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John Hewston, World War II Veteran: Aircraft Gunner, Mechanic, and Supply Sergeant

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John Hewston, World War II Veteran: Aircraft Gunner, Mechanic, and Supply Sergeant

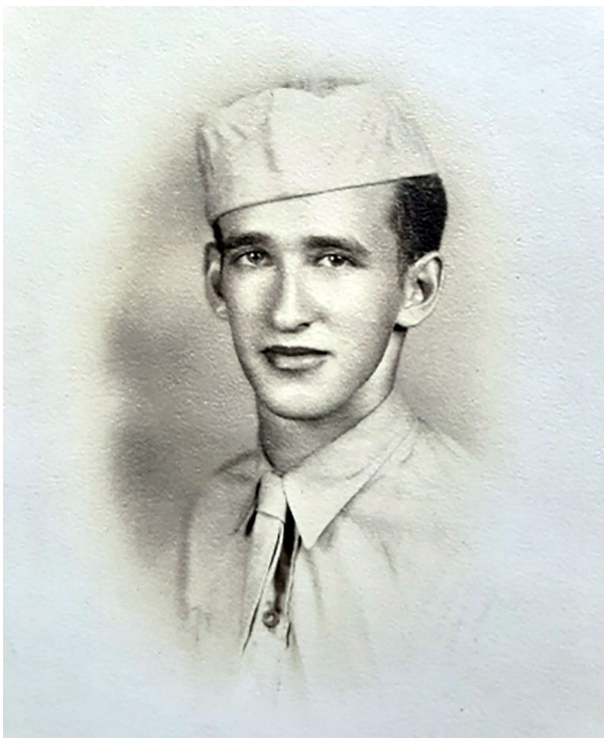
Acknowledgements

John Hewston

John Hewston, World War II Veteran: Aircraft Gunner, Mechanic, and Supply Sergeant

Michael H. Pazeian (Cal Poly Humboldt)

Keywords: John Hewston, World War II, Wildlife management



Most of us in and around Arcata, California know John Hewston as a long-time professor at Humboldt State University. He was also known as the birdman. For many years John was with the Wildlife Management Department at HSU, and he spent each Thanksgiving for 25 years coordinating the Bird Count for 12 western states, including Alaska, and compiling the results of observations from hundreds of participants.

His very early years he loved to watch birds. He drew pictures of the birds he saw. As a growing kid birding was unusual, but his friends and family supported him.

This interview was done at John's home in 2019. The focus was his years with the Army Air Corp.

These are John Hewston's words.

I was born in 1923 in Roy, Washington, about an hour south of Tacoma. On December 7th, 1941, I was running a riding academy. I worked and became a horseman. Soon I was teaching others to ride. I was just across the street from McChord Army Air Base. After nine months at the riding academy, I took a job with the Army Corps of Engineers at the base.



I was working at the base in 1942 when I was drafted. I was young, so the Corps of Engineers had me doing a variety of work on the base: running messages mostly and sometimes janitorial work too. I did that job for nine months. In December of 1942, I was the first teenager drafted in the State of Washington.

Because of the holidays I was told to report on Jan. 15, 1943, at Ft. Lewis, Washington at the induction center. I was sent to Fresno, California for my basic training. On that trip I saw my first palm tree. Most of the guys I was with were much older. We did the same as other basic army units: marching, discipline, guard duty, KP, gun practice, and cleaning the barracks. I was probably there at least 8 weeks. During training there I was really good with weapons. I was a good shot. I picked two things I wanted to do: aerial gunnery school and aircraft mechanic training.

Next was aerial gunnery school at Harlingen Army Airfield, Texas. It was 1943. I was there about eight weeks. In the classroom we studied windage and trajectory—the math behind gunnery. In the field we shot many different kinds of guns—shotguns to learn with moving targets. Mostly 30 and 50 caliber machine guns. At times we shot from planes. I got airsick. The focus of our training was to be up in planes. We went up in single engine and multiple engine planes.

I was an honor grad, top 10, in a class of 300. They asked me to stay on as an instructor. But I turned it down.

I wanted to attend aircraft mechanic's school. I was sent to Keesler Army Air Base near Biloxi, Mississippi. We were

in the classroom and working on planes. The B-24 was the major plane. By then I was Pvt. First Class. We also worked on the guns of the plane. Most of the guys with me were from different parts of the country. It took time to get to know them. Many of the guys had to go to gunnery school after we finished mechanic's school. I had already completed it. I wanted to join an outfit going overseas.

My next stop was Clovis Field in eastern New Mexico. I became part of Army Air Corps' operational training unit. Shortly after I arrived, I was on a troop train to Virginia and then to England. But we missed the convoy. We were there in Virginia for a few weeks. I was then we were sent to Georgia because of my aircraft mechanics gunnery training.

I ended up at Chatham Field near Savannah. (Chatham was home to the 8th Air Force's B-24 wings.) Our barracks inside and outside are pictured below. We had time to play some sports. Routines were the same in Mississippi and Georgia.

It was still 1943. I was training new crews on B-24s. Soon I became a specialist in supply. I was in charge of all





parts for the bombers. Each B-24 had a ground crew. They were responsible for keeping the plane in flying condition. The crew chief would come to me for any and all parts needs. Even parts needed for the guns. Most of the time I was doing my job to supply needed parts. I was now a sergeant.

I knew the plane and all its parts. I tried to make sure we had all the parts needed all the time. I could visualize the part. I knew what parts were inter-changeable. I would be ordering parts from the manufacturer as well. I was in a warehouse type of building on the base. Once in a while, I would go places to pick up parts.

One time my brother came to visit at Chatham. He had just finished his basic training in Florida. Going home to Washington was too long of a trip, so he came to visit me. We went into town and saw a movie.

I worked different shifts. If I had the day shift, I usually went into town in the evening. I had a girlfriend living with her parents in town. A few times I stayed at their house overnight. She and I would good have dinner and see a movie.

One occasion I did fly as part of a crew. The photo above is a practice mission for a squadron I worked with.



I was declared essential by the Army. I was at Chatham Field until after the war ended.

During the time there I got three furloughs. Three times I took the train home to Washington to visit my family. My younger brother was in the Pacific.

The war ended. I got some training as a military policeman in Florida shortly before I was honorably discharged in early 1946.

Always interested in wildlife, John began a career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He was focus on natural resource management and public relations.

After 20 years, John was hired by Humboldt State University. John's experience with wildlife management was a great addition in 1966.

John still spends lots of time watching for birds from his front porch. He has a house on a wooden lot above the university. At age 98 he and his adult caretakers plan a full day for him. Each of the last three years John has attended the flag ceremony on the Arcata Plaza on November 11.

