Eloise Sagmiller: (unintelligible) I want you to share with me some of your early experiences as a Montanan. Were you born and raised here?

Martha Volkomener: No, I grew up in Charleston, West Virginia. I wanted to fly ever since Lindbergh went across the ocean. I just fell in love with it then and never lost it. I graduated from high school there and I went on to college at West Virginia Wesleyan. I graduated there. When I came out of that, I had a job in Charleston with wholesale dry goods. That’s when I found out about the WASP.

I got my private license flying seaplanes off the Kanawha River in Charleston. I was in a class of 15 and I was the only girl in the class. That made complications in those days because this was back in the summer of 1940. I remember everything was going fine. I was just ready to solo. It was quite early in the morning this one day. That was when I was scheduled to do it. I got down there and my instructor, who was also head of the school, he says, “Marty, you’re the first one ready to solo. There’s one of the guys that is also ready. He’s about to have a fit if you solo ahead of him. I’m really afraid we’re going to have trouble with him if I let you go ahead and solo even though you technically were ready first.”

I said, “Let him go. I don’t care. It doesn’t make any difference to me.” So they let him solo. The class went on happily after. Those were the days. We definitely felt the competition with the men. The pilots were the glamour boys. For a woman to come up and be doing that, this was just very unusual. Though the 99s were going at that time, Amelia Earhart had already been lost. I had been to the National Air Races back in 1937, I think it was. This was when she was lost, I’m pretty sure. Jackie Cochran was winning all kinds of races and that thing.

ES: She was a beautiful woman.

MV: She was quite a lady. She was a very controversial woman. She had her enemies. Oh, that woman came from absolutely nothing. Just abject poverty and down in Panama City, Florida. She had a second grade education and then had to go to work to feed the family. She was an adopted child besides. She really came from the very low bottom up.

ES: (unintelligible)

MV: She absolutely demanded the best out of us. She was ambitious. I will grant you that. A lot of people criticize her for it, but gosh, she had an awful lot on the ball. We would have never gotten the WASP program without her. Nancy Love had started the WACS, which were...
Women’s Auxiliary Flying Service or something, something like that. I can’t remember just what it stood for. They eventually were taken in with the WASP. She and Nancy Love did a good job. There’s no doubt about that. There was a certain amount of jealousy between the two groups for a long time. The WACS found out that we weren’t such a bad bunch after all. Maybe we could fly. Well we should have been able to by the time we finished regular cadet training.

ES: I understand that you had to have a certain amount of hours in before you could (unintelligible).

MV: Yes at first, I think for the WASP to get into it was 200 hours. Now by the time I came along and I was scheduled to go in the third class, but my mother ended up in the hospital with pneumonia. I asked if it could be delayed until the next class. So I ended up in the fourth class. It had dropped to 75 hours by then. I had about 85 hours at the time. Every minute of it except for one flight in a tail dragger that had been on seaplane. There’s a little difference there. I never will forget my first time in Sweet Water with my instructor.

I got there seven or eight days late to start because of my mother’s condition. Anyhow to get in on the second class...I mean the class that I went in on. We got in the plane and they were the PT19. It was a (unintelligible) with a six-cylinder inline engine, I believe. I can’t remember for sure, and open cockpits. Of course, the communication between the student and the instructor was all one-way. He sat in the rear cockpit and the student was in the front cockpit. He said to go ahead and taxi out to the end of the runway.

I started taxiing along so I could see where I was going. He says, “You’re going too fast.” So I pulled back a little bit. Pretty soon he says, “You’re still going too fast. Slow this down a little bit,” with a couple of expletives. He really could scream. I’ve never heard anyone swear like that man in all my life. So I pulled the throttle all the way back. I was just going along like I was supposed to be doing because you couldn’t see over the nose of the airplane. You had to S in order to see that you aren’t running into something. He let out a stream of them at me for me to slow that airplane down. “When I say 'Slow it down,' I mean it.” There were about two dozen extra words in there at least.

Well I knew I couldn’t talk back to him, so I turned around and yelled back at him. I said, “If I go any slower I’ll have to turn the engine off.” Oh boy did I ever get it. “What the blankity blank blank blank blank blank blank do you think those brakes are for?” Seaplanes didn’t have brakes. Neither did that tail dragger because the tail dragger would slow the airplane down in a hurry. I’d never been in an airplane that had brakes on it before. You talk about a feeling about this big. Oh boy. I knew they were there after that. I happened to look down at the foot pedal and motor pedal to figure out what the heck he was talking about. You pressed on them with your toes as I remember.

ES: (unintelligible).
MV: Oh, yes one for each push.

ES: You had six or seven (unintelligible).

MV: Those airplanes had sticks, the trainers did. The ones I learned on, on the seaplanes were (unintelligible) I believe they were, or no, Champions. I don’t know which one it was. It was a side by side. They had the wheel. The ones that were tandem where one was in front and one was in back, they had sticks. All of the airplanes that I flew in the military had sticks except the twin-engine ones. They all had wheels.

ES: Do you remember the name of this instructor?

MV: Morris Check. Why I can remember that, I don’t know. Glen Morris Check I think it was. You did your very best just to keep him quiet. You did your very best because you wanted to please him. There were just two entirely different personalities. I still don’t remember now how I found out about the civilian pilot training program to start. There was probably an article in the paper or something, and I headed down there to the Kanawha Flying School just as fast as I could get there.

My parents were both horrified. They knew I wanted to fly, but they never thought I’d get the chance to do it. Anyhow, I got in that class. Then I got my license in September of 1940. There’s a number I can remember 20238-40. That was my license number. I haven’t used it since 1950. Anyhow, while I was working, after I graduated from college, Glen Clark called me up—the one who’d owned the flying service and had also been my instructor—he says, “Martha, would you be interested in getting into military flying?”

I said, “Why yes of course, but how in the world can I do it?”

He said, “Well there’s a program on the WASP and I have a flyer explaining what it is and is wanting to know if any women pilots are around that would be qualified. I certainly think you’d be qualified.” I went on my lunch hour because this flying school...the river goes right through the middle of town. I wasn’t more than four or five blocks from it.

ES: Is that right?

MV: I’d go over and fly every now and then at noon just for the heck of it. So I filled out the forms and sent them in. There were 25,000 women applying for it. Eighteen hundred were accepted. I thought, “My gosh.” I was one of these. I just couldn’t believe it. I didn’t find out those numbers until afterwards all over. All I knew was I was accepted. We went to Sweetwater, Texas, and started in right in with the cadet training program.

There were British cadets there at the time that had a primary set-up there for them. About four rows of barracks and they stuck us over in the first two. The men were still over in the
others. Boy, did they ever keep us separated. Jackie’s Convent is what they called anywhere where the WASP lived. Well you know, I’m sure there were some who were wild. There’s bound to be, there were a total of 1700 and something graduated all together in two years of it.

You aren’t going to find that many people that there aren’t going to be some wild ones. Boy I mean to tell you, she kept her thumb on us through the people who were running the place. I’m glad she did because we ended up with a pretty good reputation. Books like, Silver Wings in San Diego by Janet Dailey, she wrote it and it came out back here a couple of years ago. You ought to read that book. You really should. It’s got all the sex thrown in it, which just made all of the WASP madder than a hornet. She did an awful lot of research for that book. There’s just no doubt in my mind. The funny thing about it, the lead person in it, her name was Marty.

ES: Oh dear.

MV: She was in the class that followed me. She was supposedly in 435. She didn’t exist as far as that was concerned. I mean this was a fictitious character. That woman did a lot of research. The funny thing was, she did the research right through the part that I was in.

ES: So she just picked your name out?

MV: No I don’t think so. I never heard a word from her. The program and what we did in it was pretty close to exact from what I could see. I graduated in August of ’43. We had 150 hours army time when we finished plus what we had before. It had gone clear through advanced. We were trained in everything except combat and formation. We did a lot of formation anyhow. They, Cochran had, I always feel bad to say this because it sounds like I’m bragging, but it’s still a fact.

Twenty-five of us were picked out of that class and we were supposed to be the top of the class. There was a couple in there that I think must have pulled a string or two. We were called in to operations and explained what this was all about, almost what it was all about, and asked to volunteer for it. Not a one of us turned it down. We were jumping at it. What they were going to do was to take us directly from completing flight training as a cadet into an A-20 squadron.

Now an A-20 was a bomber, medium sized bomber, twin engine, built by Douglas. It was comparable in size to the old B-25 I’d say. The B-25 carried a pilot and a co-pilot and a crew. This had a crew of two: one was a pilot who was clear up in the front end of it. The other was the gunner who was in the back end of it, half way back with a thing like that. I had ten hours in the old AT-17, which was a twin engine Cessna. It was affectionately referred to as “the double breasted butter paddle,” or something to that effect. It was a fabric-covered plane with wooden propellers.
Anyhow, the ten hours that I had in that was all the twin-engine plane that I had. I thought, “Oh my gosh, they’re going to put me in this airplane?” I had seen it and I thought, “Well I’m going.” We got to Washington D.C and getting to reporting there was delayed because somebody found out about this plan. What they were going to do was to put us in the A-20 and have us fly as much time as we possibly could to see how much women could take. Congress said, “No, no. you can’t do that with a civilian woman.” We were civilian at that time, civil service. So we ended up going to Washington.

We went through all kinds of testing there, the altitude chamber, taking you up to 30,000 feet and then take off your oxygen mask and see how long it takes you to pass out and all that kind of stuff. At 18,000 feet, take off your oxygen mask, pick up your pencil and your pad of paper, and the number 100, and write it on it. So everybody writes down 100. Now subtract seven from that as long as you can. I got down into the sixties, I think, before it made no sense whatsoever.

The three guys would be in there with us. As soon as you started giving signs that you were about to pass out, they’d slap an oxygen mask back on you. They did all kinds of testing like that was. Then they sent us to toe target squadron. Well now there had been 15 women out of the class two ahead of us that had just been put in the toe target squadron at random. We went to Camp Davis, North Carolina. The morale was very bad. The toe target squadrons had the reputation that the planes they were flying were rejects from combat or worn out from combat and just weren’t...couldn’t be quite brought back.

This leaves a maintenance problem. They were having all kinds of problems. One girl was killed about three days before we got there. The reason she was killed...she was night flying was what she was doing. She was being checked out in the A-24. The A-24 was the Douglas Dauntless, the Navy used it. They called it the SBD. I don’t know if those numbers mean anything to you. I think it had about a 16 or 1700 horsepower engine in it, single engine. This particular plane had been written up by someone—one of the girls who had flown it that day, I think—that the hatch stuck.

It was hard to get it open. When she misjudged or something happened, I don’t know if that was it. On her final approach, she went into the trees. The plane caught fire. She couldn’t get out. She couldn’t get that hatch open. The instructor that was with her, he was in the rear cockpit. He was able to get out. He couldn’t help her. She burned to death. They did their best to keep us from finding out about that because this would be a morale knocker.

We knew that the toe-target squadrons were having trouble with maintenance and stuff for airplanes. I don’t know. I had very minor trouble with any planes there. We were in two toe target squadrons. Those gals that were there ahead of us were shipped out just as fast as they could get them out of there. A couple of them resigned also beforehand. When we got there and go through the orientation that you get on a new base, you know, miscellaneous stuff, we started in with the observation planes.

Martha Volkomener Interview, OH 262-011, 012, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Those are the little ones, the Cubs, the Arancas, the Stinsons, and those that were used by the...See, this was an anti-aircraft base. Their officers would come over and go on observation flights to somehow fly around low so that they could see what’s going on in their different units that are out in the field. Well it was kind of fun flying them. Of course, we wanted to fly something more than that. Then they checked us out in the A-24. Most of the men that were in the toe-target squadrons had not gone through cadets. They were with what were called “search pilots.”

They would come from the civilians. They didn’t have an awful lot of time. Now we have the A-25 there. That was a (unintelligible) diver, a Navy plane again, and SB2C, I believe was the Navy’s designation for it. It was about the size of the old B-47. It wasn’t quite as heavy. It carried a crew of two. Again, the pilot sits in the front seat and the toe-target operator in the back in this case, or a gunner if it had been in combat. The men didn’t think they’d check us out in that. None of the group ahead of us had checked out. They were all flying the A-24, but none had been allowed to check out in the A-25.

They thought they were safe, they wouldn’t have to go any further if they...If they flew the A-25, it would be ahead of us. Then we all checked out in the A-25. That was really the first plane I had checked out in that you check out totally by yourself with no instructor ahead of time with it. The A-24 there was an emergency stick in the rear cockpit just in case the pilot is incapacitated. Maybe the gunner or something might be able to get it back on the ground or something.

Anyhow, we all checked out in that. I loved flying that airplane. It was a nice one. You could get up to 25,000 feet and better. It was no trouble. That was fairly high for those days. A B-17 I think went higher. Of course, the B-29 did when it came along. The bigger planes could, but not too much on the smaller ones until you got the P-51 and the P-47s. They would go higher I think. Anyhow, we flew that. We towed targets with them. We towed targets at 1800 feet, no 1200 feet.

ES: What kind of a target were they?

MV: It was a big flag one.

ES: Like a flag?

MV: Yes, like a big long flag. It was probably as long as this house is wide.

ES: Was it all attached to the plane or did you...

MV: It was attached to a cable and they would let out about 1800 feet of cable for the low tows. For the high tows over 10,000, I can’t remember. It was at least twice that much. I can’t

Martha Volkomener Interview, OH 262-011, 012, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
remember what it was. Then you would fly on a given course. They would shoot at the target, supposedly. They didn’t always.

ES: Was it attached to the plane when you took off?

MV: Oh no there’s a big cable reel in the rear cockpit of the A-24 and the A-25. The tow target operator sits back there. The poor guy is so cramped; he can’t wear anything except an emergency chute because there’s just not room for it. Half of the time, they would sit on those. I had an A-25 mission, a low tow. We were flying, oh not too far from the field once. Now this story is in two books, but it doesn’t name me as the pilot. I am the one it happened to. It is word for word what happened to me. They just happened to be interviewing one of the girls.

She evidently knew this story had happened because whoever it was, was asking for close calls and stuff like that. So she told this story. Well they just put down that she had done it. Anyhow, we’re flying the mission out there. The cable operator says, “I think we better go back to the field.”

I say, “What’s wrong? Do we have trouble?” We hadn’t been out there more than ten or 15 minutes.

He says, “Well we’ve got a little fire back here.” There was 180-gallon gas tank between the two of us.

I said, “Yes I think we’ll go back. Can you get the fire out in the meantime?”

He said, “I’m working on it.” So there was no way we could bail out of the plane because we were just plain too low.

He couldn’t have gotten out of it. He would have been killed for sure landing with that small chute from that altitude because it wouldn’t have broken his fall. Anyhow, I kept asking him if he had the fire out. “Yes it’s just smoking now.” Well you know when the smoke is high. He says, “I think we better go in, in a hurry.”

I had already called the tower for an emergency approach. They wanted to know what was wrong. I told them, of course. They said, “Do you want a fire truck out there?”

I said, “He says he has it out, but let’s get the fire truck out anyhow.”

So we went in and landed. We got on the ground and he said, “Get out quick because we’re on fire!” Well the fire truck was right there. They put the thing out. He was afraid that if I knew that the fire was still burning back there, I would bail out and leave him in that airplane. The poor guy, he tried to impress me by saying, “Get back as fast as you can.” Anyhow, we got out of the airplane in a hurry. There was no damage to the plane. They got it out right away.
ES: What happened?

MV: Evidently, the brakes on the tow reel overheated and caught fire. Then I had another interesting...we were flying the B-34. That was a Lockheed Ventura I think. It was a twin-engine medium bomber. We were on a 10,000-foot mission. I was flying co-pilot on that. One of the guys was flying the plane. We were up cruising along out over the ocean. It was the beach guns was what they were using on us, 90mm. The low tows were the 50 mm, the smaller caliber. The high tows were mostly in the nineties.

I saw these little black clouds out there. I said, “Those are the funniest little white cloud I’ve ever seen.”

He looked over, “They are funny looking, aren’t they?”

Then one came and I said, “That almost looks like a little rain cloud.” They weren’t even bigger around than this table I don’t think. I’m not for sure, but as I remember them, they were just a little round puppy cloud.

He said, “That is strange.” A cloud that sized shouldn’t be grey. Then not 100 feet off my wingtip, one exploded and I saw the flame.

I said, “Those are shells going off. Get out of here.” He went into a dive. The toe operator cut the cable and the FCC would have not liked the language that was going on that radio. Anyhow, they quit firing immediately. They could have noticed it from the ground too that they were tracking the plane instead of the target. By gosh, when you see the flame in the middle of that thing, that big old orange flame, it was scary, yes puppy dog clouds. I only had one forced landing that actually was a forced landing, though.

I got into radio control play. This works very similar to your radio control hobby stuff except you’re using pilot carrying planes. The ones we were using, we had the little PQ-8s as they were called and then the more advanced one was a PQ-14. Culver built both of them. Culver’s airplane that they came out with right after the War was practically the same thing as a PQ-14. It was a hot little airplane. It had a big Servo unit in it. I would say it would be about that big and it sat where, right behind the pilot.

Now this had gyros in it that controlled all the controls on the airplane. Those controls had the radio signal coming from the chase plane, which was a twin-engine beach craft AT-11 or C-45 or CQ3BH, any number it happened to be. The pilot was the chase pilot. The one in the co-pilot’s seat would be operating the radio controls. It was a little box about 12 inches by four inches by two, I suppose, something like that with controls on it. The brakes, engine, flight controls, all of them were there. You flew formation with this little plane—
[End of Tape 1, Side A]
MV: —you’ve got too much money tied up in that little airplane out there. So you carry a safety pilot in that so that if whoever was practicing caught you in a bad condition, the safety pilot could take over. Now this took about 75 pounds of pressure to overpower that Servo unit until you got the whole thing turned off. Also, you didn’t have any radio control with the plane or the tower, radio contact. The two that were in the chase plane that I had some trouble.

I had suddenly fallen back. They could no longer make my airplane do what it was supposed to be doing. So they called in the tower and told them that I was evidently having trouble and looked like I was probably going to head to the airport. In the meantime, I’m sitting over the swamps of North Carolina. There’s great big trees, monstrous pine trees, tall ones, and every creepy crawly critter going in the swamp. I thought, “I’m not too sure that I want to bail out of this thing into this swamp.”

I just didn’t want to. There was also a railroad track going right straight down, just straight as an arrow. There had been plenty of room to land on it. I had full tanks of gasoline. I thought, “Oh boy, my chances of coming to a stop on those rails without catching on fire are pretty slim.” I was keeping the engine going about a quarter of what it was supposed to be with what we called a “wobble pump.”

This was a little gasoline pump that you could pump to get gas into your engine, carburetor in case of an engine failure and that was what the problem was. Well I found working the wobble pump; I had about a quarter to half power. I thought, “By gosh if I can keep this thing going, I can get into that airport.” I was up about 1500 feet or 2,000 feet and not very far from it. So I worked that wobble pump all the way in. when I was on the final approach, I had full throttle and just enough power to get me to the end of the runway. I landed and the instant that thing hit the ground, that engine took off full boar. I almost took off again. That was really the only forced landing that I ever had.

ES: Well now I’m really interested in that wobble pump. Was it only on that type of a plane or..?

MV: It was on most of the planes then. The fuel pump instead of being operated by the regular fuel pumps from the engine power itself, this was an emergency thing. I was on a high tracking mission once in an A-25. My electric generator failed and practically everything on that airplane was controlled by electricity including the landing gear. The landing gear was hydraulic, but I mean it took the electricity to get it down.

I called in and I told them I was coming in, I had an electrical failure, and I already had my landing gear down. I wasn’t about to go in with that landing gear up. I made it back without any trouble because I just went right straight back. The battery didn’t fail in that time. That could have amounted to something. Other than that, I never had a forced landing. I ground looped an
AT-6 once. That was from coming in and patting myself on the back practically for making such a perfect landing.

It started veering to the right and I caught it. It was going right straight, which is what you’re supposed to do if you can get out of the ground loop. Don’t over control because you might go in one of the opposite direction. Just let it run off the runway. I was just letting it run off the runway, like we had been preached to. I didn’t know that there were ten inches of sand on either side of that runway. That just stopped me right there. I sat in that airplane beating myself on the thighs. The radio, the control tower...an instructor always went on cross-countries. They would just sit in their airplane and act as a tower. That was my one pink slip all the way through training.

The funny thing is, I had about three hours left to do in the AT-6 before we went into the twin-engine stuff. I was already scheduled for an army flight check the next day. This had been scheduled for at least three days. You were supposed to have had one every...in each of the three units: primary, basic, and advanced. I had a civilian check in primary and that’s all that I had had. They discovered I had never had an army flight check. So I thought, “Oh boy, oh boy. Here I go. Bye-bye.” I got Lieutenant Rohr (?), which was his name. He has a reputation of being one of the tougher ones.

I thought, “Okay go on out.” I asked him on the way out, “Is this a watch-out ride because I ground looped that 6 yesterday?”

He said, “No they hadn’t even told me you were the one that did it. You just haven’t had an army flight check, so go ahead and fly.” Anyhow, we went up and flew around for a while. He checked me out on everything he could, I guess. We came in and landed, and parked the airplane. We were walking back in; I asked him how it went. He said, “Fine, no problem. Where did you learn to fly seaplanes?”

I said, “How did you know I flew seaplanes? Did you read it in my record?”

“No you can spot a seaplane pilot every time.”

I said, “In Charleston, West Virginia at the Kanawha Flying School.”

“Charleston, West Virginia? That’s where I’m from.”

I said, “Rohr, you aren’t by any chance related to Janice Rohr are you?”

“Yes she’s my first cousin.”

“Janice and I went all through the high school together.” So we had quite a conversation before we left.

Martha Volkomener Interview, OH 262-011, 012, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
ES: Isn’t that interesting?

MV: It’s a small world. I don’t know whether he had ever flown them or not. I don’t think he had. The takeoff is different. The old standard, not the tricycle landing gear that’s up front, but when the tail was down with the tail wheel, you had to get that tail up as soon as you could. So as soon as you were putting the throttle forward, stick, to get that tail in so you’d have better control.

Well in a seaplane, if you do that, you’re going to go swimming. You have to get that airplane up on the step. It was like the step on a boat practically. When you get it up on the step, you’re holding it clear back in your chest until you get up enough speed that you can rock it up on the step where it goes back up south. Then you gradually bring the tail up. Then you take off.

ES: So that even translated into your other takeoffs.

MV: Yes well I have a tendency to not push that stick forward that fast. I just didn’t like it. I never had any trouble whatsoever from doing it that way, but he said, “You can spot a seaplane pilot every time.” By this time, I had close to right around 136 or so hours in military planes. No we flew all kinds of missions in the tow-targets. We not only towed targets. In fact, there was less of that than anything else. We did tracking missions where you would go up and you’d fly for a track.

They would track you with radar or whatever it might be that they were using for tracking this airplane. I know I was up in an A-24 once on one and we hadn’t been there very long, didn’t know too much about what we were doing, or what was going on, on the ground in particular. You were in contact with the group that you were performing a mission for by radio. You heard everything they said back and forth. Well here we are, we’re right on the coast and I heard them say, “There is an unidentified aircraft in such-and-such an area.” I thought, “Oh, oh.”

I don’t know if I would do it again if I had it, but it would be nice if I had something to protect myself in case we do have an attack coming up. This airplane is coming in from the sea at whatever elevation it was at. I was looking all over everywhere for that airplane. I was going to get out of there if it showed up. Well after about five minutes of this, it dawned on me that every time that airplane was reported as changing its course, I had just changed my course. I was the unidentified aircraft.

This was what was called an IFF mission, which is identification of friend or foe. It was top-secret stuff. I mean when we flew one of those missions with that equipment in the plane, they came out with an armed guard. We wore a side arm in the plane. The instructions were if we were forced down anywhere, we could either destruct that stuff with the button by pushing it or if we needed, we could use the gun. It was such a secret thing right at that time that’s the
only thing that we did that we were armed in. Heck I don’t think I could have shot anybody if they were coming up a wrought iron plane or not.

I may have been able to blow my airplane up, but I don’t know if could have shot anyone if they were going to capture me in the process. I sure felt funny after that. We flew searchlight missions. That was probably the most difficult flying, I think. You’re up the air and you see these lights. They’re moving back and forth. You’ve got vertigo. You’ll have the feeling that you’re going down when you might be going up. Everything in your body tells you to do what you feel the airplane is doing.

You better fly those instruments or you’re not going to be around much longer. They warned you “Don’t look at the search lights. Just don’t do it. Fly strictly on instruments when the lights are turned off.” Well of course everybody has to look at the searchlights just to find out. You find out before long that boy, all of a sudden your airplane tells you or your instrument tells you you’re right about ready to stall and you’re just doing the opposite.

ES: You have to just control your mind.

MV: You have to go strictly by the instruments. Then you get away from you. I had it happened to me. We took those little PQs, the radio control ones up on high altitude missions. That was 10,000 feet. The guns were lined up in a row on ground. We would be in contact with the radio people on the ground. They would tell you to put it on at such-and-such a place. Well you’d come in over here with a chase plane and the radio, one that was on the radio control. No pilot or safety pilot was in it. This was a true mission. You would put it on course out in front of these guns at 10,000 feet.

Then you would go around behind the guns and meet this little plane, which wasn’t quite as fast as yours, or you could go faster, at the other end. You’d turn around and put it on course and bring it back. Well if they missed it, you had another airplane back on the ground that they could use again. If they knocked it down, you were short one. I did have one—the man that was doing the radio controlling was head of the R-Flight as we’d call it, for radio flight. The airplane was hit. We called for them to quit firing at it because he wanted to see if he could get it back in. We tried and you absolutely cannot pass that little plane.

I tell you, you did everything I think in the book that you were told never to do. You exceeded speeds that you should never fly that airplane at. You put landing gears and flaps down boon when you’re in a dive like this, which to me, should have (unintelligible) preached at you that the darn wings would fall off. I found out why they always carry a crew-chief on those flights because you are so busy that he’s doing a lot of the maneuvering of the controls other than just flying the airplane for you. We got that plane down. He got it pretty well under control, but he didn’t have enough power to get it to the airport. He found a little open spot in the swamp where there was a little farm.
He says, “Boy if you could stay behind this thing, maybe I could get it in.” He got it on the ground, but it went between the trees at the end. It took the wings right off of it. Boy he sure tried. I tell you, that radio control flight was some of the most interesting flying I ever did do. I loved that Twin Beach, it was the nicest...it was a real nice airplane. Let’s see, what other kind of missions did we fly? We flew strafing missions mostly to gun emplacements on the beaches. Sometimes you’d fly them just up and down the beach.

Sometimes you’d go out to sea five or ten miles, turn around and come back. My first flight out to sea, when I’m flying 20 feet off the water was a shocker to me. Thank goodness I was looking at my compass and flying a straight line out so that I could come back approximately where I started. When I turned around, I couldn’t see the shore. That really kind of shocked me. You can fly in just about as low as you can safely go and pull up over those gun emplacements. Boy if the guys don’t go down like the dust, you come over lower next time.

ES: (unintelligible).

MV: Yes it would be just about the elevation they would over the water because you were trying to simulate something that they might come into. The strafing plane is going to come in over the water just as low as he can because he doesn’t want to be spotted. They made it just as real as they could. Let’s see, what else can we do? Night and day flying both, oh chaff missions. Now chaff was tinfoil. This was to fool the radar. You would go up and the one that was usually the tow-target operator would be in the back with boxes full of shredded tinfoil.

When we would get to a certain area, whoever the radar people were on ground, which were running it, would call you and tell you to dump out so much of your chaff and all this stuff. It would go flittering down towards the ground and it blocks out the radar. They wanted of course, to teach them, the radar operators, the difference between an airplane and a bunch of stuff out there that’s trying to keep you from seeing it or whatever else they were doing with it. It was just a training mission for the radar operators. They also took us down to the beach and had us operate some of the big 90mm guns too. We didn’t fire them, but we were tracking an airplane and stuff with them.

ES: (unintelligible) viewpoint, wouldn’t it?

MV: Yes it would give you the other guys’ viewpoint. Most of the girls were in, I would say, probably 75 percent of them were probably in the ferry command. That I think was probably a more desirable assignment because you were flying mostly brand new airplanes and you were flying everything that they had. While we were stationed at a base, I thought it was nice not to have to live out of a briefcase because after that, all the space you had in the pursuits was a briefcase type thing to carry your underwear in, I guess. They got to fly a bigger variety of planes. There were girls that were instructing. There were girls that were test piloting, a whole bunch of things. I was a check pilot for the Twin Beaches for the new pilots coming on the field when it got down to Liberty Field at Camp Stewart. It’s Fort Stewart now.
ES: Is that in Texas?

MV: No this is in Georgia. Fort Stewart was where they were flying the first of the guys back home from Iraq. They came into Fort Stewart. That was in the middle of a swamp too with bugs, roaches. In both places we had army cot type beds. They were a skinny single bed with a wood frame, was what they were. They weren’t the folding cots. They had four posts on them with a mosquito netting that draped over the whole thing and the light for the room had a string that came over and it hooked onto the top of your bed so you could turn the light on before you got out of bed.

If you got out of bed, you wanted the light on so that you wouldn’t step on a roach. Each of the posts, bed posts, the foot was in a bowl of oil of some kind so that the roaches wouldn’t get in the bed. You didn’t go up and go in the night unless you had to, believe me. We had a hurricane come through and we were all assigned to fly an airplane out and I was assigned to fly an A-25 to Fort Knox and Knoxville, Tennessee. This airplane hadn’t been flown for two and a half months. It had been redlined or Xed, which meant that it had things wrong with it that had to be...redline you could fly it. It had something seriously wrong with it.

I thought, “Oh god I’ve never flown one of them at night. I’m going out at night to an airport I’ve never been to that’s in the Great Smoky Mountains practically in an airplane that hasn’t been flown for two and a half months.” I tell you, when that hurricane changed its direction, I never was so relieved in all my life. I figured I wouldn’t live through it, I really did. Why in the world? Why couldn’t they have sent us sooner?

ES: In a high wind to boot.

MV: Yes in a high wind to boot. So you know what we ended up doing? Everybody headed back to the barracks and our barracks was set right in the middle of an old pecan orchard. The enlisted men, were out over in our area, we were in the BOQs, they were out under the pecan trees picking up the pecans. We decided that if we wanted any, we better get out there. In 75 mile an hour winds we were all out there with a dishpan or a bucket or something gathering pecans. Thank goodness, it didn’t do any damage to the place at all. It would stand that.

That’s a high wind. I would say that when they canceled, we had already...Some of us had already reported to the flight line that we were going. I was one of them. Right at the last minute they canceled it. The wind was up in the 60s then. I think most of us felt the commanding officer was trying to get rid of the WASP in a hurry. It was wonderful. It was an experience that I just wouldn’t give anything in the world for to have not had that. You know, now we go to reunions.

There are nearly always some of the women pilots, the military ones. It’s strange, we talk to them and we’re so proud that women are finally flying in the military. Do you know what the

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reply that always comes back? You are the ones that were proud of it. If it hadn’t been for you and the WASP, it wouldn’t be going on now.

ES: That’s right. You’re the groundbreakers.

MV: We were the groundbreakers. We didn’t even know there was such a thing as women’s rights and ERA and all that stuff. I don’t think we were mistreated by the men pilots. There were some, you know, that were kind of hot under the collar because we were flying. For the most part, they were pretty darn nice. If you had a question, you could ask any one of them. Anyone was glad to help you. If you had a problem, you may have a problem with a plane that somebody else has been flying for 100 hours.

You could ask advice and they would give it to you. There was no problem. The girls that were in the ferry command, there was such a push. This sounds like I’m making it up, but it isn’t. There was such a push to get the planes to the point of embarkation that the P-47 people and the P-51 people were crying for the WASP to take their planes because they could get them there faster. No fooling around on the way. We were all business. We got deactivated in December of 1944. I had 22 months in and I would say approximately 600 hours of military flying, which isn’t an awful lot, but for 22 months it’s not a little bit either.

ES: That’s right. You were up there all the time.

MV: We had a mission—usually at least one mission a day, sometimes two. Once in a while, we’d have three missions a day. The missions were usually, oh, I would say two to three hours. Once in a while, you’d get one that was four hours long, but not too often. We were issued our commercial licenses when we were deactivated. If you wanted an instructor’s rating, you had to go...you did have to take a test to get that, even if you were instructing military pilots. They still had to get that CAA, as it was called.

The CAA was recruiting aircraft communicators because they wanted people with aviation experience. A whole bunch of us from Liberty Field, I think about 15 of us signed up for that. That is the way that I got to Montana. We went to Seattle for our training. We were there for six weeks. It rained the whole time we were there. I said, “I never want to see Seattle again.” I love Seattle now that I’ve been back in the summers. I was sent, along with a good friend, one of the WASP also, to Superior to the communication station that was there at the time. We finished up our training there.

Then both of us were sent to Dillon, Montana. We were there for about a year and a half and then along comes a reduction in force. We weren’t veterans at that time, so of course we got laid off. Then I got called back in, my girlfriend got married in the meantime. I went to Paine field at Washington. From there I want to Dubois, Idaho. From there I came back to Helena. Now at Helena, they started an experiment where they were putting the control towers and the

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communication station in fields that really needed a control tower, but didn’t need one full time.

There wasn’t that much flying. They wanted to see if it would work to have the communicators also qualify as tower operators. They asked me if I would do this because again, my aviation background. I said, “Heck I’d be glad to.” So I don’t remember how long that lasted. They established it and used the system for a while. Then I transferred to Missoula. In Missoula, I decided well, Mr. Right hadn’t come along yet. I don’t want to work a rotating shift the rest of my life. I would like to go back to college and get my teacher’s certificate. So I did that.

Then along comes Ed. I said, “Oh!” Ed was teaching school. We got married in January of 1950. We have been in Montana from then on. When we were on our honeymoon in New York City, he got notified that he’d been selected as the technician in charge or the chief at Great Falls. So that’s where we went back to. We were there for 24 years, I think. Then we got this cabin. Then Ed retired and we just stayed up here.

ES: So you’re here year round?

MV: No we spent one winter here just to see what it would be like. It’s a little too hard to keep your water system going and stuff like that. We did put in a small cistern under the deck out there. I could fill that up by drilling a hole in the ice and sticking a pump thing down and pumping it up the hill when the temperature wasn’t down below zero and keep the cistern full. We both just love it out here. He died in ’84. Now I quit flying when we got married because it was an expensive hobby. We wanted to have a family and I just couldn’t see spending all that money just to go up and fly just because I wanted to fly and have a good time. I did fly a little bit. I flew quite a bit between 1945 and 1950.

I don’t know exactly how many hours I did have, right around 800 hours I think. I gave it up. Now I can’t fly anyhow because I’ve got diabetes and can’t pass the physical. I dearly love Montana. We have three kids and my relatives, I have one sister. She says, “Why don’t you move back to the East?” I said, “Mary, my kids are in the West. I want to be close to them. I dearly love it here.” I have just stayed here. We started building the cabin in 1970. Ed retired in ’72 at 55. We just—

[End of Tape 1]
MV: —air navigational aids around Great Falls and down to Helena over to Lewistown, up to Kalispell, that section of the thing. He was in charge of the field maintenance for all that equipment. It was a pretty responsible job. He said the only thing wrong with it that he didn’t get to do too much technical work himself because he dearly loved electronics.

ES: Was he also a ham radio operator?

MV: Yes oh yes, radio from the word “go.”

ES: So the two of you, that’s a hobby that you shared.

MV: Yes.

ES: Isn’t that neat. Do you still...?

MV: I still ham some, but I don’t do it as much as I would like to mainly because I don’t seem to have time to for some reason or other. If I do have free time, it’s the time when most of the hams are working. You can’t get a hold of them.

We reported a forest fire back here in 1973 from here, one over on Six Point. I think it was the first word of it. It was the year they started putting in telephones. It was sloppy weather out here at the time. Now how that fire got going other than lighting, it must have been fairly early in the storm that it started. I don’t remember that. We didn’t have a phone. So I said, “Ed, I’m going to see if I can reach somebody on the radio. We just might be able to get through.” I got somebody that was down south of Missoula. I told him this was an emergency. He probably wouldn’t have even answered me if I hadn’t said that it was an emergency call. He called the Forest Service who called the Corps who got people out here to fight the fire. They came in and they came down over Six Point. They got stuck over there in the mud. The Corps had to send a boat up to bring them in that night because they couldn’t get their trucks out. That’s the only emergency thing that I have ever done. That fire could have spread.

No, the hams in eastern Montana have a picnic every Father’s Day. I haven’t managed to get to it including this one for the last three years mainly because I’m going to a dog show. I have to be there. The Montana Dog Shows are next week.

ES: Where does that take place?

MV: That will be in Billings, Helena and Missoula, I believe. Wait a minute, no. Billings, Livingston and Helena, then the fall circuit is Great Falls, Helena and Missoula, I think. So I can’t go to this Ham Fest.
I was in the 99’s for a while, and I just kind of lost interest. This time we had moved up here and were staying here. We decided that renting our house out in Great Falls was a disaster. You were there in a month for the spring and a month in the fall. We decided we either had to stay in Great Falls and forget this going south in the winter or we move to the cabin and go south in the winter. I said there was no decision to make. We started out with just that room in there. Then we put this across here. Then we closed in the, I had the east deck closed in, screened in about four years ago I guess. So it’s been in stages.

ES: This area is one of the most beautiful spots.

MV: It’s just fabulous. Are we still recording?

ES: Yes.

MV: Oh when you go back out, when you get out to where we call the “hog back,” you will have crossed five cattle guards. You’ll start down the hill. Look out across that Willow Creek Valley. It is so green, it’s unbelievable.

ES: (unintelligible) I’m so glad I brought my camera. I really want to take that on the way back.

MV: Last year, we had one rain that wasn’t, maybe about half an inch in the rainy season in May. There was no more after that. It was just enough to get the green starting up. It never did anything more than just start up because it heated up and it just burned it right down. It never did get green last year. In the western part of the state I think it did, but not here.

ES: Oh yes, we had beautiful weather. We had 140 percent normal this year. That’s before it started raining so we got a lot.

MV: Well we had three inches here Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. That’s a lot of rain.

ES: That’s a lot of rain for this area.

MV: Yes it is. I forgot one thing I wanted to tell you and that was, when I was at Helena working as an aircraft communicator, I was flying down there quite a bit too, there was one other young woman on the crew there as an aircraft communicator. She was working on her commercial. She got, she passed it. She was paying her own way through this. That involves a bit of money because 200 hours were required for it. So you can multiply that. I don’t remember what it cost you to fly then. It’s not what it does now. Anyway, she got her commercial license. There was a write up in the newspaper about it. I was reading this and well, my name is here. I read it: I was the only other woman in the state of Montana with a commercial license. I didn’t know it.

ES: What a shock!
MV: What a shock. I was one of a kind. Another thing I wanted to tell you, back here two summers ago, I was over to Seattle and they had seaplanes flying all over the place out there. I had said for two or three years to my daughter who lives there, “One of these times I’m going to take time to go out and fly a seaplane again.” So she called up the place. She said, “Mom you’re going to do it tomorrow.” She called them up and made a reservation for me.

I went out and of course the first thing I did was, the plane was on a dolly-like thing on shore. I went out with the, when you don’t have your license current, you have to have somebody with you. I said I wanted an instructor to go with me or a commercial pilot, whatever it might be. Anyhow I went out with him to check out the plane because I had never flown that plane before. It was a Cessna 172, I think it was, which is a very popular plane right now. They’ve been around since the 1950s. They are a little bit different on the inside now than they were then. Anyhow, I went out with him, and I was standing on the pontoon just looking in as he was checking things out in there. We got through, I stepped back, and I stepped on a big line that had a knot on it that was lying on the ground. I sat down real fast. I was kind of embarrassed.

Anyhow, we went out and we flew for an hour. We shot a few landings. Gosh it was fun. That’s the first time I had flown, with the exception of flying a little bit in the air if I was riding along with somebody, since 1950. It was the first time I landed a seaplane since before I went in the WASP. So that would have been back in 1943. I shot three good landings. He kept telling me, “Use a little bit more power on your approach.” I thought, “Well crying out loud, there’s nothing here.” I found out why. You’re landing in Puget Sound there. There is so much boat traffic that you don’t dare come in with a stall landing. You come in with a power landing because you might have to get out of there in a hurry.

Other than that, well I did have one little trouble. There is a rudder that drops down into the water off the end of a pontoon so that when you’re on the water taxiing, you can control. It works just like your air rudder does, except it’s in the water. This thing was heavier than the dickens. It was really just about all I could do to pull it up. I invariably started going around in a circle when I was floating. The last time I said, “Would you hold this thing either up or down?” Other than that, it just went fine. I loved every minute of it. I’m going to do it again sometime. That hour cost me $79, I think. You see why I gave up flying. Of course it wasn’t that in 1950. It would have been more around $15 or $20 at the most.

ES: That’s really interesting. So many of the women have told me that they had to give up flying because of the expense, not only insurance wise but also the plane and everything.

MV: Just renting the plane.

ES: What started out as a good hobby has turned into a sink hole.

MV: Honestly, I was spending every cent I was making in Missoula. I had a good job as an aircraft communicator. It paid me more than the woman that was head of the women’s P.E
department at the university with a doctor’s degree. It paid me more in 1949. It all went back into flying, except what it cost to live. It was really a wonderful life. I just love going to these reunions.

ES: Do you have any photographs of your days in the service?

MV: Yes I do.

ES: If you’d like to copy any to share with us...

MV: Right at the moment, I don’t know where they are.

ES: You can write me.

MV: Hey, I have a picture here on the wall that you might like to see.

[End of Interview]