how it had changed, you know? Because the capital of Wisconsin is Madison, and it sat right on a knoll overlooking four different lakes in all four directions, so what a beautiful place it was.

From there I went through aircraft school and became a flight engineer. I loved it! I loved mechanical because it was being in the airplane and flying and stuff like that. And I loved that and that’s what my — they had what they called an MOS and that’s what I ended up being in my MOS was a flight engineer and a aerial gunner.

**Sellers:** As a gunner, what was your position?

**Collins:** My position as a flight engineer and gunner was the top turret. Later on, as we proceeded through our training, though, we got assigned to B-24 bombers. That’s a four-engine bomber that was made by Douglas Consolidated Aircraft Corporation and Ford Motor Company. Not many people were aware that Ford Motor Company made bombers during World War II, but they did make almost 9,000 of them that were made there in Willow Run, Michigan.

**Sellers:** I didn’t know they had made that many but I knew they were involved.

**Collins:** They made almost — it was 8,900 and something; I have the figures somewhere. But almost 9,000, which I have been to Willow Run and went through the plant there also. Of course, at this day and time — it was a transmission plane owned by Ford at the time. But anyway, I did go through that.

Anyway, after graduating from what they called A and M school as a flight engineer, we went to Muroc Army Air Force Base out in the middle of the Mojave desert, which is now Edwards Air Force Base. And that’s where we assembled aircraft flight crews and did our training, okay? From there we went to Amarillo, Texas — no, Laredo, Texas. Laredo, Texas, for gunnery school. Then we went to Muroc. After we went to gunnery school we went to

Muroc and that's where everybody came from different points around the United States and assembled as crews. That's where we took our training, out in the Mojave desert. Incidentally, I still have one friend that I've made through the internet at Edwards Air Force Base because they were looking — oh, about a couple of years ago about the environmental cleanup there and they advertised in the Air Force magazine, which I still get today, if anyone was a member of the Air Force Association that happened to be stationed at Muroc Air Force Base during World War II.

**Sellers:** They wanted to hear from you?

**Collins:** Yeah, they wanted to hear from me. I answered that call and I still correspond, email and all, with the lady out there. Anyway, after we did our training and left Muroc, we went to Riverside at March Air Force Base there in Riverside, California, for a brief transit-like thing — and then from there to Salinas, California. From Salinas, California — we left there late in the evening one evening —

**Sellers:** This is your crew?

**Collins:** Yes, it's the crew. In fact, there was thirty crews left at one time.

**Sellers:** And you're in a B-24?

**Collins:** B-24.

**Sellers:** How many are in your crew?

**Collins:** Ten. So over 300 people, thirty aircraft, on this particular evening that left Salinas, California, flying to Hawaii.

**Sellers:** So you were obviously going to the Pacific.

**Collins:** We went to the Pacific.

**Sellers:** Now you were drafted in April of 1944. You'd been through a lot of training. What's the time-frame now?

**Collins:** The time-frame now is the first of '45.

**Sellers:** Early in '45.

**Collins:** Early '45. We're on our way — we left there in early '45, and while I was in Hawaii I happened to be unfortunate enough to have appendicitis. I got sidetracked from my crew. My crew and all the other twenty-nine crews that left had to go on down to the southwest Pacific. Well, as I say, appendicitis sidetracked me and I had to spend twenty-eight days in the

hospital.

**Sellers:** This was in a military hospital?

**Collins:** Military hospital there in Hawaii. I don't think, as I recall, there was anything particular that kept me in the hospital except that was their rules and regulations. In other words, if you had appendicitis, you stayed in the hospital twenty-eight days. So now I'm Mr. Lone Boy, you know? Man without a country, man without a crew.

**Sellers:** Did that upset you? Had you bonded yet with this crew?

**Collins:** Oh yeah, we'd started to bond, yes, because we'd been flying together for days and weeks on end.

**Sellers:** So it was disconcerting?

**Collins:** Yes, very much so. Then after that I got assigned to what they called the ATC [??]- Aircraft Ferrying Command. As these planes that came over, then, to the United States — they actually had more than they needed down there. I got assigned to a crew that all we did at that point was take these planes and fly them into Biak, New Guinea. So here were brand new bombers as well as brand new fighter aircraft being flown down to Biak, New Guinea, for storage.

**Sellers:** Are you on a cell phone?

**Collins:** No.

**Sellers:** Okay, we're cutting in and out.

**Collins:** I don't know why we're cutting in and out, unless somebody's calling. Can you hold?

**Sellers:** Yeah, let's hold so we don't lose your words. [Pause in conversation]

**Collins:** That was my daughter from Cincinnati wishing me a happy birthday.

**Sellers:** Oh, I'm sorry. Will she call back?

**Collins:** Oh yeah. She is the director of academic affairs for University of Cincinnati.

**Sellers:** So you're doing ferrying over to Biak?

**Collins:** Yeah, and we probably hit every little island in between, you know? But anyway,

after that period ended we went directly to Okinawa. At Okinawa we're assigned to the 492nd Bomb Group, still on B-24s. We flew six mission in the 492nd, doing submarine patrol.

**Sellers:** Tell me exactly what you did when you went on sub patrol.

**Collins:** Well, everybody had their eyes peeled to the outside. We were flying about 500 feet above the water, looking for periscopes or any indication of submarines, Japanese submarines, because we flew from Okinawa towards Japan all the time.

**Sellers:** Did you go out in the mornings or the afternoons?

**Collins:** We went out in the mornings and usually stayed for five or six hours and then returned. We'd fly in patterns. So then, after the war's end, they put me and my crew into a unit called the 5th calibration department.

**Sellers:** Now you said after the war's end?

**Collins:** After the war's end. That was after Japan surrendered.

**Sellers:** How long did it take you to fly these six missions? Was it just a matter of a couple of weeks?

**Collins:** The six missions lasted about a month and a half.

**Sellers:** Okay. So you got to Okinawa fairly late in the Pacific war?

**Collins:** Yes, very much so.

**Sellers:** When did you learn about the atomic bomb and what did you learn about it?

**Collins:** I learned that the bomb had been dropped.

**Sellers:** How did you find that out?

**Collins:** On the news flash that came --- in other words, more or less like a scuttlebutt.

**Sellers:** It wasn't a special announcement?

**Collins:** No, no. We had no such thing as a TV down at the rec center or anything like that back in those days. Everybody lived in tents. There wasn't even a permanent structure around that I can recall there on Okinawa [laughs]. So, just more or less, "Hey, we dropped a big bomb on Japan and they've surrendered," you know?

**Sellers:** So after the surrender, you get put into a different occupational unit?

**Collins:** Yep, yep, once again. Then they started sending people back to the United States according to how many points you had.

**Sellers:** Well, you don't have many.

**Collins:** You've got it right! I didn't come home, either [laughs]. They put me in what they called the 6th Emergency Rescue Squadron. That was flying PBYS, but the Army's version was an OA-10A (the Army's version of a PBY for Navy). We flew air and sea rescue missions from Okinawa to Shanghai and from Shanghai to Japan and back down to Okinawa on the third day. That's where I stayed until which time that I returned home.

**Sellers:** How long did that take? Two years?

**Collins:** No — that was early '45 — well, I think we got to Okinawa July the 15th of '45. The war was over in — what was it? August something?

**Sellers:** August 8th or something like that.

**Collins:** Yeah, something like that. Then, I came home — then I stayed in that for a good while and then in May of that year I came back to the States — '46.

**Sellers:** You still had some time that you owed Uncle Sam, though - what did they have you doing in the States?

**Collins:** No, no, I didn't.

**Sellers:** You mean they released you then?

**Collins:** Yeah.

**Sellers:** You were discharged after just a year and a half or so?

**Collins:** Two years, two months, and two days.

**Sellers:** Was that unusual?

**Collins:** Yeah, well, they had no more need for me, okay, because at that point I had enough points to come home.

**Sellers:** Now you're hanging out there with no planes to fly in.

**Collins:** That's right.

**Sellers:** What did you do about that? Did you re-up?

**Collins:** No, I came back to West Virginia. Being in the coal field — the guy that owned the coal mine at that time happened to be a guy that was my father's neighbor back years ago and he kept asking me when am I going to work? I said, "I'm not going to work in your coal mine." [laughs] Anyway, I didn't go to work in his coal mine; I came to Florida.

**Sellers:** Now, how did you do that?

**Collins:** Well, because I had a sister that lives in High Springs, Florida.

**Sellers:** So you came down and moved in with her?

**Collins:** I moved in with her for a couple of weeks until I found a place over in Gainesville. You know, the University of Florida's in Gainesville?

**Sellers:** Yes, sir.

**Collins:** I got into High Springs on Friday evening and on Saturday morning I went to Gainesville and I found myself a job - the first place I walked into. Went to work on Monday morning.

**Sellers:** Doing what?

**Collins:** I went to work as an automotive mechanic.

**Sellers:** Well, that's pretty close to what you were doing with the planes, isn't it?

**Collins:** Yeah, pretty close. But after a few years in that, I said, "That's not for me."

**Sellers:** Well, that doesn't exactly get you off the ground.

**Collins:** So while I was in Gainesville there — in 1960 I married this little girl who was in the first — one of the two women doctors ever graduated from University of Florida Medical School — and we got married.

**Sellers:** Well, I'm not sure if that shows she got a good education or not.

**Collins:** Now, come on. Don't be nasty now, because this isn't the story yet.

**Sellers:** Okay, I'm teasing.

**Collins:** Now wait a minute, we're going to have to back though. We're going to have to back up to when I did come back to West Virginia out of the service, okay? As I told you, the guy kept saying, "When you going to work?" I got to finish my school. So I went back to school. We had a principal – everybody called him "Pop" Hollingsworth. Of course, being I'd gone halfway around the world and everything, I thought I was the king of the roost and knew more than my teacher did.

**Sellers:** Sure —

**Collins:** Well, maybe not sure [chuckles]. Anyway, a lady by the name of Mrs. Ferguson was my typing teacher. And I don't know what happened. Like I said, I thought I knew more than she did. She and I didn't see eye to eye and I walked out of the class and was going, sneaking out of school. I'd had enough of her, you know. I happened to think — I talked to myself and I'm walking out of the school and I'm walking out towards the front door — "Look, everywhere you've been, you've have to say you haven't been graduated, your schooling has held you up from doing things you want to do." Anyway, Pop Hollingsworth, the principal, saw me and wanted to know, "Why aren't you in class?" and all that kind of — you know, you've been there as well as I have. I told him. He said, "Well, I got a job for you. You can be my assistant for the next month and a half." That's how I got my high school diploma - by being the principal's assistant or aide. Then when I came to Florida and was a mechanic — and anyway, I went to Florida State.

**Sellers:** Did you? Up here?

**Collins:** Graduated in 1963.

**Sellers:** Well, well. Where did you live up here?

**Collins:** I lived out in the country with a friend of my brother-in-law's family.

**Sellers:** Okay, now what happened to your wife in Gainesville?

**Collins:** She was living in Jacksonville at the time, going through her internship. After I went to school there while she was doing her internship there in Jacksonville, then we came to Fort Lauderdale because she was from Fort Lauderdale.

**Sellers:** You've got me curious about you coming up here. What did you study up here?

**Collins:** I had my degree in meteorology.

**Sellers:** Okay. Do you remember any of your professors?

**Collins:** No [laughs].

**Sellers:** Okay, well in that case, we won't go there.

**Collins:** But when we came to Ft. Lauderdale, I got out of the mechanical business and I heard that they needed an automotive teacher here at Northeast High School in Ft. Lauderdale in the Broward County school system. I qualified for the position, both in knowledge and industry-wide training. I applied for the job and I got the job as the first automotive teacher for Broward County school systems. Thirty years later, after being the first automotive teacher, we expanded the system to twenty-three automotive teachers and we had a program for General Motors and Ford training centers here in Ft. Lauderdale schools. I ended up being the assistant supervisor for all industrial education for Broward County Schools.

**Sellers:** Wow, that's quite a hop up from not wanting to be in the coal fields. That's impressive.

**Collins:** Yeah. I retired after thirty years, Broward County school system. I retired in 1993, and as the old saying goes, "If you can retire from the system and live ten years, you beat the system." So I beat the system.

**Sellers:** You beat the system. Well, you're right, that is a different angle on it. You said in your email to me that you still fly from ten to twelve on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

**Collins:** That is correct.

**Sellers:** You mean you get in a plane and — did you take pilot's lessons?

**Collins:** I'm taking pilot's lessons now.

**Sellers:** Okay, so you are doing the flying yourself now.

**Collins:** Yes, ma'am. I fly in a Piper Warrior. It's a single-engine plane that holds four passengers.

**Sellers:** What's the difference in flying yourself, being at the controls?

**Collins:** I'm doing what I want to do.

**Sellers:** And you no longer have to trust or blame the guy at the wheel, right, or at the stick?

**Collins:** Well, you're right there, but I just love doing what I'm doing.

**Sellers:** So you are going to continue flying?

**Collins:** I will continue flying to suit my own personal needs, yes.

**Sellers:** What haven't you told me that you'd like to add to the interview?

**Collins:** Well, I have three kids. I had one girl. The oldest girl, she is an attorney. I have a boy who is an attorney and also a state representative for the state of Wyoming. And my daughter in Cincinnati, the youngest one, she is the Director of Academic Affairs for the University of Cincinnati.

**Sellers:** I would say that you and your family went a far cry from mining in West Virginia.

**Collins:** Yes.

**Sellers:** Wow, that's impressive. Okay, well, let me ask you then again before we turn it off if we've had your permission to record?

**Collins:** Yes.

End