

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

James A. Brazelton

conducted by Martin W. Thomas

April 1, 2004

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Part 1: Introduction:

This interview is being conducted on April 1, 2004 at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, IL. My name is Martin Thomas. I am speaking with James A. Brazelton. Mr. Brazelton was born on September 12, 1925 in Trenton, MO and now lives in Lombard, IL.

Mr. Brazelton learned of the Veterans History Project when his wife heard on (Family Radio, 91.9 FM) in an interview with me (by Virginia Beehn of that station). Mr. Brazelton has kindly consented to be interviewed for the project. Here is his story:

Mr. Brazelton, before we went on record you said I should call you “Jim”...

Right.

Part 2: Entering the Military:

...so I'll refer to you as Jim. Jim, when did you enter the service?

I entered the service, probably in, oh, probably in February of '44.

Where were you living at the time?

I was living in Chicago, IL.

What were you doing before you entered the service?

I turned 18 when I was in my last, or senior semester in high school. I showed my papers to the principal and told him that I had my draft notice, and he told me to go ahead, so I went and took my physical and everything, two weeks before I graduated from high school. And after I graduated from high school I got my notice about two weeks after that to report to Ft. Sheridan, IL for my induction into the service. At Ft. Sheridan I was sworn into the service. I received my uniform allotment, and I was there about two days going through the paperwork and everything. Then I was in the Air Force and I was in the Cadet program...

Jim, before we go into the Cadet program, let me ask you a couple questions, if I may.

Sure.

First of all, you said you were sworn in and you received your uniform allotment. What do you mean by that?

You were given a basic allotment of clothing. You got, I don't even remember what it is now, you got two pair of shoes, you got the wool uniform or the OD uniform, you got the summer uniform or the khaki uniform, you got underwear, you got the whole bit.

This was all at Ft. Sheridan?

At Ft. Sheridan.

And then you said you went to Air Force Cadet school. How did you end up in the Army Air Corps after you were drafted into the Army?

When I was drafted and went down for my first physical, that was an all day deal because they had thousands of people down there. We paraded around in this building at 155, I think it was Randolph or Jackson. We paraded around that building there with no clothes on all day. Then, when we were finished, or we had passed the examination, the last room we went into, there was tables set up for every branch of the service, and when I went in they were all filled, so I walked over to the Air Force table and told them I would like to get into their Cadet program. So then I was told that I would be in the Army, and I would be in that program, and they would take me down to Miami and I would go through the psychomotive test, the physical test, and the mental tests at Miami.

Part 3: Training:

Now Jim, was this something that you would have after boot camp, or was this actually at the boot camp?

It was during the boot camp. In other words, I got my basic training plus this.

And what was the name of the post there?

I don't remember the name of the post.

How many weeks was that, altogether?

Oh, that was a couple of months, I think, at most.

So you were taking the psychomotive testing during boot camp.

Yes.

And what happened then?

At that time the requirements for Cadet program was that you had to pass all three disciplines. And I did not pass the navigation discipline. I passed bombardier and I passed the pilots, but I didn't pass the navigation, so I was not accepted as a cadet. But I was accepted as a gunner, or to train for gunnery on the aircraft. And so from Miami Beach they took me to Kingman, AZ, and I took my gunnery training at Kingman, AZ.

What did the gunnery training consist of?

Well, the first thing they did was, they showed us a 50 caliber machine gun which we would be responsible to know how to fire and know how to take care of, and they told us that we would have to assemble the machine gun blindfolded, field stripped. I beg your pardon, detail strip, not field strip. You had to, they took the bolt apart and they took the receivers apart, and they took everything apart. They took the barrel off the receiver, and you had to assemble this blindfolded as one of the final tests.

How about training in firing it, and hitting targets?

We shot a lot of skeet. Shotguns and skeet, to learn how to lead your target. And then we fired machine guns at a moving target on rails, an elliptical rail out there that they sent this machine

around and around and around, and you'd learn to fire at that.

Were you firing from fixed positions at the skeet?

At that time it was fixed positions.

Both for the skeet and for the moving targets with the machine gun?

Uh, skeet, we shot a lot of that from the back of a truck.

And the targets on rails?

The targets on rails would go around and around, and we would fire at that, just to give you the feel of the gun and to get you used to leading your target as you shot. We took air to ground gunnery. We went to a town called Yucca. At that time it consisted of about three adobe houses and a bar. We flew in old B-17s there, and we shot live ammunition and we shot cameras mounted on our guns.

Were these the ground targets?

No, we would fly up to fighter strips and they would come up and practice attacking bombers, and we would be the attackees, and we would get the fighters coming in at us on our gun cameras. And then they would evaluate the gun cameras and things like this. I'll tell you a side thing there: when we would finish up, the pilots were usually men that had returned from overseas, so they would say, "Have you got all your cameras shot up?" or "all your film shot up?" and we had an instructor in the waist with us and he would tell the pilot when we did, and he would say "How would you like to go for a ride?" Because if he came back he would have to take another group up. So (laughs) he was dead beating it at the time. And one time we went to the Grand Canyon. And we flew down and through the Grand Canyon. He didn't want any film taken of that flight, but that's what we did. And that's probably off the record, or probably some shock to a visitor. (both laugh) But anyhow, we flew through there.

Was there any other component of gunnery training, besides what you've told me?

No, not at that time.

When did you finish up your gunnery training?

Oh, jeepers, I don't remember the dates.

Roughly, what month or year?

It was probably a two month deal there.

And so this would have been...? What season?

Uh, well we're down in Kingman, AZ, so it was hot. Let's put it that way.

Was this still 1944?

Yes.

Part 4: Going Overseas:

Then what happened next?

OK, I went from Kingman to Lincoln, NE, and was assigned to a crew. This would be the crew that I would fly with for the rest of my time in the service. We went from Lincoln, NE to Ardmore, OK for what they designated as crew training. Crew training consisted of mainly touching a little bit on gunnery, but it was mainly for navigation, and it was for the pilots so that they would learn to fly in formation, and we would get used to formations, and we would get used to tracking our guns so we didn't shoot down our squadron buddies. So we flew there, that was about a month. I guess. in there at Ardmore. And then from Ardmore, we went back to Lincoln, NE, and we picked up a B-17. And we flew from Lincoln, NE to Bangor, ME, and at Bangor, ME that was our last port of call in the United States. We flew from Bangor to Gander, Newfoundland.

Was this a new plane?

Yes. Brand new. We flew to Gander, Newfoundland, and we were weathered in there in a snowstorm for about four or five days. They couldn't get the strip cleaned off so we could take off, so...

Do you remember what month that would have been?

No, I don't. That was (laughs) 60 years ago. So we had to go out every day, and we did what they call "pull the props through," we got the oil circulating in the engine. We'd pull the props through, then we would put the engine covers over the engine so that the wind wouldn't freeze them up.

You say you pulled the props through, but you didn't actually fire the engines up?

No.

Do you remember what the temperature was, roughly?

No, I don't. But it was cold.(both laugh) And windy.

What did you do the rest of the day?

Rest of the day, why, we didn't do much. I mean, that took us quite a bit of time, 'cause the engine covers were canvas and they were stiff as a board. You had to get the canvas cover over the blades of the propeller. And we had three bladed props, so it was a problem. And we would eventually get those on and get the engines all taken care of. Then we would come back and

mainly just get chow and.... I don't know if they had movies there or not. It was an English base, Gander was, so it wasn't our base.

So when you left...

So we left Gander and we flew to the Azores Islands, of which I had never heard of before. But that's a Portuguese domain that's in the Atlantic Ocean just off of Spain. It's out in the ocean.

So you flew directly from Gander to the Azores?

Gander to the Azores. From the Azores, we spent the night there, and the ball gunner and I went down and fueled up the airplane, and it was cold, and we topped the tanks off, right to the top because we were going to fly over what was at that time Morocco, French Morocco, or the northern tip of Africa. So we wanted to make sure we had all the gas possible. So we fueled the tanks up, and the pilot just about had a fit the next morning, because the sun come out, hit those nice new shiny wings, the gas expanded, and we were shooting gas out our overflow jets like crazy, and he says, "What in the world did you guys do?" So we told him (laughs). But there was three ships that were flying. We didn't know where we were going until we left Bangor, I beg your pardon, until we left Gander. When we left Gander, Newfoundland and we were over the Atlantic our bombardier came back and gave us our orders, telling us that we were going to Italy, to the 15th Air Force. So, anyhow, there was three of us going over there, so the two ships had taken off and the weather front was moving in on the Azores, and they were going to close the field down, and the other two B-17s are up there circling and they were calling to us, telling us to come on, come on, and we were at the end of the runway. We had started the engines. The pilot thought we would blow up, but we didn't. We started the engines, and we were sitting at the end of the runway. And the man in the tower fired out two red flares. That meant that the strip was closed down. But the pilot just put the throttles right to the firewall, and we started down the runway. And the radio operator said they kept yelling at us, "The strip is closed! The strip is closed!" because this weather front was moving in. And we just kept on going. And they were really reading us our pedigree.

And what was your destination when you left there?

Our destination was Marrakech. We flew across French Morocco, and we landed in a town called Marrakech. Which to us looked like the end of the world. We were 18 years old, never been away from home, and this was a typical Arabic town. I mean, walls were mud walls with wine bottles broken and set in the mud on the top, and it was kind of desolate. So, anyhow, we...

How long were you there?

We were only there overnight. We were told when we left, the bombardier also read us the requirements that we were under. That when we landed at any strip, like the Azores or Marrakech or wherever, that when it was time for us to leave the next morning, if we were not there we would be court martialled. And we could not get sick, we could not get, well, they told you "You better not get any venereal disease, 'cause you'll be court martialled for that too," and they told us that they would hold the whole plane up, and the crew. So you would be court martialled for that. But we landed at Marrakech, and we stayed there overnight, and we got fueled up, and then we went over to Joyia, Italy.

How do you spell that?

Gee, I don't know how you spell it. It's right in the arch of the boot. We went to Joyia, Italy, and we landed there, and we got fueled up again, and the pilot came to us and told us that we were going to be there for a week. That there was another squadron in another bomb group that had got shot up, and they needed our aircraft. So they took our aircraft, and we didn't have an airplane then. They took our plane, and we waited there a week, and finally our bomb group sent a plane down to us, to pick us up and our baggage. And we put all our stuff on there, and then they flew us up to Foggia, Italy.

Foggia, Italy was your ultimate destination?

That was our ultimate destination.

And when you got to Foggia, you got there without your plane, correct?

Right. We didn't have an aircraft.

Part 5: Overseas Duty:

And what was your outfit then?

The outfit that we was assigned to in Italy was the 15th Air Force, the 2nd Bomb Group, and I was assigned to the 49th Bomb Squadron.

And did your plane then...

I don't know where it went to.

Oh, you never got that plane back?

Never got that plane back.

So you were assigned a different plane once you got to your unit?

Yes, we were flying the planes that was in the squadron.

And what was the plane like that you got, in comparison to the one that you...

(laughs) They weren't new.

How many missions did it have on it?

Well, I'll tell you about the last one we had when... We flew, or I flew, 27 sorties for the squadron, at various targets. I flew to Vienna...

OK, Jim, we're going to your combat in a little bit. First I want to get a little more information, if I may, on the outfit you were assigned to. What was its overall mission?

Usually, I was on what they called the second round of oil refineries.

What does that mean, the second round of oil refineries?

Well, that means that they had, basically that the first round they had wiped out, or they had bombed, the major oil producers and storage units for Germany. And those fellows paid the dues.

So, your mission was primarily oil refineries?

Oil refineries, marshaling yards, bridges, uh, we had about three missions up to Bologna, Italy, where the German 9th, 'cause the Germans, there was a line right from Rome right across the boot, and that was called "the bomb line." The Germans were on the northern section and we were on the southern section. We flew up there about, I would say, oh about three times. The Germans had dug in for the winter, and our job was to go up there and drop "daisy cutters," or the frag bombs to get the German army up and get them moving again.

Would you describe a daisy cutter? What it looked like? What it did?

Well, the daisy cutters that we had, when you walked in a bomb group, it looked like a load of garbage in there. They were, the bombs themselves, they were about, oh, about a foot and a half long, and they were about, maybe, oh, four or five inches around. And they were just made up of concentric rings that were together. And when they would explode, the rings would come out, like shrapnel. And this was for personnel, to get the, well, see, the Germans evidently had dug in up there. They said they were going to spend the winter there. They had drawn the line. And I guess the infantry wanted them to get up and get rolling. And if they got up, why then the infantry could keep after them. And it was easier for us to go up there and drop these daisy cutters on them, so that they, the Germans would abandon their position. And I guess it worked, because we flew up there, and you would look out the aircraft and there was snow all over the ground, and when we would leave it would look like somebody had just taken a big shovel and just turned the ground over, and it was all black. We did what they called "pattern bombing". We didn't bomb individually, we dropped as a group.

Well, I'm going to ask you more questions about your combat missions in a little bit. You were in Foggia, Italy, and what was the name of the airfield?

Amandola. Used to call it "the Vino Tower," (laughs) 'cause the guy that ran the tower was drunk half the time. (both laugh)

Now, was he US military or was he a...

Oh, yeah. Everything was military. Well, we had three, what we called three hard runways, and one, like a blacktop runway. And the three hard runways were made out of these steel, uh...

Pierced steel planking?

Steel planking, like. And we had two of those, and one of the hard. And we had two thirds of the field, and the British had a third of it. And they would do their night missions. They had everything from Mosquitoes to B-24s, to Lancasters. They had everything over there. So they would do the night bombing and we would do the day bombing.

And your position was tail gunner, you said.

Yes.

How many crewmen were on your B-17?

Ten.

And what were their positions?

Well, starting at the nose, you had the bombardier, the navigator, were in the nose. Then directly above them was the pilot and copilot. Directly behind them was the upper turret gunner. Then the bomb bay started. And on the other side of the bomb bay was the radio room, and we had a radio man in there. Then we had the ball turret gunner just outside the radio room. Then we had two waist gunners. And then myself. I was in the tail.

The ball turret gunner was under the belly of the plane?

The ball on the B-17 didn't retract or anything, so a little better than 50% of the ball was below the aircraft. And he would actually get in the position, it was just a metal ball, and he would get in there and close the hatch behind him. And he would fly there.

Among the crews, was there any one of those positions that was deemed to be more dangerous or less desirable than any of the others?

Well, they told me that it was the ball gunner and the tail that the Germans wanted to nullify first.

So if you were attacked by enemy aircraft, those would be the primary targets?

Those would be the two positions that they would like to see out of the way.

Now your position, how many guns were you operating?

Two hand held 50 caliber machine guns.

They were mounted in tandem?

Yes. All of them were twin guns except for the waist gunners, and the waist gunners had single 50 calibers.

Your plane, did it have a nickname?

The last plane I flew on had a nickname, but the rest of them were just nondescript.

At what point would a plane generally get a nickname?

Usually it was when they first started. Like when we brought our aircraft over, that was our aircraft at that time. If we would have kept that aircraft, we could have put a name on it. If the pilot so desired and everybody agreed on a name, why we could put a name on it. Some of them had some pretty fancy names, some of them had some pretty fancy drawings.

Well, what was the nickname on your plane?

The last plane that I flew, the nickname on her was "Tough Tittie."

(laughs) Tough Tittie?

That meant it was “too bad.”

You’re saying that was just another, a slang way, of saying “too bad.”

That’s right.

And, uh, did it have a picture to go with it?

Yes. There was a copy after Vargas pictures.

And Vargas was a famous painter of...

Esquire.

Esquire and Playboy desirable women.

She was a very voluptuous young lady.

When you inherited that plane, she was already named and painted?

Oh yes. Yes, yes, she was one oldest ships in the squadron. And we took her up to 95 missions.

OK, I’ll ask you about the missions in a little bit. I just want to ask you a couple of more questions about the nose art. What they call nose art, the name and the picture. Do you know if there were any Air Force regulations that determined who has the permission to name a plane?

No, I don’t.

Did they actually, then, record those names on official records?

Not that I know of. I’ve seen books that were strictly on nose art. Of the bombers. But, normally there was no, as far as I know, there was no restrictions, because some of them were pretty graphic (interviewer laughs), and some of them were pretty, um, or want of another word, (laughs) they were vulgar (both laugh).

Risqué?

Yeah!

All right, we’ve discussed your plane; now let’s just discuss you. At that time, what was life like for you? What did you do off duty? How did you feel about what you were doing?

Well, I thought that, like I say, I was just 18, basically it was the first time I was really on my own. As one of our sergeants told us when we got off a troop train, he said, “When you used to get in trouble, you would go to your mommy and your daddy.” He says, “Now when you have trouble, you come to Sgt. McCartney. And Sgt. McCartney don’t like trouble.” (both laugh) I remember that to this day.

At that time, speaking of mother and father, were you able to stay in touch with your

family?

Oh, yes.

And how did you do that?

We wrote letters, and then when I was in the service, I mean in the States, I could call. But, mainly it was letters. And the parents would send packages to you while you were in the service, of goodies and things that they had.

What, for instance, would you get from home?

Mainly, I got cookies from home. And my crew, the one that I was assigned to, they loved the cookies. In fact, when we were overseas, we had a steady diet of Spam. And to this day, I can't look a can of (laughs) Spam in the face. But, anyhow, my mother used to make icebox cookies because they were hard, or they were of a hard consistency and they would ship, so they wouldn't break up and crumble. And every time I would get a package from home overseas, why, the guys knew I was getting icebox cookies, so they would grab the canteen cups and they would run to the mess hall and they'd get coffee. And they would come back, and we'd all sit there and eat cookies and drink coffee until they were gone. So, this one time, I got this package, and they were just in the mood for cookies, and so we were all sitting around and I opened up the package, and there were two tubes of cookies in there. And in the middle, there was two cans of Spam. And they had saved their ration coupons and sent me Spam! (both are laughing).

Oh, you're saying your parents had saved their meat ration coupons to provide you with Spam?

Provide me with Spam! (still laughing) And, oh boy, did I get it from my crew!

(laughing) They weren't ready for more Spam?

No, they were ready for cookies!

Did you ever write your mother and tell her that...?

Yes, I told her graciously, I said, "Don't expend your ration coupons on us. They're feeding us all right. (laughs) I told her, "We have adequate Spam over here."

Well, besides the grief that your crew gave you over the Spam, did you feel any pressure or stress, either because of the mission or because you were a young man away from home?

Well, there was always anxiety, I mean, when you were going on a mission, why, like I say, we were on the second round of oil refineries, and they didn't have the fuel to...or for some reason or other they didn't put fighters up against us. I don't know why, I think they were using them all up in Germany proper, trying to stop the bombing up there. But their antiaircraft, they were very, very good with that.

I'm going to ask you some specific questions in a little bit about the combat missions and the antiaircraft. Before we get to that, when you were off duty, first of all did you get any

leave or passes while you were there?

Well, we were about ten miles from Foggia, and that was where our tents were, or our bivouac area, and if you weren't flying, the time was your own. The only thing of it was, that if you were scheduled to fly you had better be there. And you had better report to the ship that you were assigned to. I flew a lot of missions, not with my crew, but with other crews that their ball gunner was either missing or sick or something or other, but anyhow, why, I've flown quite a few missions on my own, so to speak.

Now, you said "ball gunner." Were you actually flying a different position?

No, I was flying tail.

So, did you go to Foggia, yourself?

Oh, yes. If we weren't scheduled to fly, they had trucks that were constantly going down the road. And there was about three or four other bomb groups on this road. We were on what they called the Manfredonia Road.

How do you spell that?

I don't know. There was town, Foggia was inland and Manfredonia was right on the Adriatic Sea. And so that was called the Manfredonia Road, and we would go out there and if a truck was going by you just hailed him and he'd pull over to the side and you'd jump in.

What sort of things would you do in town?

Oh, all you'd do is bum around and go to the Red Cross and maybe shoot some pool. First thing you did was that you would go in town, you would take a shower, 'cause we didn't have any showers out in the bivouac area.

And where would you take the shower?

At the Red Cross.

So the Red Cross had a facility with showers. What else did they have there?

Oh, like I say, they had pool tables and just ordinary things like that. But we would go in there and we would take a shower. Then we would go to the barber shop, which was quite plentiful there in Foggia, and we would go to the barber shop and we'd get a shave and get a haircut, and (laughs) they would want to Marcell your hair (both laugh) when they did your hair, because I guess that was the fad over there.

Did you have any USO shows while you were there?

They had, I think, they had one that I know of. Jinx Faulkenburg came over there, and, but I didn't go, because those things are jammed up to the rafters. But I didn't go. We didn't have any of the famous names over there.

Who was Jinx Faulkenburg?

I think she was a tennis player (movie star) or something.

Did you take any other leave, did you do any travel while you were over there?

I had rest camp. When I had about 20 sorties in, they scheduled me to go to rest camp.

And where was that?

Well, I was scheduled to go to Rome, and they had another one at the Isle of Capri. Well, my radio operator was of Catholic persuasion, and he was going to the Isle of Capri. And I told him, I said, "I'll trade with you. Seeing that, you know, you're of Catholic persuasion, why, Rome, I mean, you can go there, you can go to the Vatican and all that." So we traded, and I went to the Isle of Capri and he went to Rome, and we had our rest camp that way.

Part 6: Combat

OK. I think now we are ready to talk about your combat missions. You already mentioned, but I'll ask you again, how many missions did you fly?

I was on the sortie deal. The sortie meant that you were assigned a mission, and you went over the mission, went over the target and dropped your bombs, you got credit for one sortie. On the mission deal, if you went to Germany, not northern Italy, but if you went to Germany you got credit for two missions. Of course, the missions at those times were very, very rough. And so they got credit for two missions. But I got credit for one what they called sortie, once over the target, drop the bombs and that was it. So I had 27 sorties.

And what were your targets again, Jim?

Our targets were usually, at that time we were still after the marshaling yards, where they made up their trains to run their supplies and things. We were after the oil storage. We were after the oil refineries. We were after ball bearing works. And we were after the manufacturing of aircraft.

What cities would that typically take you to? First of all for the ball bearing works and the aircraft.

Regensburg, well, let's put it this way, I went to Vienna...

And what was your target in Vienna?

I think that was manufacturing of aircraft. Regensburg, I believe was ball bearings and aircraft. We went to Graz, and I don't know what the target there was.

Graz. What...?

G-R-A-Z.

And what country was that?

I think that's in Austria, if I'm not mistaken.

Of those...

Then we went to Hungary, Czechoslovakia...

Of all those, what were your most memorable?

(chuckles) Vienna.

Vienna. And why was Vienna the most memorable?

Vienna, they told us they had over 850 flak guns there.

850?

And it was quite hot when we would go up there.

What was it like flying through the flak?

Very, very strange. Because you have the, uh, when you're in the aircraft, they're not pressurized, and you had the slipstream coming around the ball turret, which the ball had an opening roughly of an inch all the way around it so that it could rotate 360 degrees, so that would suck air up in there. You had the waist, that was most cases, lot of cases, that was open. And that would all funnel back toward the tail (end of tape)

We ran out of tape and I had to switch the tape over. And Jim, when we ran out of tape you were telling me what it was like flying through a storm of flak, and you described hearing the engines and what was coming back through the various gaps in the plane. And some of that probably didn't get recorded, so I'll let you start with that again.

So, most of the slipstream that came into the aircraft would come back to the tail, because the tail, the shroud around the guns was about two inches opening, and so it would just slip right out the back of the aircraft. So you didn't really hear the flak going off, but you would see the bursts, and especially in the tail. And we were flying "tail end Charlie." A flak battery was four guns, and so when I would see a burst of flak come up near us on the tail section, I would tell the pilot, "We've got a burst of flak on our right hand side," and he would slide over to the left, because there was going to be three more bursts coming right in there. And so that way, why, you could talk to the pilot and he would get the information, because he couldn't see where he was at. So I would tell him that, and he would slide back and forth...

Jim, you used the term “tail end Charlie.” What did you mean?

That, the way our squadron was set up, or our bomb group was set up, we had four groups. And we flew in what they called a “hollow box” position. Each corner of the box, there was a squadron. And they flew at different altitudes, so that if the Germans got the altitude of, say, the right hand corner of the box, they didn’t have the altitude of the others. They would be above or below that. When you flew there, the corner of the boxes, they would fly three ships, and if you had an extra ship he would fly in the back of the “V”, here (gestures) in the last ship, and that was “tail end Charlie.”

So each squadron had three to four ships?

Well, our squadron was the biggest. We could put up, at maximum, we could put up 15 ships. But most squadrons, they only put up eight, eight or ten ships.

And so in each of the corners of the box, how many planes would be flying?

Well, ours could fly 15. The others could have ten, and that was the bomb group then, see. The whole bomb group. And that bomb group, we were assigned a target, and that bomb group dropped on that target, the whole bomb group. Now there’s other bomb groups coming in ahead of us or behind us, and they are assigned another target. In other words, they weren’t assigned the target that we were assigned. So they would come in. Tail end Charlie, you didn’t have to hold a rigid formation. “Cause in rigid, when you dropped your bombs you wanted the bombs to all go on the target, so you had to fly close in together.

Now you say you that you didn’t all necessarily have the same target...

Well, it was the same target, but it wasn’t the same area of that target.

Understand. So you did all stay together. You just dropped your bombs...

Yeah, well our bomb group dropped, see we had oil storage tanks that we were dropping at. We would drop at the oil storage tanks. And, say that the, another bomb group coming in behind us, they had the cracking mill, so they would drop for the cracking mill, so...

The cracking mill is something that makes gasoline out of the oil?

Yeah, so they would, in other words you would, you were all bombing the same target, but you were bombing given sections of that target.

Well, of your 27 missions, or sorties, roughly how many of those resulted in attacks on your group, or your aircraft?

None by aircraft.

No. How many involved any attack, on your aircraft or on your group?

What do you mean by attack? Another aircraft?

Or ground fire? Antiaircraft?

Oh, we always had ground fire.

Every mission?

Every mission. You had ground fire. In fact, the 88 was a versatile weapon, and they could move it. And we actually picked up what they called "mobile flak," where they had it on the road, and they were going, moving it to another location, and they heard us coming and so they just stopped and set their guns up, and when we went by, why they just let us have it.

So it wasn't predictable where they would be.

No. No.

Now you said before that you never had any attacks by enemy fighter planes.

No.

But with the antiaircraft, you say every mission that somewhere...

Every mission.

...and you never really knew where it was going to come from?

They had us, they would plot us so that when we would go in on a target, we would rally either to the left or to the right after we dropped our bombs. And that was so that the air wouldn't be turbulent over the target. The other bomb groups coming in behind us would have a smooth air. And (chuckles) the Germans seemed to know which way we were going to rally, because they had the air just black out there with antiaircraft fire. And you rallied to the left, that was it.

Were there ever any missions targeting any of the antiaircraft batteries?

Yes, I went on what, in our squadron, was the first attack on the antiaircraft. What we did, they had made what they called a new bomb, and it was a 260 pound frag bomb. And it was about, oh I would say about (pauses to recall dimensions) a foot or 18 inches round, just made of concentric rings, and they were all hooked together. And they had a new fuse on it. They called it a proximity fuse. And it looked like a potato masher. And what it was, it would send out a radio signal, and when that signal reflected back up to the bomb it would explode. So they sent us in, they sent three aircraft in in front of the second bomb group, to drop at the concentration of antiaircraft, so that they would more or less nullify some the antiaircraft guns. And so when the Germans saw us coming with three aircraft, they just, they sent up, they sent up a couple of shots just to keep us honest (both laugh), and we opened up. They thought we were, you know, going on to the target, so we open up wing tip to wing tip and we went in there and we dropped our bombs. And I guess they were quite effective because the next raids they sent those three ships on, boy those German gunners, (laughs) they really got anxious about them.

Well, now you said that you guess they were effective, and that leads, actually to my next question. Were there any briefings that you received later to tell the effectiveness of any of your runs?

They probably told the pilots, or the bombardiers. I know they told the bombardiers. Because if they were off target, why they were on the hot seat.

But you were never, as the crew, briefed...

No we were not briefed on the results. They would always send in a photograph aircraft after we bombed, and he would photograph the area. But we were never taken in and said that we had really done it this time.

Well, getting back to the attacks on your plane by the antiaircraft, was your plane ever hit or damaged?

It was always hit. Flak is very funny. I mean, you can see it explode right in between the wingtip and the stabilizer, almost right up in the waist, and you, it would just sound like somebody had a handful of gravel and it was dropping it on a tin roof. But there wouldn't be a hole in the airplane. And then other times, why it would be 200 feet off. It would go off and, man, your airplane would just vibrate. I mean, it would, 'cause they, in fact, once, when we got antiaircraft that heavy, why we would duck down behind our armor plate. And I was ducked down and I was looking up at the waist, and my waist gunner, Abbott, he was leaning up against the armor plate, and he was of Catholic persuasion and he was saying his rosary. And a piece of flak, as fate would have it, came through and hit the armor plate right by his shoulder. Knocked him right onto the middle of the aircraft. Dust and everything flying around. And I called up to him, and I says, "You OK, Abbott?" And the dust finally blew back into me, and he said, "Yeah, I'm OK." I says, "Boy, I thought they had you that time." And he says, "Naw. And guess what?" And I says, "What?" He says, "I never missed a bead." (both laugh)

Were any of your crew members ever actually injured?

I had, two of them were shot down...

Oh, not in your plane, but in another...?

No, they flew split crew. My bombardier and my waist gunner was both shot down, and they came back through Yugoslavia. And they came back to the crew.

Oh. And they came back and they flew with your crew again?

Yeah. Yep, they flew with us till the end of the war.

Were there any other especially memorable missions? You mentioned the one to Vienna where you...

Well, yeah, I had one. My oxygen regulator froze open on us one time. Our mission started at approximately 25,000 feet, and went up. The highest I went in was 32,000 feet. And you had to have oxygen at 10,000 feet or up. 'Cause we were in a nonpressurized type cabin. And my oxygen regulator, something malfunctioned and my oxygen mask blew off and hit the, I had an armor plate glass in front of me, and it blew off and hit that. And I thought my mask had gone bad. So I called up and told them to give me the spare mask, and they threw it back to me. And I put it on and my cheeks bulged all out, so I took that off. And you're only allowed about a minute to two minutes up there without oxygen, and then you have what they call anoxia, lack of

oxygen. You just drift off into never-never land. If you don't get oxygen within a given length of time, why, you're gone. So I pulled that mask out, and I took the hose that was connected to my regulator, and I stuck it in my mouth. Because I had to have oxygen. So my cheeks, they bulged out again, and that was a metal ring on that hose, and that took the skin all out of the inside of my mouth. Of course, you don't worry about things like that at the time.

What caused your cheeks to bulge out when...

Oxygen was coming. We had what they called demand oxygen. In other words, it adjusts automatically. And when you would breathe, why, the oxygen would come in. And there was also a setting on there that you could turn, it would make it go full blast. But that wasn't it, so, anyhow, I told the pilot, I said something was wrong with my regulator. And he said, "Well, you better get it fixed right away," he said, "because we don't have that much oxygen." So I beat on that thing with my, that's the only time I used my .45 (both laugh). I took it out and I used it as a hammer. And it finally broke loose, but we lost a lot of oxygen. We just made it back.

Now, just a couple quick questions about the armor. You mentioned the armor on the plane. How was it configured, and what was it? How thick was it?

Oh, it looked to be about maybe a quarter of an inch thick. It was in the waist. It was a curved piece of armor that went from the window down to the floor. And it would protect the lower part of the body. And in the tail I had on the, there was like a ball out in front of me there, a half ball, and they had the same of armor, was in that half ball there. Plus on my hips, from my hips back, where my ammunition containers, and they had the .50 caliber machine guns, bullets which were about five inches long, six inches long, so you set them with the primers facing into you, so if the primers were hit they would go out. And have to come through them.

Generally on a mission, how many rounds would you have for your position?

We had, I had about 850 rounds per gun. Most guns carried that. Of course you couldn't fire 850 rounds all at once like they do in the movies, or you'd melt the gun. So the gun would go to 700 to 800 rounds per minute, so we actually a minute of firepower. But you nursed it. You didn't do that.

So with the fire discipline, what would they teach you to do? How many rounds burst, normally?

Just bursts. And you didn't fire off of the tracer bullets. The tracers would, were made of magnesium, and when they would go out they would burn, and it wouldn't burn symmetrically, and it would throw the bullet off, although it didn't look like it. And so, your bullet wasn't really going to the target. It was just basically a scare factor for the people that was trying to get you.

So we mentioned your missions. You told me, and I don't remember if it was on record or not, about the last mission your plane flew, without your crew. And I'm going to ask you to tell me that story. But before I do that, after that mission, did you fly any other missions with any other plane before you...

No that was the last time we were scheduled to fly.

OK. Let's talk about that mission, the last flight of the "Tough Tittie."

I can tell you also about crazy incidents that shouldn't have happened that did happen.

OK.

We had our, our escorts were usually P-51s, and they carried belly tanks. And that day that we hit the anti-aircraft that was on the road that was not predicted. They usually fly in fours and they would cross back and forth underneath us and over the top of us. They had a group of four aircraft going across, and when the anti-aircraft came up, their belly tanks are like a bomb setting underneath them. It's full of gas. So, they triggered their belly tanks, and they came floating down through our squadron.

Did any of them come near hitting any of your ships?

The old man told us to open up, and the tanks, thank goodness they got a visual on them, you know and they were descending quite rapidly, but they looked like they were floating.

And you dodged them?

Plus then we had another ball gunner that was up there one time, and he didn't, the ball is self-contained and all his ammunition is in the ball, and he has a cover that goes over ammunition containers. And this ball gunner, nobody knows why, probably the old man, or the commanding officer, knew why after the mission (chuckles), but anyhow that fellow rolled his guns down, you had to have them down at 90 degrees to get into the ball. And when he did that, he didn't have the cover on his ammo box, covered. And here we had 850 rounds of ammunition belted, coming, floating down through the squadrons (both laugh).

So, just little things like that. But of those three ships that went over, our ship was the only ship that didn't lose a man. The one ship was on a mission and it got hit in one of their engines, and they couldn't feather the propeller on it. And it was what they call a runaway prop, and it was just vibrating the ship to death. And they had to crash land in the Adriatic. Everybody got out. The radio operator, when you crash land he has to stay at his position giving out a signal, so that they can home in on you, and so they'll know where you are at. He was at his position, and he was sending out. And they crashed, and they made sure that he got out. But he had not taken off any of his heavy flight gear or anything like that. And he stepped for the dinghy, or the little rubber life raft that they pull up alongside the ship, and he missed. And he fell in the water and he never came up. He just went right down.

In the other ship, the upper turret gunner, the turret gunners, they would spin their turrets. They had, somewhere along the line somebody said if you did that and the flak come in or anything, it would hit a moving target, why it would ricochet off. So he was spinning his upper turret, and when they went on a bomb run we would always get real heavy flak then. And he was spinning his turret, and some way or other his oxygen became disconnected. And there's no talking on the bomb run until you're off the bomb run. Then they go on an oxygen check. They check everybody to make sure they're OK. And they called him and his turret was still spinning, and he was dead. 'Cause he didn't have the oxygen and he just died.

Did you ever hear what happened to the crew that inherited your plane?

We were scheduled to go on what turned out to be the last bomb run that our bomb group went on. I don't even remember where it was at. It had to be somewhere up in, over the Alps. So it was probably in Austria. And we come down to the ship. We were scheduled to go, and we came down to the ship. And we preflighted the ship, made sure that it was all ready to go.

And this was to be your last...

Well, it turned out to be our last. We had the ship all preflighted and everything, and she was all ready to go. And a truck pulled up. And it had our commanding officer and group of fellows on there. And he told our pilot, he said, "This is a green crew that has just checked into the squadron, and they would like to have a mission." So, evidently he knew that the missions were just about over. He said, "You and your crew are going to be standby, and they're going to take your ship, and they're going to fly the mission." So they took, and they never did that before, I mean usually you would fly, the first five missions you would fly with an old crew to get broke in. And so they took our ship, and they went on the mission. And she got hit in between number one and number two engine with flak. And a fire started (pause) and the gas tanks are just behind in the wing. And a fire started up there, and our squadron sighted our ship. She was, when they were going over the Alps, she uh, you needed three engines to fly over the Alps. If you had two engines, you would fly through the Alps. You would go down on the deck and dodge the peaks and go through. And they sighted her going into a cloud bank at the base of the Alps, going in (pause) on the Austrian side. And, uh, she never came back. And after the war which, that happened to be the next last bomb run that our group went on...

What was the date?

I don't know. It was in '45 sometime.

What month?

That I couldn't tell you. The reason we found out what happened to her, we got it through the grapevine. They found two of the crew in a prison of war camp at the base of the Alps, and they said that the pilot was just ready, he thought he had the fire blown out, and it caught again, and he was ready to give the bailout signal. And uh, the crew had jettisoned the escape hatches. And the fire got back into the gas tank, and the aircraft blew up.

And what happened to the people in it?

The bombardier, he was blown through the Plexiglas nose. The waist gunner was standing at the waist hatch, and he was blown out of the hatch. And they were kind of beat up, but they found them in prisoner of war camp up there, and that's how they found what happened to the ship.

So they were the only two survivors.

(No response.)

So how that affect you when you heard that news?

(pause) It made you feel kind of funny. (pause) Because if they hadn't taken, taken our place, that might have been us. (pause) It felt kind of sad because, you know, some other guy had your position and had your, uh, your flight, so I mean...(pause)

And this was, these were men that you had never met before...

No.

...that encounter out on the...

No. I didn't even know their names.

So, that, in fact the mission before that was your last mission. What happened then, to you?

Well, I was the oldest tail gunner in the squadron. And so, after the Germans had signed their peace treaty, they started sending the men home. And they made my bomb group, they made it occupational. Our air strip, why, they would, the other air, the other bomb groups would fly their ships in and they would park them on our air strip there. And they made our bomb group occupational. Well, I was the oldest tail gunner in the squadron, so....

How old were you at the time?

I was about 19 or 20.

You were (chuckles) the oldest tail gunner in the squadron at 20?

Yeah (both laugh).

So they sent you home?

So I had my choice. They told me, "If you go home we'll give you a ten day delay in route, and you will train in B-29s," because Japan was still... So they said that I would go home, and I would get a ten day route leave. So I said, "Well, I'll go home." And my ball gunner, he didn't have the time, so he had to stay. So he had a real good time.

So you were sent back to the States. Where did they send you?

I went down to Naples...

Naples, Florida?

(laughs) Yeah, Naples, Florida! Naples, Italy! And I took a troop ship out of there coming back.

(laughs) **Oh! It was Naples, Italy. OK.**

Yeah.

And they sent you home on a troop ship. Do you remember the name of the troop ship?

No. We came in at Newport News. And I don't know how long it took us.

What happened after Newport News?

I knew we were going to, I wanted to see the Straits of Gibraltar. And when we got to the Straits of Gibraltar it was all fogged in and everything, and I never did see it.

Well, then when you went to Newport News, what happened then?

When I got to Newport News there was thousands of guys coming in there, so they gave me a ten day delay in route and sent me home. And I went home. Then I went back to Newport News again. And then they sent me home again, why I don't know. But everything was all fouled up down there anyhow. And then they called me back the third time. The third time I was discharged from the Army.

The war was over? V-J day had occurred?

V-J day happened when we were going through the Straits of Gibraltar.

But they still kept you in after that?

Well, I mean, they had to process it, you know, process you. So, when we were going through the Straits of Gibraltar, we couldn't see the rock, but one of the crew came out on the bridge and they had a speaker system there, and we were all up on deck. And they said that the Japanese had surrendered.

Part 7: After Service:

Oh. So after you were discharged, what did you do, immediately after your discharge from the service?

I tried to adjust to civilian life, which, see I was 18 when I went in. I was about 20 or 21 when I came out. And, in fact, you might say I grew up in the service. And it was kind of hard getting back into civilian life again. I mean, you were used to the regimentation and you were used to the way that the Army did things and the way things moved. I remember when I was home at one time, why, my mother asked me something and I turned around and I answered her rather sharply, and she (laughs) let me have it, right in the mouth (both laugh), and she said, "I'm your mother!" (both continue laughing) And I said, "Yes, Maam!"

After you got out of the service, did you go to work or go to school?

I started going to school, but I didn't have, I was just restless. I didn't have the tenacity to stay with it.

Was that supported by the GI bill, the school?

No, I was going to a junior high school, I mean a junior college. I was going to Wright Junior college. And I went there for awhile, and like I say I, some of the stuff they were doing, they were, you know, after where we'd been and what we'd done and everything like that, it was kind of "Mickey Mouse", and so you didn't...

So what did you do instead?

My uncle had a farm in Missouri, and I went down to Missouri and I was on a farm, stayed on a farm for a little bit there. I really didn't do much of anything. I, my folks, they didn't challenge me to go to school, or they didn't challenge me to do anything. I did try and get into the electricians' union. I thought I would like to be an electrician. But at that time, why, they had thousands of applicants, so you had to know somebody to really get into their apprentice program.

So did you come back to Chicago then?

Yes, I came back to Chicago.

When and where did you meet your wife?

I met my wife in Church. We were attending a small church.

This was in Chicago?

Yes.

Do you remember what year that was?

No, I don't. My cousin was the youth leader there at the time, and he was trying to form a baseball team. And I was fairly good at playing sports. So he asked me if I would come to this church and play baseball with them. So I came to their church to play baseball with them, and...

What were you doing at the time? What kind of work were you doing?

I worked for Electromotive Division. And I was in their, oh, electrical department, making the, well they have the high voltage cabinet, where they have big panels on there, where they have their relays and resistors. And they were all cabled and wired together, and I was making those, for Electromotive Division.

Did you stay with Electromotive throughout your career?

I was there for about four years. It was factory work. And I was making fairly good money, but I felt that it was more or less a dead end job. I mean, they could take a man off the street and in a matter of a week, why, they would have him being able to do this. So I went from there, I went

to De Vry University. It's University now, but at that time it was just a trade school. I went there, and after I went there I got a job with AT&T in their test rooms. And I worked for AT&T for 39 years. And wound up being an engineer's associate for AT&T, working on microwave.

Since your time in the service, did you ever get in contact with any of your wartime crew members?

I used to send Christmas cards to my crew every year. I did this for about six years. And I never got anyone to answer me, so I just stopped.

Did you ever join a veterans organization?

I did belong to the VFW in Chicago, but when I moved out to Lombard I didn't continue.

Have you ever attended any reunions?

No, I haven't. I thought there for awhile, I didn't know that the 2nd Bomb had an association. I joined that association and I joined the 15th Air Force Association. But I've never gone to any of the reunions that they've had. No.

Part 8: Closing:

Well, Jim, I'm about ready to wrap up. Just to sum it up, how do you feel that your service in the Army Air Corps and those experiences that you had, affected your life? Did they change anything in the way you lived your life since then?

Well, we, our type of war in the heavy bombardment is a different type of fighting than you would get if you were in the infantry or the marines or something like that. I told my wife there's more than one way of, our bombardier had a saying that when we would go on the bomb run, he would tell us, "I want you to unplug your heated suit. Because I don't want you burnt with any hot wires." That meant if you got hit with flak, why, (laughs) and we would say "Thanks a lot." So, if you got injured in our type of aircraft, your chances of survival were nil or next to none. Because we flew the Alps at 60 below zero, and if your heated suit was gone, why, you were gone too. And if you were wounded, why, you would die of shock. We had four syrettes of morphine, and if you didn't have a head wound they could shoot you full of morphine. But as far as survival, why, it's not there.

I think I've asked all the questions I have. Is there anything before we go off record that you would like to add?

Yeah, I'll tell you about one time when I fell asleep up there.

OK.

They have what they call "oxygen check." The bombardier radios in about every minute or so, and you learn the voices of the men you fly with, so we would have to respond verbally when he would say "Oxygen Check." I'd say, "Tail OK," "Waist OK," "Ball OK." Well, we were flying, you would fly at altitude, why, the breath from your lungs is warm. And we had rubber oxygen masks, and they were cold. And so you had what they called a butterfly valve that, when you exhaled it would open up and then it would close. And the warm breath coming out hitting the

cold mask would form condensation. And that would drip down and sometimes would open up the butterfly valve. So all your oxygen would be going out. So, basically what you're supposed to do is when you got your oxygen check, you were supposed to reach up, take ahold of your mask, and what we called "break your mask," squeeze your mask to clear any ice that was on the butterfly valve. Well, I don't know why I didn't do it, but I didn't do it. And so they called me, and I didn't answer. This is why you always flew with the guys that you trained with. "Cause they were like a family. And I didn't answer, and so the waist gunner, he had K rations that we had up there. He crawled back and he couldn't reach me, but he crawled back and he threw this K ration and hit me in the middle of the back. And that kind of ticked me off. And so I lifted my head, you know, and the ball gunner was telling me, "Break your mask! Break your mask!" So I broke, just out of reflex, I broke the mask.

Would you say he saved your life by doing that?

Yeah. So my life was saved by K rations (both laugh)

Jim, thank you very much for taking the time to do this interview with me today. We are going off record.