CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: A.W. Breck

INTERVIEWER: Bill Aikman

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Transcription of Interview Number 31D 6 BRECK

A.W. Breck

Interviewed 2 December, 2005

By Bill Aikman

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program interview with Bill Breck. Recorded on the 2 December 2005 in Peterborough, Ontario. Interviewed by Bill Aikman tape one side one.

Bill, could you give us your name and spelling of it?

BRECK: My name is Bill Breck. That's spelled B_R_E_C_K. I confirm that I have signed the interview release form.

INTERVIEWER: Bill, could you give us a bit of background on your life before you actually joined the RCAF?

BRECK: I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba on October 2, 1922. I lived in Winnipeg until I was about six years old. In the summer of 1929, my father got a new job in Toronto. We moved east that summer and I lived in Toronto from then until 1936. In those depression years, my father lost his job, couldn't get another one, and my parents ended up buying a general store in a small village called Burketon in Ontario which is north of Bowmanville. I lived in Burketon from 1936 to 1940. I attended three different high schools. First of all, Oakwood Collegiate in Toronto for one year, Blackstock Continuation School for three years and Bowmanville High School for one year. I graduated from Bowmanville High School in the summer of 1940. I was seventeen years old at the time.

My ambition was to join the air force but you had to be eighteen before they would take you. I got a job in Toronto as an office boy with Confederation Life and waited for my eighteenth birthday to arrive. I didn't start work until 9:00 in the morning. On the morning of my birthday, I went down to the RCAF recruiting centre on Bay Street, which is not far from my work, and put in my application to join the RCAF. I finished that in time to get back to Confederation Life and start work at 9:00 as required. I then waited until the wheels turned. I got notice to report to No. 1 Manning Depot in Toronto on the 14th of December 1940 and started my RCAF wartime career.

At the manning depot at Toronto, we went through the basics of being given uniforms, innoculations, some drill. After about three weeks I was sent to No. 1A Manning Depot in Picton, Ontario, which was an air force station that was just completed. As luck would have it, I and the fellows I was with were retained at Picton for what was called security guard duty. This

was not to fend off attacks from the Germans but simply to provide security for the station which had some aircraft stored in hangars, as well as the aircraft that were flying there. After our tour there, we went to Initial Training School.

The group I was with went to Victoriaville, Quebec in an old monastery. We were the first course in there. That was an interesting experience because I think some of the local inhabitants had never seen English-speaking people before. It was almost as if we came from Mars and landed in Victoriaville. Anyway, we were kept busy and didn't have much time for leisure activities in the town of Victoriaville. Probably just as well. I was fortunate in Victoriaville because when I was at Bowmanville High School I was acquainted with a commercial teacher there by the name of Steve Ainslie. At Victoriaville, lo and behold, the corporal armament instructor was Steve Ainslie. As soon as we saw each other, we recognized the connection. Steve and I used to see each other socially a bit while I was there.

From Victoriaville we were posted to various elementary flying training schools in smaller groups. I happened to go to No. 10 Elementary Flying Training School at a place called Mount Hope, just south of Hamilton. It was the base of the Hamilton Flying Club and wartime buildings had been put up. Nothing had been done to the airfield, really. It was still a grass field but there was construction going on. We had Fleet Finch aircraft there which was a Canadian-built biplane, a very good aircraft. If we made it through EFTS, and not everybody did, some were washed out because of their considered inaptitude to be further trained as pilots.

We then went to No. 6 Service Flying Training School at Dunnville, Ontario which is down near Lake Erie, close to the Grand River. At Dunnville we had an interesting experience because the first aircraft we started training on was the North American Yale. The Yale was not a common aircraft. The story of the Yale is that the French government had placed a contract with North American Aviation in the United States for delivery of so many Yale aircraft. Of course, France fell in 1940. The aircraft couldn't be delivered so they were sold to Canada. The interesting part of the Yale is, of course, being built for France, all of the instrumentation was metric. So the cockpit of the Yale was plastered with conversion charts. If you wanted to know how fast you were going, what your airspeed was, you would look at the airspeed indicator. It would register so many kilometres an hour. Then you'd have to go to a conversion chart and say, that's so many miles an hour. Same with height, same with everything. All the instrumentation was metric.

The Yale was considered to be an easier aircraft. That's why we started on it. It had a fixed undercarriage and had a variable pitch propeller and was considered easier to fly than the Harvard. Once you'd mastered the challenge of flying a Yale with the metric instrumentation, the Harvard seemed easier even though the Harvard, as an aircraft, was more complicated, having a retractable undercarriage and a constant speed propeller and some other refinements. Most of our time there was spent flying Harvards [Yales] and some other instruction, of course, and some solo. We went through, before graduation, a navigation test which involved some flying under hood, blind flying, and finally a wings test. If we passed the wings test we, in effect, graduated.

INTERVIEWER: What exactly is a wings test?

BRECK: This was the test given by one of the instructors or a visiting person to run you through all the basics of flying: take-off, climbing, flying straight and level, aerobatics, different forms of aerobatics, forced landing – simulated, of course – and finally the landing. You would be assessed on all these various aspects of flying to ensure that you were competent and warranted the award of wings.

INTERVIEWER: So it was in a solo flight?

BRECK: No, no. This was with a….

INTERVIEWER: An instructor in a two-seater?

BRECK: Yes, he was.

INTERVIEWER: That would have been in a Harvard then?

BRECK: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so we have you with your wings?

BRECK: Then the powers that be made a decision as to what they were going to do with these new graduates. Some were selected to go to instructor's school to serve as flying instructors in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Others were sent overseas. I was posted to Halifax as one of the majority of the course that were going overseas. I was in Halifax for – I've forgotten exactly how long – ten days, two weeks, something like that.

One day was told we were going on a convoy to Britain. As it turned out, I and five other fellows were taken to a merchant ship of 6000 or 7000 tons, the MANCHESTER MERCHANT. This was one of about forty-five ships in the convoy that was leaving Halifax early in September 1941. As it turned out, the commodore of the convoy, who was a salty, old retired Royal Navy admiral, had been brought back and pressed into service as the commodore of our convoy. He was on board our ship. We saw very little of him because he was on the bridge practically the whole time, day and night. Anyway, we made it across in about thirteen days. We lost one ship which happened to be the ship behind us. We ran into fog somewhere around mid-Atlantic and the ship behind us was rammed by the one behind it. Punched a hole in it and it sank with, as far as we know, all hands on board. Fortunately, no enemy action. No U-boats.

We pulled into Hollyhead in Wales which is on the east side of the Irish Sea. It's a part of Wales that sticks out into the Irish Sea. We had no sooner tied up than they opened the hatches and lo and behold, in the forward hold were boxes marked TNT. We had a comment about that. We said how lucky we were that there was no U-boat activity on our way across. If there had been, we would have been blown to smithereens. Which is perhaps not a bad thing if the alternative is ending up in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. From there we were six, I guess, that were put on the train, to London. Stayed overnight in London at a hotel that was arranged for us and got a train the next morning for Bournemouth which is on the south coast of England. [It] was called

No. 3 Personnel Reception Centre, which was the place where RCAF people arriving from Canada went to await posting to a unit overseas. I spent a couple of weeks in Bournemouth and was posted to 23 Operational Training Unit which is at a place called Pershore in Worcestershire in England where they had Wellington aircraft. The Wellington is a twin-engined bomber. I spent some weeks there learning to fly the Wellington aircraft.

INTERVIEWER: Now this is multiple engine aircraft?

BRECK: This is twin-engined, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Was this your first experience on a twin-engined aircraft?

BRECK: Yes it was.

INTERVIEWER: Until then it had been all single?

BRECK: Yes. The expectation of all of us who had trained on single-engined aircraft in Canada was that we would go on to single-engined aircraft in Britain or elsewhere. But obviously there was a need for twin-engined bomber pilots. So I was one of the ones that, even though I had trained on singles, ended up on Wellingtons. I went through the OTU course and was posted in December 1941 to No. 12 Squadron which was a Royal Air Force Wellington squadron equipped with the Wellington II, which was a version with two Rolls Royce Merlin engines. I was checked out on the Wellington II.

The routine in those days was that, as a new pilot to the squadron, you went on what were called 'second dickie' trips. You went as the second pilot to an experienced pilot, a captain, to learn the ropes. See how it was done without actually being put in the position of actually having to act as captain of an aircraft on a bombing trip. Unfortunately, I had an accident at that time. I was second pilot. We had been out over enemy territory. The strange rule that was in effect then was that if you couldn't see your target, you didn't drop your bombs. It was ten-tenths cloud over the target. We came back with our bombs still on. I happened to be flying the aircraft at the time and I started to have a problem. I could see a problem with the glycol temperature in one of the engines fluctuating quite a bit. We had a glycol leak. Glycol was the coolant in a liquid-cooled engine. The drill was to shut the engine down and feather the propeller, which I did.

The captain was in the back of the aircraft. I called him forward and told him what had happened. He decided to take over the aircraft. We were losing height because we still had our bombs on. We decided to jettison our bombs which we did somewhere in England, out in the open. The aircraft would still not maintain height. The captain ordered us to take up crash positions. We made Mayday calls. The radios were terrible in those days and so we were essentially on our own. The skipper did the best job he could to try to find an airfield and didn't find one. Obviously decided to put it down in a field. The rest of us had taken up crash positions. The aircraft ended up, I believe, stalling and hitting the ground and cartwheeling such that it broke in two. The front end ended up going in the opposite direction from the back end. Two of us survived the crash. The rear-gunner who was thrown out of his turret, and I. As luck

would have it, we landed near a balloon station which perhaps the captain had his eye on. The balloon station had hangars so it looked like an airfield but there were no runways. We surmised that at the last minute he saw that there were no runways and did the best he could in very difficult circumstances. The rear-gunner and I were both injured and ended up in hospital. As a result of that, my medical category was lowered.

When I recovered, I was posted to an air gunners school in Lancastershire as a staff pilot. There we had Defiants which had been taken off operations because of a very high loss rate. The Defiant was built by Boulton-Paul and had a pilot and a gunner in a turret behind the pilot. It was thought that the design would fool the Germans but they soon got on to it. As I said, they were taken off operations. The other aircraft that was there was a Lysander which was built as an army co-operation aircraft with a high wing and a system of slots and slats which allowed it to come down at very low speed and land on short runways or in fields.

The Defiants were used to train the air gunners. The staff pilot would fly the aircraft and the gunner under training would be in the turret. You'd take off and fly up and formate on a drogue which was towed by a Lysander. The gunner would fire off his rounds which had a colored tip. When a certain number of gunners had fired against the drogue, the Lysander would drop the drogue. The holes would be counted by color and the mark of the gunner would be passed back to the station. That was how the gunners were assessed. I spent about six months at the air gunners school at a place called Walney Island near Barrow-in-Furness in Lancastershire.

I was then posted in December 1942, I believe it was, to No. 55 Operational Training Unit at a place called Annan in Dumfriesshire in Scotland, just over the border from England. They were equipped with Hurricane aircraft. I went through the operational training course on the Hurricane. Finished that in February or March 1943 and was posted to 198 Squadron which was a Royal Air Force squadron equipped with Typhoons. The Typhoon had entered squadron service in 1942. We had the early version of the Typhoon, a couple of Typhoon IAs which was equipped with twelve .303 machine-guns, six in each wing. The aircraft used for operations were IBs which had four 20mm cannon, two in each wing. The drill was to be checked out in the IA, do your first solo in the IA and then, after so many hours, switch over to the IB and eventually go on operations.

INTERVIEWER: The Typhoon at that time was having some technical problems. You were in the Typhoon stream fairly early on?

BRECK: Yes, fairly early. There were two problems that the Typhoon had in those days. The first was an engine problem and the second was an airframe problem. In terms of the engines, the engine was a Napier Sabre engine which was an unusual design. It had an H-configuration with six cyclinders opposing six above and six below, two crank shafts that were joined together at the propeller. It had, instead of the regular pocket valves, it had sleeve valves. There was a problem with the sleeve valves in that the metal was not the best for the purpose. There were a lot of engine failures due to the sleeve valves to the point where the Air Ministry got Bristol, who made a radial engine with sleeve valves, they got Bristol to help Napier correct the sleeve valve problem on the Sabre engine, which they did eventually.

The fuselage problem was with the tail. Embarrassingly, on some aircraft, the tail came off. Of course, complete control was lost and the aircraft would pitch up or down, whatever it wanted to do. That problem was eventually corrected by putting small straps of metal between the end of the fuselage and the tail assembly. That corrected the tail problem. Another unusual feature of the Typhoon was that it had two car-type doors on the sides of the cockpit. The canopy opened up, and to get in and out of the aircraft you opened the door that actually had windows that wound up and down like the windows on a car. It wasn't a very satisfactory design, partly because, if you wanted to bail out, one of the things you had to do was to cross your arms and pull a cable on either side which pulled the pins out of the doors. The doors would fly off along with the canopy above and you could then go over the side. That was fortunately replaced by a single canopy that slid back and forth as with other contemporary aircraft such as the Mustang.

INTERVIEWER: Bill, how did it feel then about getting on to the Typhoons so early in their developmental phase?

BRECK: There really wasn't a choice. Thinking about it, the choice was really made in terms of the operational training unit to which you went. There would be fighter OTUs equipped with Hurricanes and fighter OTUs equipped with Spitfires. Really, the decision as to which operational training unit you went determined what would happen to you when you left there. In terms of the Hurricane OTU, you would go on to either Hurricanes or Typhoons. In my case, of course, it was the Typhoon about which I knew nothing. I ended up on a Typhoon squadron. I had never seen one before. I thought it was an enormous beast and I wondered about being able to fly it, but other fellows could so eventually I managed to do that. But it was a somewhat formidable aircraft. There really was no choice. You couldn't say, "Well now I've seen a Typhoon. I don't like it. I'd rather fly a Spitfire." That was just not on. You'd be told in pretty clear terms that you were going to stay where you went.

One other thing about the Typhoon which I thought might be interesting was the first solo. I did my first solo at Manston in Kent which at the time was a grass field. No runways. This first solo was on a IA, of course, which had a three-blade propeller with a fourteen-foot diameter. The Napier Sabre was a very powerful engine which produced 2200 horsepower. There was a lot of torque associated with the propeller. So the first solo in a Typhoon was an interesting experience because you'd been checked out on the cockpit, all the instruments and controls and everything. Somebody says, "Get in and away you go on your first solo. Good luck." And good luck was needed because it was akin to having a tiger by the tail. The engine was about twice as powerful as an engine in the Hurricane. You'd strap yourself in and start up and off you'd go. If you were unlucky, from the dispersal you would have to taxi, in a wind, across to the other side of the airfield to get ready for takeoff. The brakes on the Typhoon were pneumatic. In other words, they were operated by compressed air. If you used your brakes too much, you'd run out of air. So, sometimes, one of the things you'd have to do was to stop in your taxiing to the takeoff point, turn into the wind, put on the brakes and run up to generate compressed air so the brakes would start to work again. Unfortunately, that happened to me on my first solo. That was one problem

Next problem was, I got it to the takeoff point and headed into the wind and was all set to go. I

was not ready for the amount of torque there was so the aircraft was taking off in a sort of a curve, bouncing across this grass field. I was very conscious of the fact that this great, huge propeller was out front. The last thing I wanted was for it to dig into the ground so I kept the tail down lower to the ground than I should have. To the point where the aircraft sort of staggered off the ground. Thanks to the powerful engine, I stayed in the air, but it was quite an experience. It was always something to watch on the squadron when someone was doing their first solo. The fellows would turn out and watch how the new boy got along taking off for the first time in a Typhoon.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting. So you then became operational in the Typhoon. What sort of operations did you do?

BRECK: I was thinking earlier that what I should have said at the outset about Typhoons was that there were really three different chapters. There's the Typhoon fighters, that is the clean Typhoon. There's the Typhoon fighter-bomber with bomb racks on. Then there's Typhoons that carried rockets. So there's three different kinds of operations associated with Typhoons. 198 Squadron, while I was on it, was clean. That is, there were no rocket-rails or bomb-racks attached to the aircraft. At that time – this is in 1943 – there was very little German activity over Britain. So, from an air force point of view, there were these fighter squadrons that were, in a sense, sitting around. It was decided to conduct offensive operations. One of the things we did was to fly across the English Channel and attack targets of opportunity in occupied France or Belgium or the Netherlands. Often this involved shipping. The German convoys used to leave places like the port of Hamburg and go up around Denmark, come down the west side of Denmark and go into the Dutch islands and try to stay away from any attacks by weaving their way between the Dutch islands. We would attack them using our four 20mm cannon. We actually sank a freighter one day, simply with cannon fire. Unfortunately, the Germans were up to us and as part of a convoy they would have flakships. Often there were quite a few flakships interspersed in the convoy. As you were attacking the convoy, you'd be met with a fair amount of flak. A number of fellows were either shot down or had their aircraft damaged by flak in these attacks.

INTERVIEWER: The Typhoon was a pretty solid airplane, I gather, and quite often withstood a lot of hits?

BRECK: It would take a lot of punishment. I was hit three trips in a row in this kind of thing. Fortunately, none of them was critical to the flyability of the aircraft.

INTERVIEWER: How did you find, then, the Typhoon as a clean airplane and in a fighter role?

BRECK: It was a good aircraft once some of the initial problems were overcome, and once one got comfortable with the aircraft, it was a very good aircraft, I think. One of the interesting things that I think about is… A well-known Typhoon pilot during the war was a man named Baldwin, Johnny Baldwin. I knew Johnny as a Flying Officer at Manston in early 1943. He ended up with having a very distinguished career with the air force. He finished the war as a Group Captain. He was either a flight commander or the CO of a Typhoon squadron, I've

forgotten the number, which was the first to be equipped with long-range tanks. They were stationed in the south of England. They used to fly across the Channel into parts of occupied France that hadn't been entered before by Allied fighter aircraft. There were fighter bases, training bases, and so on, in this part of France that were not expecting to see any Allied fighters. Lo and behold, the Typhoons with long-range tanks were able to get into that far into France, picked off a number of German aircraft that were just not expecting to encounter Allied aircraft. Some of them built up pretty good scores and Baldwin was probably the leader of that. He lost two or three COs in the course of 1943 and Johnny Baldwin came to us as our CO on 198 Squadron in September, I believe it was, of 1943. He was an excellent leader, Baldwin.

INTERVIEWER: What age would he have been? Having been a Flying Officer just earlier that year, he must have moved up very quickly?

BRECK: Early twenties. When I graduated from SFTS, when I got my wings, I was fortunate because we were told early on that about a third of us would be commissioned upon graduation, depending upon the overall mark we had, that is both ground school and flying. I was fortunate enough to be in the top third upon graduation. So I was commissioned on 20 August 1941. The RCAF had an automatic promotion system whereby you were promoted to Flying Officer in one year and Flight Lieutenant in two years after commission. So, in August of 1943, I was a Flight Lieutenant. This created a bit of a problem on the squadron because the normal structure was the CO was a Squadron Leader. There would be two flight commanders who were Flight Lieutenants and the rest of the rest of the pilots would be Flying Officers, Pilot Officers, Flight Sergeants, Sergeants, whatever. Well, having surplus Flight Lieutenants around was a bit of a problem because in a way, the Flight Lieutenant should have been a flight commander. On the other hand, his job was just to be one of the squadron pilots with no command.

INTERVIEWER: Bearing in mind that this was a British squadron you were on.

BRECK: Yes. In December, 1943, I was posted from the squadron, partly because of this Flight Lieutenant problem. Partly because they were looking for flying instructors who had operational experience. I was posted to a flying instructors' school at a place called Upavon in Wiltshire. It was back to twin-engines again. They had Oxfords, Airspeed Oxfords there. So I took a flying instructor's course there. Graduated and was posted to an advanced flying unit.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when you went to this advanced flying school?

BRECK: Twenty-one years old. They had Blenheims and Oxfords. It was an advanced flying unit that was training people to go on aircraft like Mosquitoes and Beaufighters. We had the standard Oxford and three types of Blenheim. The old short-nosed Blenheim, it was called, the Blenheim I. The Blenheim IV which was like the Canadian Bolingbroke, and the Blenheim V which was an improved version of the IV with different engines. I was made a flight commander at 12 Pilot Advanced Flying Unit near Grantham in Lincolnshire in England. Spent most of my time instructing in the air. The flight commander's job was not an onerous one. We had students going through.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of the Blenheim, below [?] the Canadian Bolingbroke version?

BRECK: Well, actually the nicest was the Blenheim I, the original short-nosed Blenheim, which was almost like a fighter. Even though the engines were not as powerful as those in some of the later marks, because it didn't have much on it or in it, it was a lovely aircraft to fly. But technically they started loading it up with things, so some of these aircraft got heavier and heavier and heavier, not less.

INTERVIEWER: What was the Blenheim's role at that point?

BRECK: The Blenheim I was really a prewar aircraft that went out of squadron service, if not before the war, certainly early in the war. The Blenheim IV was by 2 Group of the Royal Air Force. They were called a medium bomber and the idea was that they would be able to carry out attacks against the enemy at a fairly good speed, a fairly good clip, and so be able to stay out of trouble. Unfortunately, that didn't work out. The losses in 2 Group were terrible. They lost an awful lot of aircraft and people. It was given up as a bad job, really. The Blenheim IVs and Vs were relegated to training roles for the rest of the war.

INTERVIEWER: Were they replaced by the Mosquito? Is that the aircraft that they replaced?

BRECK: Yeah, Mosquitoes. The Beaufighter was sort of an interim replacement but the Mosquito was the most successful of the twin-engined light bomber aircraft.

END OF SIDE ONE

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program interview with Bill Breck Tape one, side two.

Bill, could you continue with your story about the advanced flying school?

BRECK: My days at the advanced flying unit came to an end when I was posted back to Canada in October 1944 for a month's leave. There was a rule, that if you'd done a tour of operations and done six months instructing, or had spent three years overseas, you qualified for a month's leave in Canada. I came home on the old ACQUITANIA, which was a troopship, and had a months leave in Canada. I was posted to Lachine outside Montreal at the end of my leave and was offered my discharge there, there being a surplus of pilots in the RCAF at the time. I quite honestly didn't….

INTERVIEWER: This was after the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan had been in play for several years?

BRECK: Yeah. And very successful and a great Canadian contribution to the war effort. Quite frankly, I didn't know what to do. My adult life had been spent in the air force and I didn't know anything else. So rather than take the plunge, I decided to continue on in the air force. [I] was posted back overseas. Again went to Bournemouth. There was a procedure there whereby you were allowed to indicate what you'd like to do. Because of my instructing on Blenheims and Oxfords, I thought that Mosquitoes would be a good choice so I put that down as my first choice. Unfortunately, the person who interviewed me said, "Oh, I see you've flown Typhoons. We need Typhoon pilots so you're going to a Typhoon squadron."

INTERVIEWER: So it was back to Typhoons?

BRECK: It was back to Typhoons. I was posted to 83 Group Support Unit at a place called Dunsfold which is in the south of England to get checked out on a Typhoon again. They were terrible, old beat-up Typhoons that nobody else wanted there. Anyway, I managed to survive that and was posted to 143 Wing, 439 Squadron, which was then stationed at a place called Eindhoven in the Netherlands, in Holland.

INTERVIEWER: This was the first time you had actually flown on a totally Canadian squadron?

BRECK: Yes. There were differences certainly. Much less formality than on RAF squadrons. Generally a more pleasant experience than on RAF squadrons.

INTERVIEWER: How was the food?

BRECK: Terrible. When we were on the continent, our rations came originally from the British Army. The British Army picked off the best of the standard British Army rations and the next best went to the Royal Air Force on the continent and we got what was left over. So we got canned stew, bullied beef, powdered milk and nothing fresh of any kind. So the food was pretty lousy. In addition to that, we got one bottle of Scotch whiskey a month which usually lasted a couple of days. Beer which was brewed in a brewery in Belgium. We always thought there were horses involved in this brewery somehow. It wasn't very good. Life had its pleasures, too. We were comforted by the fact that the war was going well. The troops were advancing. We were continuing to attack the Jerries and felt good about making a contribution to the war effort.

INTERVIEWER: When exactly was this that you joined the Canadian squadron?

BRECK: It was toward the end of January 1945. I was there until July of 1945. There was a bit of problem in getting us out of there because what they had developed after the war ended was a point system for repatriation whereby if you had so many years of service, that counted for so much and so did time overseas and so on. My flight commander, who was a fellow named "Staff" Marlatt, who's now no longer with us, Staff and I became good friends. He was my roommate and he was my flight commander, as I said.

INTERVIEWER: What type of operations did you do with the squadron at that point?

BRECK: Most of our work was so-called interdiction. This was from Eindhoven where the front was pretty static. We carried, normally, two 1000-lb bombs, one under each wing. We would fly across the Rhine and attack, usually, rail lines that were used to bring supplies, troops, whatever, up to the German front. We attacked those by dive-bombing. We would fly over, climbing up to 10,000 or 12,000 feet over the target area and then go into a steep dive, one by one, following the leader and drop our bombs on the target. Sometimes attack targets of opportunity, such as a train that might be steaming along the line. After we'd dropped our bombs we'd circle around, come back and attack with cannon. Attack the engine with cannon. So that would stop some of the train traffic. There'd sometimes be other targets of opportunity. The occasional German aircraft. Two of our fellows each shot down an Me 262 which is a German twin-engined jet fighter which was a lot faster than the Typhoon. Both of which were being flown, presumably, by relatively inexperienced pilots, so they didn't keep a lookout and got shot down.

INTERVIEWER: Really? I understood with 262s, because they were so fast, you waited until they were going back to land and were going slower that you got them. But this was acutally air combat where they were caught in full flight?

BRECK: I don't know, but my guess is that they were doing a reconnaissance flight over the front lines or perhaps over Allied territory to see what was going on. Taking some pictures maybe and not paying a whole lot of attention to what was going on behind.

INTERVIEWER: They paid the price?

BRECK: They paid the price, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Were you in support mainly of Canadian Army formations, units at that time?

BRECK: The British Commonwealth air force organization on the continent, called 2nd Tactical Air Force. It consisted of a number of different wings formed into two groups: 83 Group and 84 Group. 83 Group supported Second British Army and 84 Group supported First Canadian Army. We were in 83 Group so we supported Second British Army and that meant that we were south of the Canadian army, in between the Canadians and the Americans.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do, actually, assignments for them? I'm thinking of cab rank sort of concept. Would you become involved in that type of operation?

BRECK: I didn't personally. I think the cab rank applied mostly in Normandy, when the going was particularly tough in Normandy and the front was moving pretty slowly. The Germans, I guess, had more armour then than they had later on.

INTERVIEWER: So, therefore, it was a time when you were assigned targets rather than going up and waiting to be assigned targets?

BRECK: Yes. One of the interesting problems we had was with the so-called bomb line. There was a Canadian Army intelligence officer on our wing. His job was to keep track of what was happening to the troops on the ground and where the front line was and what was happening there. When we'd go to briefing for an attack on a target, a fixed target, we'd be given what was called a bomb line. This was a line behind which you were not supposed to bomb. Understandably, the troops on the ground found the going easier than expected and instead of stopping and saying "Well, I know those air force guys have a bomb line" and so on, they'd do the obvious and keep going until they met resistance. So we had to be very careful to make sure that we didn't take the bomb line as being absolutely sacred. We had to keep an eye on what was happening on the ground and if possible identify Allied vehicles, troops, whatever, such that we wouldn't make a mistake and bomb them.

INTERVIEWER: It became standard procedure in that period of the war to have a big, white star on the vehicle. Did that help?

BRECK: Yes, it did.

INTERVIEWER: What type of German equipment would you normally go after? You mentioned trains, of course, but in the way of motorized equipment, what would you be going after at that time?

BRECK: Are you thinking of German soldiers, army vehicles? We didn't really get involved in that very much. Our role was nominally close support of the Second British Army but, in actual fact, we did very little of that. Most of our work was interdiction. The one time I recall when we were involved in close support was at the time of the Rhine crossing when the Germans had a lot of guns on the east bank of the Rhine River. The close support role required that as many of those guns as possible be knocked out because the Allies were dropping paratroops and the slow-moving transport aircraft were very vulnerable to flak. But I can't think of any other instance off hand when we were in a real close support role.

INTERVIEWER: Speaking of flak, what was the greatest threat to your squadron and to your operations?

BRECK: My recollection is that if you were at something like 10,000 or 12,000 feet, which we were when we were going to the target, you'd be subjected to heavy flak. This would be 88mm guns. Lower down would be light flak. That would be 40mm, 20mm, that sort of thing. If you were really unlucky, you got both.

INTERVIEWER: To what extent would it really affect your attack? Would it force you to actually back off or could you do it with jinking or something like that?

BRECK: Not really. What you really had to do was carry out your attack and try and ignore the flak and hope for the best. The fellows that I felt sorriest for, really, were the fellows with the rockets because what they had to do was come in at a pretty low level and fly without any G.

That is without any force up or down because that would effect the trajectory of the rockets. So they had to fly, sort of, straight at the target without any movement and release their rockets so that they would, in fact, go where they were aiming. Of course, when they were doing that they were very vulnerable to flak because they're flying in a predictable direction.

INTERVIEWER: The rockets were simply aimed by the aircraft? They went in the direction that the aircraft was going?

BRECK: Yes. Their initial velocity was imparted by the aircraft, whatever speed it was going at. It just occurs to me, the Typhoon used to cruise, straight and level, at what we called zero boost, at 270 miles an hour which was a pretty good clip for an aircraft in those days. The rocket fellows going down in a dive like that would be going 300-325, something like that. So that was the initial velocity of the rocket. Of course, the propellant fired and it accelerated towards the target.

INTERVIEWER: You said that the Canadian wing was actually supporting the British?

BRECK: Second British Army, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Surprising. You would have thought that they'd be supporting the Canadian side logically, but it did not go that way?

BRECK: I read a piece about that. Apparently the powers that be thought that the Canadians were relatively inexperienced in fighting the war so they apparently thought that marrying the Canadian army with the Canadian air force was not a good idea. They were both relatively inexperienced. To prevent that, they apparently decided that [the] RAF would support First Canadian and RCAF would support the British. Now it didn't quite work out exactly that way because a lot of the RAF pilots were actually Canadian. They weren't in RCAF units, they were in RAF units but they were Canadian.

INTERVIEWER: As you were earlier in the war?

BRECK: Yes, that's right. Actually, I'm told, there were more RCAF pilots served on RAF squadrons than served on RCAF squadrons during the war.

INTERVIEWER: There was also a situation, I gather, where if, for example, all the Canadian squadrons were flying bomb-carrying Typhoons while most of the British ones were rocket-carrying?

BRECK: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: If you wanted bombs, you pretty well had to look to the Canadians, and if you wanted rockets, you pretty well had to look to the Brits?

BRECK: That's right. A thought I had about the organization aspect of that. We're all aware of

the fact that there was a Canadian group in Bomber Command, 6 Group, and I think there should have been a Canadian group in 2nd TAF. Had that been the case, there would have been RCAF people in command positions that were denied them because there wasn't an RCAF group in 2nd TAF.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting. Now you were in Eindhoven when you arrived. In early February the front line started to advance as the Rhineland campaign started. Did you stay in Eindhoven for long or did you move forward?

BRECK: We moved forward. I can't tell you exactly when. I can get my logbook, if you like…. We were at Eindhoven, which was called B78, until the 30 March 1945 when we moved across the Rhine to B100 at a place called Goch in Germany. We were there for a short period until the 6th April. Then 439 Squadron was sent to England for practice. We were there for two weeks and when we came back we went to B150 at a place called Celle in Germany. We were there from 22 April 1945 to 29 May.

INTERVIEWER: That's right through to the end of the war then?

BRECK: To the end of the war. After the war ended, we moved up to B166 which was at Flensburg, just below the Danish border. I was there until, I see, the 22 July 1945.

INTERVIEWER: How did you make the moves, actually? What kind of action would there be around moving from one base to the next, particularly in the wartime experience?

BRECK: We would fly the aircraft, of course, from one airfield to another. What we would normally do is we had a parachute bag which was not needed because we sat on our parachutes in the aircraft. So we'd put personal belongings in the parachute bag. There was room in the gun bay in the wing to put the parachute bag and stow it there. We would fly up to the new base and there'd be an advance party that would go up there and open it up. The bulk of the wing or squadron would move by vehicle. There'd be a rear party that would clean up.

INTERVIEWER: Would you have enough vehicles in the squadron to do that or would there be an allotment from air headquarters, something like that?

BRECK: No, I think there were enough on the wing. The idea was that the wings would be mobile, self-contained in terms of vehicles and such, that they could move under their own steam.

INTERVIEWER: Right. By this stage of the war you were moving into facilities where you lived in a barrack of some sort? You didn't live in a tent under most of those conditions? Most of those locations?

BRECK: Yes. Eindhoven had been a Luftwaffe base. We lived in the town, in the city. Actually, where we lived was on the ground floor of a convent. The nuns had conveniently moved upstairs so our mess was downstairs. There was a school beside the convent. We

occupied the rooms in the school. We had a camp kit with a bed roll, and a chair, a bucket, wash basin and that's all canvas which we used there. At B100, I've forgotten exactly what it was like. I think we might have been in tents there. At Celle, we took over a big house near the airfield and again set up our camp cots. When we moved up to Flensburg, we took over a German barracks. It again had been a Luftwaffe base and we took over their barracks.

INTERVIEWER: They were no longer being used by the Luftwaffe?

BRECK: No. They just smelled of German cigarettes.

INTERVIEWER: Back to flying and the operations in that time frame, the winter of '44-'45. How often in a day would you go up?

BRECK: It depended, of course, but—depended on the weather. Depended on what was happening on the ground. Depended on serviceability of the aircraft. Some days you wouldn't fly at all. Some days you'd fly a couple of trips. I would say, the time I was on 439 squadron, two trips a day. Two operational trips.

INTERVIEWER: What would be the normal time for a typical Typhoon operational flight?

BRECK: Something over an hour. An hour ten, an hour twenty. The Typhoon didn't have a long range. We just operated on internal fuel. If memory serves, we had 154 Imperial gallon capacity. We burned about 70 gallons an hour in normal cruising. With takeoff and landing and some reserve, you couldn't stay up more than an hour twenty, an hour and a half at the very most.

INTERVIEWER: Were the airplanes serviceable? Was the serviceability rate of the Typhoon good?

BRECK: It was pretty good.

INTERVIEWER: Particularly by that time in the war?

BRECK: Yes. The bugs had been ironed out of the Typhoon from a design point of view. So it was a good aircraft. One of the interesting things that just occurs to me, talking about fuel. For simplicity of supply, the av gas as it was called, the fuel for aircraft, was 150 octane. This was because one or more of the later marks of Spitfires had a very high-compression engine and needed 150 octane fuel. To simplify the supply of fuel, there were two types of fuel sent to the continent. One was 150 octane for aircraft and the other was about 85 or 90 for ground vehicles. Because there was so much lead in the 150 octane, our instructions were to open up to full bore every fifteen minutes to literally get the lead out. So that used up some fuel, too, which wouldn't have been required if we'd had the lower octane which was all we required.

INTERVIEWER: Did it make a difference in the motor using the high octane?

BRECK: Not noticeably, no.

INTERVIEWER: I'm just going through my thoughts, here. Is there anything else that you'd like to mention on the operational side?

BRECK: No, I don't think so. I can't think of anything else at the moment.

INTERVIEWER: How did the war end for you then? The 8 May time frame?

BRECK: We were grounded a few days before the war ended. It was obvious to those in charge that the Germans were collapsing. We were stood down. We didn't do any flying for a week to ten days, something like that. Until, I guess, everyone came to grips with the fact that the war was over. What do we do now, sort of thing? After a period we started formation flying and trips here and there, that sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER: What had the losses been like in the time you were on the squadron?

BRECK: Not bad.

INTERVIEWER: There was a difference as you got near the end of the war, I presume?

BRECK: Yes. I would say that the loss rate went down as the war came to a conclusion. Mind you, the Germans were still trying. They were successful, unfortunately, sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: At that stage of the war it would have been the ground anti-air rather than the airplanes that would have been your challenge?

BRECK: Yes, that's right. I can remember one occasion in particular. This was just before the end of the war and we were operating up north of the Elbe River where the troops on the ground hadn't reached. I remember being in a formation of four and we attacked a train. Unfortunately there were flak cars on the train and one of our fellows was shot down and killed. He caught fire and…. So they continued to the bitter end.

INTERVIEWER: Once the war was over then, you had to think about coming home, turning in your airplane and coming home. When did you last fly your Typhoon?

BRECK: It would have been sometime in July 1945 because I left the squadron on the 22nd of July 1945.

INTERVIEWER: What happened to you after that?

BRECK: I went to England, back to good old Bournemouth for the third time, stooged around there for a while. My friend, Staff Marlatt, and I were there together. We had to parade once a day, as I recall, but had the rest of the day to ourselves. Bournemouth is a nice town on the Channel. So it was nice summer weather. We got word on one of the parades that we were being moved and we thought, "Ah, we're going home at last," only to find out that we were being

moved to Torquay in Devon, farther down the coast. We stooged around there for a while and finally got word that we were going home.

INTERVIEWER: When did you actually get back to Canada?

BRECK: It was September 1945.

INTERVIEWER: And a good feeling, I should think?

BRECK: Yes. My parents were living in Ottawa at the time and my brother was there so it was family reunion time.

INTERVIEWER: Just in conclusion to the interview, I understand that there is a particular story that would be worth telling. Would you like to give us your perspectives on things?

BRECK: Yes, thank you. I want to speak about a friend that I made by the name of Harold Freeman. Harold and I became friends on 198 Squadron. There was a bit of a connection between us because I was born in Winnipeg and Harold Freeman enlisted in Winnipeg.

INTERVIEWER: So he was a Canadian RCAF pilot?

BRECK: Yes. From Manitoba. Harold had been an instructor at No. 6 SFTS at Dunnville where I went through as a student so there was sort of two connections between us. I left 198 Squadron in December 1943 and Harold Freeman stayed on. 198 Squadron was equipped with rocket rails. Harold Freeman was killed on 24 May 1944 in an attack on enemy positions in France. I'd like to read from a book called *Typhoon Pilot* written by Desmond Scott, whose a New Zealander, who was a Group Captain at the end of the war, was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, was made an officer of the Order of the British Empire and was awarded the DFC and Bar. In his book *Typhoon Pilot*, here's what Desmond Scott has to say about Harold Freeman.

"A classic and heroic example of one such attack was by four of our aircraft on a radar station at Cap de la Hague, Jobourg, on 24 May." That's 1944. "This mission was led by Squadron Leader Niblett of 198 Squadron who was killed a week later while attacking a similar target at Dieppe. His report read, 32x60lb rockets and cannons were fired. One missing aircraft seen to crash at base of installation. Flight Sergeant Vallilee crashed on target. A German soldier who saw this attack and was captured some months later was so impressed that he insisted on recounting it to his interrogators. Three Typhoons came in from the valley flying very low. The second aircraft received direct hit from 37mm flak which practically shot off the tail. The pilot, however, managed to keep some sort of control and continued on straight at the target. He dived below the level of the radar structure, fired his rockets into it and then tried at the last moment tried to clear it. The third aircraft, in trying to avoid the damaged Typhoon, touched the latter's fuselage and both crashed into the installation. This radar site was never again serviceable. Of the cables leading up to the target, twenty-three out of the twenty-eight major leads were severed. On the strenght of our own evidence" – this is Scott writing – "I later recommended the young pilot of

the damaged Typhoon, Flying Officer Harold Freeman of the Royal Canadian Air Force, for a postumous Victoria Cross but to no avail. He had carried out many dangerous operations and when you appreciate that anyone of them could have been a major episode in the life of any soldier or sailor, or many airman, too, for that matter, I consider my bitterness over this denial fully justified. As his Group Captain, he will always remain to me Flying Officer Freeman, VC, Royal Canadian Air Force."

INTERVIEWER: Interview with Bill Breck on 2 December 2005. Interview ends.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS