

# *Bob & Mary Chambers*

## **Hillsborough Remembers**

Bob and Mary Chambers lived in Tampa during World War II. Bob was a fighter pilot, stationed at MacDill Air Force Base. Mary worked on the base in an office. They had met as students at Auburn University in Alabama before the war and both ended up at MacDill, where they met again. Bob's tour of duty as a fighter pilot was both frightening and heroic, ending when his plane was shot down. After his return, the romance blossomed and they were married, making Hillsborough County their home.

WWII

At Home & Abroad

*This is an interview with Bob (BC) and Mary (MC) Chambers, a retired Army fighter pilot and his wife of Tampa, Florida. Mr. Chambers was a fighter pilot that trained at MacDill Air Force Base. Both lived in Tampa during the World War II time period. This interview is being conducted on November 22, 1999 at Hillsborough County Public Library. The interviewer is Laura Neiheisel (LN), representing the "Juniors to Seniors: Hillsborough Remembers Oral History Collection Project."*

**Laura Neiheisel:** *What were you doing before the war? Were you going to any school?*

**Bob Chambers:** I was in school.

**LN:** *Where were you at school?*

**BC:** Alabama, Auburn University.

**LN:** *How old were you when you went into the war?*

**BC:** Twenty-one, twenty-two . . . twenty-one . . . about that old. [Laughter]

**LN:** *Were you all married before you went into the war?*

**BC:** No.

**LN:** *Did you volunteer to go into the war?*

**BC:** Yes ma'am.

**LN:** *Why did you volunteer?*

**BC:** You know I can't explain that, I don't really know why I did that. I wanted to – I had a private license already in those small planes. And I had planned on, before anybody ever talked about a war, planned on trying to get into the Army if I could get into

the flying end of the thing. I figured I could get -- be taught there. Of course that was a lot of money at that time, so I was going to get into the Army. And then when I got into the army, and the army took me I insisted that I wanted be in the Air Corps. I had just found out that there was such a thing as the Air Corps. We didn't get too much first class information in that little village I grew up in. [Laughter] but that is to say about that.

**LN:** *How did your family react to you going into the war?*

**BC:** Well my father wasn't living, and my brother was already in. I think they thought maybe that as long as I was healthy it was our duty to do what we could to take care of our part of our country.

**Mary Chambers:** What about your mother?

**BC:** She didn't care too much about it, but she didn't resent it and she didn't try to stop me.

**LN:** *You said your brother went, did any other family members go?*

**BC:** No.

**LN:** *Where did you train for the war?*

**BC:** I didn't train in any military area other than in the flying end of the game. I was sent to Randolph Field and I think that's where I got my basic training in an airplane. Then we went somewhere else. Do you remember which field, Mary?

**MC:** No.

**BC:** Maybe it was just Randolph Field . . . in San Antonio.

**LN:** *What did you do in your training? What did they teach you?*

**BC:** Well you took your marching every day. You had that that you had to do. You had to go to school. I forget what all of the names of the courses were you took. One of the main ones was Navigation. So we could know which way we were going and where to.

**LN:** *What type of airplanes did you fly?*

**BC:** In the war or in training?

**LN:** *Either or both.*

**BC:** Well I flew a single engine plane in training and in advance training a little bit higher power plane in advanced school. And a little fellow like myself was going to be in small airplanes so I was in fighter planes. So I took my training in what they considered a fighter plane.

**LN:** *Did you fly them by yourself?*

**BC:** Each plane had – these single engine planes had two seats. One seat for you and somebody was in it most of the time besides you until you got advanced enough where they'd let you go on flights by yourself. And then you went on cross-countries by yourself, that kind of thing. All in your training you were – somebody else was in the plane with you, a qualified pilot.

**LN:** *How long did you train for?*

**BC:** I don't know. I trained at Randolph for a few months. And then they moved us primaries to what they called basic. And that was at Randolph Field for advanced training. And you know I can't remember what that place was called, but I know it was in Texas. And that's what you did and what you didn't do, all that strict pilot

stuff with all of the military mess, excuse me. If anybody stepped out a line a little bit, they gave you an hour or two hours or whatever they thought the punishment should be of walking on the ramp with the rifle on your shoulder and walking at a military pace. You usually – the least amount you did that would be two hours. Anywhere from two to four hours ( ). I figured that thing out one day I wasn't doing anything that walking at two miles an hour and the hours I spent on that thing I walked enough to walk from San Antonio to Austin and back.

**MC:** What did you do to have to do that?

**BC:** Well, sometimes you wouldn't salute a fellow like you were supposed to, that was the main thing. And then in the Randolph Field mess hall you had to sit at a long table. You would eat at that and they had regular Army personnel, privates, ready to train you walking down the aisles with food that you could get. And they always had the youngest fellows on the end and they'd just tell you what they wanted. They'd say grab the potatoes or something, so you'd get the potato guy and you'd holler at the first potato guy that walked by. So they'd get the potato and get it mashed up and get it on down there. And most of the time they'd kept the juniors and you always start out so busy that you wouldn't have time to eat. So you usually lost about ten pounds because you usually had to do that about a week and that's just what you had to do. And you'd lose a good bit of weight cause you couldn't eat, and that's what you did on top of flying or whatever, and going on the ramp sometime. They had peculiar ideas about the things . . . .they were very strict about what they wanted you to do.

I know this one fellow that didn't think anything of it, but they had a short

time . . . I used to have-still do have a nervous stomach that would get all messed up. They thought if you were sick or something, throwing up or something, and they sent me to the hospital because some kind of a bug was going around they figured I had a part of. They kept me there for two weeks and found out I didn't have any of that stuff. So the next day I left. At that time they had a navigation course that I didn't even know they had because I was in the hospital for the length of time they were taking the course. So I had to report to the comrade of cadets as to why I had a zero in navigation. And I said didn't know there was navigation. Well, you should have known. Where were you?

I was in the hospital. So he picked up the telephone and called the hospital to see if I had been in the hospital. And when he found out I had been he reached in the desk drawer and pulled out the examination for this navigation course. Well, if you don't pass it you meet the washout board. The washout board wasn't a real board; they called themselves a board. You were just washed. You were out of the training program and were put back into the army as a private. Lost all of your rank.

I had had a course in navigation with an old navy pilot, an old professor at Auburn at the time. He taught us a course in navigation as students at Auburn. And so I knew the navigation that this fellow had was probably what I learned at Auburn. So I passed, but he didn't mean for me to. [Laughter] They wanted you to be tough. They wanted you to be a part . . . . . They were trying to get soldiers out of most of us that were kids. And they did pretty well sometimes with some of us, some of us they didn't. Two or three fellows were in my class; one was in my room, that old boy just quit. They said, well you're going to be a pilot tomorrow. He said that's fine. He

wasn't going to take anymore of that nonsense. The rest of us just wanted to do what we wanted to do so bad that we just put up with it. And came out in good shape. We got a lot of good training. Mainly about what would happen I you did what you weren't supposed to do.

*LN: What were the living conditions like when you were in Texas? Like the facilities?*

**BC:** The military conditions . . . they were good. If you were sick you went to the hospital. They had doctors to take care of you. You got a hair cut once a week and it was seventy-five cents to get a hair cut that rolled around. And if you didn't do it, you'd walk five hours on the ramp. An hour for each day during the week. So when that time came up you got your hair cut. [Laughter]

*LN: What part of the war were you in? What area?*

**BC:** They sent me after I graduated as a single engine pilot. And they sent me to MacDill field, which is here. And they didn't have any single engine planes, all they had was B-26s. Which were bombers. So I never had any . . . I didn't know there was one. They taught us how to fly them. I met some real fine folks, good instructors. So when you had spent . . . about three months there we went to England. And were assigned to the 322 Bomb Group. And we practiced around there a little bit, and then we were ready to go. It was a lot of differences in planes . . . two engines and two thousand-horse power apiece. It was a lot difference from the six hundred horse power engine we had in advanced training and that was the last plane we flew in training. But it worked out pretty well.

*LN: Do you remember any events that took place while you were in Europe?*

**BC:** Well most folks in Europe were very good to us. They tried to treat us like we were enjoying ourselves, you know, and they were fine folks. I guess it was a town about twenty-five percent as Tampa that we stayed in. And we went there regularly and everyone was very nice to us. They appreciated the fact that the Americans were there to get rid of Hitler. That was the main objective. They had a good boy Winston Churchill; he really lit them up.

**MC:** Why don't you tell her some of the experiences that took place in the war while you were there?

**BC:** We were there to fly. And we usually flew in six ship flights. Three six ship flights . . . eighteen ships was usually out flying. There'd be six ships here and here and here. If we were going after a bridge we would usually fall back into a line because the bridge wasn't all that wide, but if it was the manufacturing end of the town or something like that we'd stay in formation and all drop the bombs at the same time. It would have the lead ship opened up everyone else would. It was just one little button you had to push then to drop the bomb. Everyone would see the lead ship drop and they would drop the bomb. It covered a decent little mass. We did I pretty good job, I guess. The wind took something and the bomb would get a little off and we wouldn't hit the exact part of the target. And we'd go in front sometime.

**MC:** Tell her some of your really exciting experiences flying and on the field.

**BC:** These things a lot of times . . . these old boys would do what they were supposed to do some times, some times they wouldn't. I remember I got real upset one time, we got shot at and one of the engines wasn't

running like it needed to run, so we couldn't stay in the formation so we got signaled at, this is in Old France, before we got back to the English Channel. A German fighter plane had found out that somebody from the rear never shot at the plane that much so he got back there and started shooting. The tail end . . . in the front of the plane, where we were, you could always tell when somebody in your crew fired, you could tell where it came from. And this fellow never fired a shot and this boy is back there shooting all the time. He knocked everything loose . . . he knocked part of the tail section off of the plane and we managed to stay afloat like that. It got where he got all the way through and knocked out the windshield in front of the co-pilot. When I say knocked it out I mean the small portion went all of the way through and shattered glass so he couldn't see through it anymore.

Anyway, we had an engine on fire and it did a lot of damaged. Well we got back to the coast and as soon as we got there he wiggled his wings and waved us goodbye. He left and decided not to kill us all and he wasn't going to go across the channel. We got down and had a terrible time with the plane, flying it and getting it there and we figured we had gone through and awful lot. We had landed out there in the middle of the field, where we weren't supposed to park it, and the guy came over and told us we needed to move it, run it on in and park it where it's supposed to be parked. I said it's all yours, you can have the whole damn thing. He didn't understand what the trouble was until he got to looking at it and then he sent a couple of wrecker crews out there. All kind of things happened.

**MC:** He also had lots of funny experiences out there flying. Like when they finally landed the plane when the engine was on fire, the co-

pilot stepped on Bob's nose to get out and ran all of the way back in.

**BC:** A lot of planes you can't put the wheels down when you're coming in to land, you can't tell what's going on around you. The tire could have torn loose, or a big hole blown in it. The sides were still round though so you couldn't tell. When you'd come in you'd make sure with the engineer the tires were checked. He checked and said ok and that time one tire was flat and it was the tire on the right hand side. The brakes are up on top and you can move them around because that didn't cause any pressure. I was standing up making sure the wheel was locked out to make sure the plane would land easy . . . we wanted to steer onto the runway.

I was with a fairly new pilot and when we were coming in he went to open the top windows, and in the process he kicked me and the controls and the ignition system so we didn't have any power to stay on the runway at all. As he was jumping out of the top he kicked me in the face; I had a bloody nose and bloody lips. The old boy that was in charge that had the ambulance out on the runways came over. We finally stopped . . . and old Doc Pennington came over and said who's injured, who's injured? He was asking and finally I just said he kicked me! [Laughter] He got it all taken care of and he took us all to the area with his little parachute in his hands. He didn't get hurt at all, he was all right. We just took a lot, if somebody was lost in one plane then he couldn't hold it all and before we could get it stopped it ran into the walls of the tower and the fellows in front of the plane were killed.

**MC:** Tell her about the first mission of all when you all came back and the others went the next day and none came back.

**BC:** When we went over there we were flying at low level, they were training us to fly down at low level. We practiced that for, I guess, two or three months. We got along pretty good and so they said ok we need to let you go out where those fellows will shoot at you and see what happens. So we went and the target was an electrical plant right outside of a city in Holland. We made it through alright and we had pictures of the bomb going into the building. They had photos of the pictures and when they hit they had delayed fuses on them and the Germans sent some of the Hollanders in to pull out the bombs and they found out they had timed fuses on them so they pulled them all out and not much happened. The thing was ok.

The next day, or two days later, anyhow we went back to that same place and they took the other part of the group, I wasn't in it. An old boy Jack Crane was in it and I didn't want him to be in it, I wanted to be in it. I begged him and I talked ugly to him and I said let me get on that plane. No, all you want to do is get your twenty-five, he said, twenty-five missions was the tour to go home and you want to go home and be a hero and leave me here and I'm not going to do it. So he went, they sent twelve, and none of them came back. So then they decided they better get up to medium altitude, so from then on we flew and practiced and learned how to fly at ten to twelve thousand feet.

**MC:** You mentioned a lot of stuff but why don't you tell her about the very last flight. He came home . . .

**BC:** When you first started flying it was twenty-five missions for a tour and then you come home. I got on every mission they would let me go on and I got my twenty-five. Then they said no you have to have fifty.

**MC:** And then you came home?

**BC:** No, then we had to do fifty, we thought it couldn't get any worse than fifty. So then we'll come home because the B-15s are doing twenty-five and we figured we'd have to do twenty-five too. We figured we'd do our fifty and get through with it. Then when I gave away practically everything except a bag of clothes I was coming home with . . . they decided said I couldn't go, but I'd been there for the duration of the war. The tour wasn't fifty missions anymore. So they had a little trouble with that but finally got it straightened out. Guy were going down to finance offices with all kinds of things, some of them getting a little extra money. But then they finally got the thing settled and decided they would let some of us come home for a thirty day leave.

I was one of the fortunate fellows that got to come home on a thirty-day leave. I went home and talked to mama and told her I was glad to see her, but right now I have to go to Tampa. I can't stay here much longer. And mama said you're planning on marrying that girl aren't you? I said no I'm not planning on it but if she will I will. [Laughter] So we got married and shortly after we had a little honeymoon. Then I had to go back because my thirty days was up. I had fifty-seven missions when I came home and on my fourth mission was when I got messed up. I had reprimanded my co-pilot, my regular co-pilot, and they had then reassigned him to a new plane as first pilot, so I had to get a new co-pilot.

**MC:** The co-pilot had never flown a plane at that time.

**BC:** No, the new one that I got had never been in a B-26 before until the day that I got him and the next day we were scheduled for a mission. We

got him in it and never did even land it but we did take a couple shots at the field and I said do you think you've got the field of it and he said yeah. Well I knew he couldn't have got the feel of it, but anyhow he said ok. Then I had him for a co-pilot on that next mission we went on. It wasn't a bad mission; it was going pretty good. We were going into France on the Seine River that leads to Paris. Anyhow, there was an area of the right side that the Germans didn't have any guns to shoot at us with. Usually when you're coming in you're getting shot at as long as you were in their range. But they had a little black spot on the right hand side this time going in. When we got done with the mission we had to do, that wasn't all that bad, we were coming back and when I got to the point to where I could see the white cliffs from where we were flying. I knew we weren't very far away so I reached into my pocket to get a cigarette and I began to light it and then I said no I better not do that because this old boy here might not want to fly anything, so I didn't do that. So I put it back down.

I wasn't paying any attention to where we were going but the navigator had us on the right side of the river. And when we came in on the right side of the river there wasn't anyone defending it at all, but this other side was filled with guns. So I was in front, I was the lead ship of a six ship and as we were coming out I had just put my hands on the throttle when wham it came right up to the side of my head. It knocked a little hole in my head. I tried to stop the bleeding and after a while I couldn't feel my arm. I wasn't really worried about what was fixing to happen. I thought I was going to be alright, but before we got home they decided they would move me and put me in the radioman's seat. And this old boy was going to fly the thing and he got over the first pilot seat to fly and when we got back to the field

where we were going to land we were in pretty bad shape.

They had moved me back into the radioman's seat but then they had to move me out because they figured I'd have to talk this fellow in for a landing. When they were moving me they found out that I had been bleeding up here in the shoulder all the time, and that's where I lost all of the blood. Anyway, they put me in the co-pilot's seat and the radio man got in his own seat and they hit the ground going, I guess, two hundred miles an hour. They hit the ground so hard they knocked off both wings and the wheels got caught too. And the little boy that had moved me out of my seat, I don't think I'd been out of the seat five minutes, but he was killed when they hit the ground. He was killed because of the radio. And they moved me out and gave me a little bit of blood and put me in the hospital.

**MC:** And sent you home . . .

**BC:** No, [Laughter] they didn't do that.

**MC:** You know, we met in August at the university and we liked each other just a little bit. And then I thought he was awfully nice. Then we went home and I started teaching school and I hadn't heard from him in three years and didn't think about him much, but I did think about him some. And so during the war I worked at MacDill field. I was teaching school and resigned and went out there in Tampa to work. And I was going to lunch one day, carrying some girls in my car, and stopped on the way at the BX and then went to the enlisted men's club for lunch. Well one day I heard somebody say . . . but I didn't dare look back. There was so many men out there, nothing but men were out there.

**BC:** Go ahead . . . [Laughter]

**MC:** Sorry. So I went ahead back to the BX to get the girls and they weren't out yet. And I thought to myself I better get in and get them or we are going to be late to work. And ran right into Bob at the BX.

**BC:** I was waiting to see where this good-looking gal was coming from.

**MC:** We went on to work and I didn't see him again for several days. So I asked this nice friend of mine that was in the service that I had known from school if he knew if he had been transferred. Well he had been transferred to Lakeland. I saw another nice friend of mine that asked me to go to dinner with him. I said yes so he asked me where I would like to go. I said how about Lakeland? So we went to the Officers' Club and we were sitting there having dinner and do you know who walked in? I asked my friend, he was a very nice boy, if he could excuse me for just a few minutes to go speak to someone hadn't seen in some time that I had gone to college with. So he said of course.

And as Bob walked out he stopped at the pinball machine, not far from where we were sitting. So I went over to talk for him and he asked me for my phone number where I lived. So then he was transferred back from Lakeland after a little bit and I'll never forget, we were having dinner in the cafeteria. I was boarding with Mr. J. Edgar Wall, and his wife, who at that time was the postmaster of Tampa. I found out and he walked over to the table and wanted a date. I said I cannot go. All of the girls at the table didn't understand why and I said no I can't do that. And I said if you go to the bus station and tell my date and I had to do something, that's the only way I can go. So they went to the bus station and I went home, and my date was there. So I started to explain to

him and . . . no, Bob called me and said well, can you go out? And I said no my date is here. He said alright I'll be there in a few minutes. So we sat and we sat and sat . . .

**BC:** He's a nice fellow, just as nice as he could be.

**MC:** So he finally left and that was the beginning, well, part of our romance. But I used to turn on the radio and listen to BBC, the Europe station, and one of Mr. Wall's sisters told me one time that she had a dream. And she was very psychic. She dreamed that Bob was coming home to get married. I thought she was kidding. It turned out that she had talked to a doctor that came home on the same boat and told her that Bob was coming home. And it turned out it was true. It was that time, in thirty days, that we were married. So it had a real wonderful ending.

**LN:** *What was it like him being over there after you were married?*

**MC:** After we were married? I was very nervous and worried about him from the time he went the first time. I thought about him all of the time and loved him dearly and missed him. But I knew he was home for thirty days and that they would let him come home soon. When he was hurt, on his birthday, I sent him a telegram wishing him a happy birthday. In a few days I got a message from him saying don't worry, everything will be alright. No, you didn't even say don't worry you just said everything will be alright. And I didn't worry about that, I didn't know he had been shot.

**BC:** I didn't know I thought somebody had told her something.

**MC:** And while we were dating he had been alerted that he could not leave the field. He had a friend, a married

friend, who lived in Tampa so Bob would crawl into that man's car. He'd get in that man's trunk, go through the gates and then get into the car and ride into town. Then he'd sleep in chair in the old Edgewater Hotel.

**BC:** I would stay in the lobby and sleep in this old boy's easy chair until my friend would come back and honk his horn when he was ready to go back to the base. So I'd wake that boy, he was back there on a cot. I'd wake him up, hey I got to go and here's your chair. [Laughter]

**MC:** His friend would stop and pick him up and just before he got to the gate he'd get back into the trunk. So we had a very exciting romance. And we've been married fifty-five years.

**LN:** *You were here during the war, right? How was Tampa during that time period?*

**MC:** Well it was certainly aware of the war and it was a time when going out Dale Mabry was going out in the woods. Can you believe that?

**LN:** *Wow. MC:* I worked at MacDill and it was very interesting. I don't really know, I don't remember. Of course things were rationed, gasoline was hard to get. Well, it wasn't hard to get, but you had to have ration stamps to get it. And of course everyone was doing their part. They wanted it to be over soon. It was quite an experience.

**LN:** *What was the most memorable thing from that time period for either one of you?*

**MC:** I think it was my marriage! [Laughter]

**BC:** That's exactly what I was thinking. Because no one even told me she was going to have me, I was just going to marry her. Mama knew too. I

had told her that I had to go. She said I was going to Tampa, wasn't I? I said, well, I had thought about it. She said will you marry that girl? I said yes ma'am I sure would. She said then I guess when you get back you'll be married. She just put it like that. And that's what happened. We had a nice wedding. It was a little wedding.

**MC:** We were married in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Wall.

**BC:** It was with my best man who had a father that had been here since Tampa began . . . he was an outstanding father figure.

**MC:** Anything else?

**LN:** *How had things changed when you came back?*

**BC:** Well, gasoline was hard to get. I don't know how things were. I went back to school. I went around and looked for a job. I was planning on getting a job. The plane I was flying had more horsepower at the time than commercial. Anyhow I got an unlimited commercial license. I could fly anything that flew. I talked to a couple people about getting a job, yes sir you just come on down. You come and I'll put you to work. Then I started something else and then I decided that, you see, that crash landing we had settled it. I knew that had happened several occasions after that. The planes had crashed and blown up. I figured the good Lord had been looking after me. The Lord didn't want me to be foolish with this stuff anymore if I could make a living somehow. We got along pretty well, made a good living.

**MC:** We had three wonderful daughters. They were very nice. We enjoyed them very much.

**BC:** I think also, as far as I'm personally concerned, that it showed me or proved that you could get in spots that you could not save your soul, you could not get out of. But you'd get out. So it had to be a greater hand than I had. And it was the Lord, I'm sure. And I think everyone ought to know. But I even had one old boy I wanted to shoot, but they wouldn't let me shoot him.

**MC:** No, don't go any further. You've gotten him started.

**LN:** *How has the time in service affected the rest of my life?*

**BC:** One thing it has affected is that if you think you can't get it done, the Lord can get it done if he wants it done. And I realize that today wholeheartedly. I don't begrudge my having been in. I can't throw a baseball because I can't rotate my arm. I can't take many x-rays in the side of my head. I can't hear very well, but when you get older that happens anyway. The thing about it is though is that you live. You live through this thing . . . I think we did the right thing declaring war against Germany and if some of them start acting the way they've been acting then maybe we need to start a war with them. I'm not saying that and I'm not trying to say that, but everything in life is more than just being all hunkie-dory. You need to delineate sometimes, and that doesn't hurt anybody I don't think.

**LN:** *If there were one thing you could tell our generation that you learned from that time, what would it be?*

**BC:** I really don't know how to fit that thing. If I was qualified, if I was capable I think everybody needs to appreciate this country. There's an awful lot more people that need to appreciate this country. I don't know what is necessary to keep that

accomplished, but it needs to. You know, you don't want to shoot people to get them out of the way but you couldn't do it. Are you understanding what I'm saying?

**MC:** Yes. That was great. There is no country in the world like our country. Isn't that great?

**BC:** And you don't have to go to too many places in the world to find that out. It is obvious.

**LN:** *Alright, thank you very much.*