

Lancaster County Historical Society
Oral History Project

Interviewee: Jessie and Dr Howard Eckhart

Interviewer: Bev Newton

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Bev: My name is Beverly Newton, and today we're interviewing Howard and Jessie Eckart.

Howard: Eckhart.

Bev: Eckhart, excuse me.

Howard: There are Eckart's and there are Eckhart's. Eckart is German, and Eckhart is Swiss.

Bev: Jessie, let me start with you. You were a civilian flight trainer?

Jessie: Yes, civilian flight instructor. And my father he's long gone. He's the one you should be interviewing. He started the first airport on the Manheim Pike in 1927.

Bev: And what was his name?

Jessie: Jesse Paul Jones. And he later was the first manager of the newer airport out on the Lititz Pike. The airport was grass and that's the way airports were. There weren't too many airports when he started the airport. I grew up as an "airport kid".

Bev: Did he teach you how to fly?

Jessie: Yes, he did. I soloed on my sixteenth birthday in 1940.

Bev: Was that, that was in a single engine?

Jessie: Oh, yes. I mostly flew single engine and instructed in single engine, only primary. I'll tell you a story. When World War II first started; I have an older sister Helen. They sent her a telegram requesting that she join this WAFS. You had to be 21, and I had every qualification and then some to join but I was only 18. So, I sent them a telegram back and said my sister wasn't interested in coming but I sure was and I was sure they would waiver my age. They sent back a message, "Well we're going to start a training program and we'd like to employ you as a flight instructor." And I said, "Well I'm not coming there to be your flight instructor, I'll stay home and be a flight instructor."

Bev: And that's what you did. How old were you?

Jessie: Eighteen. I quit college after the first year because the war had started. I was at Penn State, and then I came home to my father's airport and got my ratings and went to work. First I worked for his navy program, and then later I went to Carlisle for an army program. What they did, the navy or the army would send groups of young men. They had a pile up of people wanting to go in the service as pilots and they would send them to these various colleges and there they would get their ground school training and they would come to the local airports and learn to fly. It wasn't unique to Lancaster. They were at most small colleges all over the United States. We flew small airplanes like Yellow Crafts and cubs. Later on, they started to use N3Ns and Stearmans. What basically you did, you taught the fellows to fly. It was equivalent to having a pilot's license, but because of the equivalent, because of WWII, there were restrictions on travel. So, therefore, they didn't have them cross-country. Other than that, they were qualified, private pilots really.

Bev: How many, this was male? All male?

Jessie: Yes

Bev: How many men did you have in each class?

Jessie: Well, each class in the navy, which was a little better program, we had five students at a time. In the army, there was ten, but then it was a whole different program.

Bev: How long was each school?

Jessie: About three months they would be at the college. I really don't remember. It seemed you flew them a lot for a month or two, and then they were gone.

Bev: Howard, you were in the navy in submarines?

Howard: Yes.

Bev: When did you join?

Howard: I was seventeen years of age. I started F & M at age 16, and went there about a year and two months and everybody was gone. By then they closed the enlisted programs, so I went volunteer for the draft board out in Ephrata. I remember the guy in charge of it, he said "Stay in college, we'll let you there". I said, "No I don't want to go". So I volunteered and went to boot camp O-6 in New York. That was twelve weeks. Then I went to what was called "radio material school", which was radar, sound, etc. I finished that in a year. Then I spent six months out on Treasure Island in California. From there, there were four hundred thirty men in my class, and there were 34 of us who volunteered for submarines. You had to fight to get on a submarine. There were 34 of us who volunteered for submarines; they took two. I was one of them. Then we were transferred to New London, Connecticut, and I spent a month in submarine school. Then I was assigned to new construction which was the USS Fleming, SS 324, and I rode it down a ways and about three months, about a month and a half until it was finished, and the

captain, Bill Hazard, and I were the first two people assigned to it. Then we went to sea for about two weeks, on our shakedown, then went down the east coast of the United States. The submarine ahead of us was sunk by an Air Force B-25, so we went down the east coast of the United States, the same as we operated off the coast of Japan. On the surface, only at night and so on, and we went through the Panama Canal and out to Honolulu and from there on we went on out and onto the northern side of the Philippines to the island of Luzon which is the largest island in the Philippines.

We operated off a place called Cebu Bay and on Christmas Day, 1944 we sank our first. The navy had broken the Japanese radio code before the war started. People didn't know this and the Japs didn't know it. So we would get orders; so and so is going so and so. So we were ordered to intercept. There was a 15,000 ton troop transport with 5,000 Jap troops aboard heading for Mineneo, the day before McArthur reinvaded the Philippines, and we intercepted and they had three destroyer escorts. We went in under the three destroyers, came up to periscope depth, and fired six torpedoes. They all hit. Of course, the three destroyers are on us right now because those torpedoes left a wake, they just followed the wake to where it stops and there we are. We were depth charged for something like ten hours. The way we finally got out of that, we lost the periscope, we lost some decking, and so on, and the way we finally got out of that, Bill Hazard was pretty sharp. He put a CO₂ bottle in a torpedo tube, opened it, and fired it out and backed away from it. They really depth charged that thing as we got away. So then we went back to Cebu.

Then there was a place called Lembok Straits. It was eight miles wide and was about twenty miles through it, and there was a current through it, because the Indian Ocean is lower than the Java Sea. I think a submarine went through there every night and Japanese fishing boats went back and forth, in fact, we sank a boat in there. We'd go through there and head for Australia. When we'd come into Australia, we'd tie up at the dock; we were all ready to go. We'd have our sea bags packed, we'd leave the submarine bag and baggage, and the first thing you had was Australian beer, which was delicious. We had sandwiches, and apples, fruit, that we hadn't had, and mail, and payday. Then they'd load us in buses and haul us downtown and put us up at the finest hotel in the whole town, all expenses paid, for three weeks. Then we'd go back out again for patrol runs.

Bev: Do you have any pictures from when you were in?

Howard: I have tape of a lot of this stuff.

Bev: And you were saying something about Java?

Howard: Java, we backed into. The Java Sea. South of the Java Sea in Surabaya, the capital of Java. The channel in there is about ten miles long and is not deep enough for us to dive or wasn't deep enough for us to turn around, so we backed in and fired six torpedoes and beat it out of there. We sank three ships tied up at the dock.

Jessie: Howard, maybe Bev would like to know about the end of the 1980s, when they sank your submarine?

Howard: I got a phone call from Smokey Roberts one night. You know who he is? The diver here in town. Smokey called and says, "Howard, I understand you were on board a submarine." I said yes. He says, "You know they're sinking one down off the coast of Maryland." I said, "Yes, It's the one I was aboard." "OH," he says, "Well, let's go!" So we went down.

Jessie: First you went to Baltimore.

Howard: Went to Baltimore to see it. The navy demolition crews had no idea how to do it, so I showed them where to put the charges where it would sink quick. And then we went down for the sinking and the, it was the Maryland Department of Fish and Game or something like that.

Jessie: And what was the city? Ocean

Howard: Ocean City, Maryland. And so we all stood on the beach as they towed it by, going by, taking it nine miles out to sink it. Then we got on board a party boat, very nice with all the food and drink and what-have-you aboard, and there were 26 or 28 of the original crew members on that one.

Jessie: the Captain.

Howard: And Captain Bill Hazard, and so on.

Jessie: You have a tape of that.

Howard: Yes, we went out we circled it, backed away about a mile, and they sank it. I have a tape of that. But when it sank, we all stood there and cried.

Bev: When did you guys meet? Was the war still going on?

Jessie: After World War II, when he came back to college and I was instructing at the local airport.

Bev: You're a doctor now Howard? What (kind of practice, specialty)?

Howard: Oral surgeon. Maxiofacial, dentist oral surgeon. I did that for 38 years. My son took my practice. I got six of them in it. Conestoga Oral Maxiofacial Surgery Group. Good bunch of guys.

Bev (to Jessie): What did your dad think of you being an instructor?

Jessie: We were raised at the airport. My two sisters and I had to solo before we could learn to drive the car. I'd rather fly than drive any day. Dad really enjoyed us as people, not just as daughters. He taught us how to hunt. He taught us to do lots of very interesting things. I never for a minute minded that I was a girl in a man's world. I think the important thing is, if you have the respect of the men, that's all you need. If you have the respect of anybody you know, you're never one of the boys, you never try to be.

Bev: So you went out hunting for deer ?

Jessie: Yes! Small game.

Bev: So the war ended, you got married. How many kids do you have?

Howard: We have three sons. An older son and twins, identical twin sons.

Bev: Did any of them go in the military?

Howard: No.

Bev: So Jessie, You were flying, did you go cross-country?

Jessie: Yes. I ferried a few airplanes for Piper while I was studying to get my ratings. That was fun, I enjoyed that. But then we came home again to get back to work. The most wonderful time I had was between the time I was sixteen and eighteen. You couldn't get a license back then and you can now at seventeen. But you then had to wait until you were eighteen. So I had about 450 hours by the time I was eighteen and then I went lots of cross-country. Actually, all over Pennsylvania and my dad paid for the gas and whenever there was a free airplane I was in it.

Bev: What's the furthest you flew?

Jessie: Oh I guess by myself, was probably out to Kansas. But that was hard. After you get the airplane out there then you have to ride back on the train or the bus. Sometimes they didn't pay you much, and so you think, well I'll just sit up on this train for two days and that way I'll save some money.

Bev: What did your sister end up doing then?

Jessie: My sister Helen was also a flight instructor. My sister Carolyn came along at an unfortunate time. When she was sixteen, the war had just started and all the airplanes were busy. All the instructors were busy and although she did learn to fly she had difficulty getting it all together and she wouldn't go up and hit somebody on the head and say, "It's my turn!"

Bev (to Howard): In your service in submarines, how did you stay in contact with family? Did you get mail or anything like that?

Howard: When you hit port, a number of things happened. Payday and mail were two of them. You got a pack of mail at whatever port you came into. Our home base was Perth, Australia, which is southwest Australia; the mail would show up there.

When you hit port we'd have three weeks and they put us up in the finest hotel in town. Some sea captain brought a couple rabbits to Australia years ago, just like our cottontails there are no natural enemies. And it got so bad, the farmers actually built fences and buried them in

the ground to keep the rabbits from their crops. When the submarines were in port, in Perth, the farmers requested us to come shoot rabbits. We'd do it with a .30 caliber semi-automatic rifle. I must have shot, on one day I must have shot 60 rabbits. I've never seen so many rabbits in my life.

Bev: Did you have rabbit stew then?

Howard: No. We just left them lay. We shot one kangaroo.

Bev: Everyone had kangaroo stew.

Howard: The tail. Only the tail.

Bev: I've heard about the kangaroos in Australia.

Howard: Well, there are two kinds. The wallabies and kangaroos. The wallabies are just about this big (about three feet), and kangaroos are that big (about five feet). And the wallabies are a small kangaroo.

Bev: When you came back to the States, what did you do?

Howard: I went back to F & M.

Bev: With the G.I. Bill?

Howard: Yes. The G.I. Bill paid for all my education except the last year of dental school. They did that by the months. I had four years. Well, if you divide that by 4 times 9 is 36, I had to go 48. A term was nine months. So I actually got about seven years out of that or eight. Seven years on the G.I. Bill.

Bev: When you came out of the service, were you still on active service?

Howard: I stayed in the reserves for a while. And the reason I did that was because I went down to the Philadelphia Navy Yard once a month, and I got paid x number of dollars.

Jessie: That was when you were in dental school.

Howard: That was when I was in dental school. But that backfired on me. I guess this was my sophomore year, I went home for the weekend, and there were orders to report aboard the USS Dogface, in London for active duty. Sheessch! So, the way I got out of that, I applied for a commission. At that time, I was a chief petty officer. I applied for a commission, and that came through a couple weeks before I was supposed to report and that cancelled those orders.

Bev: Was that submarines?

Howard: No. That would be the dental corp.

Bev: Are you in any of the veterans' organizations? Like the V (VFW), or Legion?

Howard: I'm a member of the VA.

Jessie: We belong to the VFW in Millersville.

Howard: VFW in Millersville.

Jessie: And back years ago there was a very active Ephrata Legion and we belonged to that. But, and he is in the Submarine ..

Howard: Submarine Veteran's of World War II. They have a meeting every five years. And we've been going to that. The last one was done in Dallas wasn't it?

Jessie: No, it was going to be in Dallas. The last one was in Reno.

Howard: Reno. And usually quite a number of guys show up.

Bev: You say you have a lot of photographs from when you were in the service.

Howard: I have tapes. I got a bunch of photographs. A whole scrapbook full of photographs.

Jessie: Yes, it would be available for copies.

Bev(to Jessie): Do you have any photographs, Jessie, of the airport?

Jessie: Yes, some.

Howard: She has ninety some scrapbooks.

Jessie: They aren't the kind you want. They're a mixture of airplanes and people and kids. We have three sons, Howie is 49, Michael and David just 48, and they're the identical twins. They all have learned to fly by their grandfather. Michael is the oral surgeon in Lancaster. Howie sells an insurance program, and he's in Lancaster. David is in investments and he lives around Pottstown. So they all had their pilot licenses and Howie has his ATP which is airport transport.

Howard: Air Transport Pilot

Jessie: And that's the highest you can get.

Howard: He flew for Eastern until they went broke.

Jessie: And Howard and I both have many ratings. We have single and multi-engine and flight instructor ratings, and instrument rating.

Bev: Do you guys have a plane?

Jessie: For years, first we flew a Taylor Craft when we were first married. And then of course with schooling and so on we didn't have a plane for a few years.

Howard: We couldn't afford the fifteen-dollar a month hangar rent.

Jessie: Yes. And so we flew my brother-in-law's Tri-Placer and then Howard got a beautiful little single-engine Comanche. The kids were getting pretty big - that was four seat, we put the three kids in the back and us up front. When we outgrew that, we got a small twin by the name of Apache. That had five seats and it was just right. So then everybody, we had that airplane for seventeen years. Then we decided that we outgrew that, so then we got an Aztec which has six seats and more horsepower, and can carry more.

Howard: It was 195 miles per hour. Was fully instrumented.

Jessie: In the meantime

Howard: It has a GPS in it.

Jessie: In the meantime, I was flying almost every day with my father and he had various airplanes like the Luscome, and then the Pacer and so and they were all "tail-draggers". This is the old fashioned airplane, that when you look at it the tail's on the ground all the modern airplanes. So he always kept those and I flew them a lot. And even when Howard he mostly flew that one, and I would fly the single engine Luscome that we had. And then recently I had a Tri-Pacer I had to let that wonderful Luscome go because I also wanted room in it for four people so the Tri-Pacer will accommodate that while the Luscome was just room for two people. And the baggage.

Bev: Do you know anything about there's a couple people were telling me that they had observers in the area. Observer towers

Jessie: Yes.

Bev: One in Millersville

Jessie: And there was one in Neffsville. Also, they moved the one that was in Neffsville. First of all they had it at the airport. And what they did, any airport, airplane that flew over then they would go and call and say about the airplanes flying over. And there was a whole group of them and they built this tower then and at the park in Neffsville. Because they, these people were always running to the phone. and that was really inconvenient at the airport and there were to many so they thought that worked out better for them.

Bev: They were looking for enemy aircraft, or was it just ...

Jessie: Well, they were just telling about all aircraft. They closed a whole area along the east coast it was called the Violet Defense Area and if you were going to fly into that area to a city you would have to get special permission, that you're coming and what time and would land tell them that you were there, cell phones were not invented back then and so you'd, it was a little inconvenient. But they, anybody that was running an airport in that area had to move themselves out of there for this flight school because there was no way they were letting people fly in and out along the coast. Like Atlantic City, and Ocean City and area around Philadelphia and so on that. I don't know how far inland it came, maybe a hundred miles, that's a guess.

Bev: When they told me that I was kind of surprised, cause I wasn't aware that

Jessie: They called them spotter towers.

Bev: Yes.

Jessie: And these people really knew, they took a course and they would show them silhouettes of the airplanes and so on and that gave them something to do.

Bev: I understand they had a patch and uniforms too!

Jessie: I don't know what it was, what it all included, cause I'd just see them walking around there and they would run to the phone to say what kind of plane is that? So, it was a good program. They were all part of the people that were supposed to take charge if there was a catastrophe. I really don't know, I know my old English teacher was one of them. My old English teacher from West Junior High. He later was the principal of McCaskey. But I read his obituary, so he can't tell you...

Bev: Is there any of the other instructors? How many instructors were there at your, at the airport? Besides, besides, your dad and yourself?

Jessie: My dad gave the flight checks, he didn't instruct. But I suppose there were about ten or twelve at Lancaster, and when I worked at Carlisle there might have been about twenty, twenty-five.

Bev: In this program, the army and the navy, they lasted throughout the whole war?

Jessie: Right at the very end they had cancelled them because they could see the war was winding down and they didn't have a need to keep training people like that. And I think that actually, what we put down in their log books and recommendations are often what weeded them out to whether somebody went in to navigate or bombardier or pilot. It's not everybody that is easily trained. It doesn't mean that on down the line some guy that's having trouble in the beginning may be the best pilot but it depends on how they react. The thing that surprised me was, you get all these people that their name is say Jack NMI and I said to one of the other instructors, I can't pronounce that. And he said, "Oh dummy, that means no middle initial".

(chuckles all around)

Bev: Do you have any other comments that you would like to make? About your service?

Howard: Not really, no.

Jessie: Howard was very fortunate to be in submarines because it was a special group of people. People had to fight to get into the submarines, it was all volunteers.

Howard: Submarine duty was great duty. First we got paid considerably more than other service people, and the navy had x number of dollars per man for food. Submarines, got twice that so we had the best tenderloins, our food was absolutely superb. We had four cooks. One guy did breakfast, one guy did lunch, one guy did dinner, and the other was the baker. And I would take the, you did four on, eight off on a submarine, and I would always take the 12(midnight) to 4 watch, so I'd be off at 4 in the morning, just as the baker was finishing the fresh apple pies, the cakes, and the donuts and what have you. Food was superb. And our living quarters, the whole submarine was completely air-conditioned. Everybody had an innerspring mattress, very comfortable.

Bev: I didn't know that. From what I had seen in the movies they were kind of hot and cramped.

Howard: If you would get a chance to aboard one of the modern submarines, they are like the most delicate Pullman car you ever saw. There are green leather upholstery and just beautiful. Today's modern submarine are really something else.

Bev: Howard, Jessie, thank you very much for coming in.

Jessie: Well, it was a pleasure to meet you.

Howard: Is there anything else you want from us?

Bev: No.