VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Edwin C. Edwards

Conducted by Deb Barrett

August 25, 2008

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This interview is being conducted on Monday, August 25, 2008, with Mr. Ed Edwards at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Edwards was born on April 25, 1924, in Lee, Illinois. He is a retired electrical engineer who worked for Commonwealth Edison. Mr. Edwards learned of the Veterans History Project from a member of the audience during the presentation he did on the Normandy Invasion, Operation Market Garden, and Battle of the Bulge. He has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Military Service

Where were you living when you entered the service – what was your life like just before you went in?

I grew up on a farm and worked on the farm just southwest of DeKalb in Lee. My Dad was a farmer. Just immediately prior to going into the service I was a student at Northern Illinois State Teachers' College, which was the predecessor of Northern Illinois University. It had about 300 students – there are now 30,000 or so, I think – and had three or four buildings. I attended there for a semester, during the winter of 1942 and into early January, 1943. During that time I took an exam at the University of Chicago. I had heard about the Army Air Corps pre-meteorology program, took an exam to qualify for it and I qualified for it. I was accepted, and I had to enlist in the Army, because the Air Corps was part of the Army at that time. So I enlisted and was inducted on January 24, 1943, at Amboy, Illinois.

So at the time …

I was living in Lee and attending college in DeKalb.

How old were you at the time?

I was 19 then.

What attracted you to the Air Corps?

Well, this particular program.

The meteorology program.

I hadn't thought too much about being a member of an air crew before that, but being a meteorologist interested me. And it promised me a year and a half of college, which was another point I thought was worthwhile. So I entered the Army January 23.

Induction and Basic Training

Where were you inducted?

I was inducted in Chicago and then sent to Camp Grant in Rockford.

Tell us what your induction was like.

Oh, that was unreal!

What happened?

I was an Illinois farm boy, never been away from home. You get in Chicago and the first thing they do is they take away all your clothes. You're walking around there buck-naked all day long! (Both chuckle)

With all these other young men doing the same thing!

Yes. All these young men. That was a weird experience! I had never done anything like that before.

How many young men were in this room?

Oh, there were hundreds of them. Hundreds of them.

All naked!

All naked. You went from one doctor, he'd ask you questions; to a psychologist and all this. The psychologist asked "Do you like girls" and all this kind of stuff. So we finally got through the induction. Mostly it was a typical exam.

Did you know anyone else you were going in with?

One or two other people from my area – we took the train from Amboy and went into Chicago. That's where the induction experience began.

So, you were walking around getting examined by all these doctors. What else happened besides the exam?

Well, we had psychiatrists sit down with you and ask you all kinds of weird questions that I'd never had before. I didn't know anything about this sort of thing.

What sort of questions did they ask?

They asked you, "Do you like girls" and "Do you like boys." I had no idea what that was about, but I answered it. Finally we got our uniforms.

You were probably pretty glad to put those on!

Yes! We got our uniforms and we sent our clothes home – we had to mail them back home.

Were you allowed to keep any of your personal belongings?

Very little. Very little.

What did you keep?

Personal articles, like your toilet articles – that kind of thing. That's about all I had. I had nothing else – no papers, no books or anything like that. I had my induction papers and that was it. Then we took a train ride from Chicago to Rockford.

Union Station?

Yes. And in that train ride we went through my hometown. And that's when I got homesick.

Already.

Already.

How many days had it been?

Just one! (Both chuckle) I had never been away from home – ever!

This was your first time – not just going to the big city, but your first time away from home.

Yes. First time away from home. You could have taken my right arm off if they would let me go at that time because I was really homesick. We got to Camp Grant, and all of us were introduced into Army life.

And what was your introduction?

First of all, somebody else decides everything. Somebody else decides when you're going to eat, when you're going to do this, when you're going to go to sleep. You had to learn how to make beds …

The Army way.

The Army way. And we learned that corporals at that time were very near to God (both chuckle) – not quite, but very near! We were privates – no rank at all, no prestige or rank at all.

Tell us about the quarters they put you in.

They were wooden barracks there.

One level?

Two level barracks with double-bunks.

About how many men in a room?

I would guess about 50 to 75 men in a room. Early in the morning – 5:00 in the morning – they'd come in and …

Gently wake you? (both chuckle)

Oh, yeah – gently wake us! "All right guys, up and at 'em." They'd give us ten minutes to get ready and get outside. You had to get your clothes on, your face washed and teeth brushed and whatever. And 75 guys are trying to get into the bathroom! (both chuckle) And all this time before in my life I had been alone – I was an only child. So it was …

All of a sudden you had 74 brothers!

74 guys – it was quite different. We spent most of the time there marching and learning things about military discipline and order and so forth.

What type of rules did you have, for example, in the barracks – your bed had to be made?

Yes.

And did they inspect it?

Oh, yes!

Who inspected it?

The barracks – they had a barracks corporal or officer – non-commissioned officer come in and inspect it.

And was he always satisfied with what he saw?

Well, if he didn't like it, they didn't say anything – they just ripped the bed apart and say make it again. That was it. That was their standard technique.

You said you had ten minutes in the morning to get ready and line up outside.

Yes. Everything you did you lined up! (both chuckle) You walked in formation. They marched you – from the barracks they'd march you to the mess hall where you'd have breakfast.

Did you do anything before breakfast – exercise?

No.

You had ten minutes to get ready and you marched as a group.

Yes. On the way back – we'd march back to the barracks – and they'd give you a few minutes and you'd be ready for your next activity; marching or physical activity.

What sort of breakfast was a typical breakfast for you?

They weren't bad at Camp Grant. It would be breakfast food – scrambled eggs, pancakes – a pretty good breakfast.

Did you have a lot of time to eat?

No, no you didn't. You had an adequate, but they determined when the time was up, that was when you had to quit eating and get in line – somebody else decided how long you ate (both chuckle)! Somebody else decided everything!

Someone else decided you weren't hungry anymore!

That's right!

So then you marched back a group, and then you went on to your next activity.

They decided what your next activity was.

What types of other activities did you have?

Physical activities – physical exercises.

Conditioning.

Conditioning – push-ups, running; they would put you on where you would do pull-ups …

A chin-up bar?

A chin-up bar. That type of thing.

Did they have goals for you of how many you should do?

Yes. And sit-ups! Oh, man, I remember those! Your stomach was really sore. They had a minimum amount you had to do. One soldier would hold your feet, and you'd take turns holding each other's feet and you had to raise up vertical, and put your back vertical, and go back down and do that 20 or 30 times. And by that time your stomach was getting sore. So that was physical activity. I don't recall any classroom work. I'm sure there was some – probably the beginning of military discipline. They'd explain the various ranks …

Who was an officer; who you call "Sir" and who you don't?

Yes. That's where the rule was "If it moves you salute it; if it doesn't move you paint it!" (both chuckle)

Did people break the rules; forget the rules?

Not too much. These were all raw recruits, right out of small towns and farms. We had, in that particular place, we didn't have too many big-city kids goofing around.

Were there any penalties for people who broke the rules?

Oh, yeah.

Like what?

The big penalty, if you got on the wrong side of the non-commissioned officer was KP – kitchen police. You got to wash buckets of dishes – oceans of dishes! (both chuckle) And take care of waste food, and peel potatoes and all that kind of good stuff.

Did you ever have to do KP?

Oh, yeah!

You had your share, huh.

Oh, yeah. You'd get up at 2, 3:00 in the morning and go down to the mess hall and they put you to work. You worked all day, from early morning until after the supper hour. You'd get a little break in between the meals, and that's about it. But nobody liked KP.

Do you remember why you got put on KP?

No. Some of it was that they'd just arbitrarily pick out certain people – there didn't have to be any reason for it. So, I was only at Camp Grant for three or four days. It was just a place to stage before the next move. Then I took a train to Keesler Field.

In Mississippi?

Yes. Biloxi. `I've been there since, lots of times. I go down there to play golf. Keesler Field, at that time, had greatly expanded. Our quarters were basically a tent – the top of it was a tent, and the sides were wood and it had a wood floor that was about half-full of sand because every place we went was sand. So Keesler Field was basic training, and that's where they taught you military discipline. They taught marching – they were great on marching (both chuckle); forward marching, right turn, left turn. They wanted you to be able to march in an orderly fashion – in a military fashion. And we did some of that. And that's the place where I learned that everybody in the United States doesn't speak alike.

The same way. Right. (Ms. Barrett chuckles)

I'd never been south – I'd been in Illinois and Indiana, and that's as far south as I'd ever been. When you got down to Keesler Field in Mississippi …

That's right on the Gulf.

Yes. The first thing I heard when I got off the train was "One, two, three, Foh." You don't pronounce four, 'foh.' Well, not for them! That's where I learned where the southern accent came from. And some of them, out of the hills of Tennessee and so forth, I could barely understand them – the southern boys could understand them, but I couldn't. That was different.

So you got exposed to a little different complexity …

Yes. We were there for six to eight weeks in basic training. That was, again, marching in what they called 'close-ordered drill,' and physical exercise – a lot of that – and some classes that taught you about the history of military discipline; some military history and some basic courses in military life.

So, nothing specialized.

No, not at that point.

It was just general military background.

I was there six weeks, right near New Orleans, and never got off the base!

Did you have any free time?

We had a little free time, but it was on the base. You never got a pass to get off the base. The instructors and the non-commissioned officers – what they called the 'permanent personnel' – they had all kinds of leave. They had leave where they could go off every night, they could go on weekends – Friday afternoon to Monday morning they were free. Not us! We had no leave at all. The routine relaxed a little bit on Saturday and Sunday. We had Saturday morning until early afternoon activities and classes, exercises and so forth. And Sunday was pretty much – they didn't bother you too much on Sunday. You could go to – they had churches and so forth on the base, so you could participate in your religion there.

What did you do for relaxation, then?

Write letters and read, go to movies – they had movies there – and that's about it; go to the PX and buy something to eat – candy or whatever. That was it. I can't remember what the pay was – I think $40 or $50 a month. When World War II started, the pay was $21 a month for a private. Then they raised it before I got in.

So it was like a dollar and a half a day.

Yes. You didn't need much money (chuckles) because you had no place to spend it! Something to put in your mouth, that's it, or buy a book.

Were there card games going on?

Yeah. There were – I didn't participate in that because I never gambled. Some of these guys …

They knew what they were doing!

Oh, yeah. They knew what they were doing. And gambling was a big thing for some of them. I didn't participate in that. I knew it was something that I couldn't handle. I didn't know how to do that. I'd play cards, but never for money. I'd never played poker and blackjack and all those kinds of games. So that was a common relaxation in the Army (chuckles), and they'd play until one guy got all the money and the rest of them are all broke. Then they'd go home! (chuckles)

So you would go to the PX and things like that. Did you read?

Yes. I'd read and write letters. I wrote to my folks at home.

Did you have any good friends there?

I made friends there.

Specialty Training

Nobody that you got particularly close to.

No. And after Keesler Field we went to Vanderbilt University. The concentration was on academics there. We had a brand new building to live in there. The quarters were really nice.

Just for the Army?

Just for the program – the (unclear) officers' program. They had some other Army groups there, too. They had Army ASTP.

What was that for?

Army Specialized Training Program. I don't remember what all the programs were, but they were in there for maybe six months going to school for specialized work in the Army. Our group was there, and we had – again, every day we had calisthenics, close-ordered drill, marching to classes, marched back again; after a class you went out and formed in a group and marched to your next class.

So you were there with regular civilian students.

Nope.

It was all military at that time?

In our classes it was all military.

But on the campus …

Right. There were some civilian students there.

Were you in any classes with them, or were your classes separate?

We didn't have any classes with them.

Everything was separate.

Yes. This was a concentrated course. I remember we went through trigonometry in three weeks.

Wow! That's fast!

Yes. We got all the way up to differential equations, integral calculus…

Calculus.

Yes, integral calculus and differential equations. We studied probably the best course in geography I've ever had. We studied intensely geography, because geography is related closely to weather. Any physics, mechanics – most of them scientific courses. A lot of math. We had school every day, all day long until mid-afternoon. Then we'd have calisthenics and marching until supper time. We had a gal who ran the kitchen there …

It was a separate kitchen for you and everything?

Yes. A separate kitchen for us. The building had its own kitchens and dining rooms and so forth. It was a good facility. It was really a good place for a young kid to go to spend a year. You had discipline and a lot of academic training there. I got the equivalent of two years of college out of that.

In a year's time, you said?

Yes. We had no time off in the evening. You couldn't leave – you had to have a pass to leave. You could leave on the weekends. Saturday afternoon you could leave and go down to Nashville, or Sunday you could go off to Nashville.

You couldn't go off the campus except on the weekends.

Yes. Nashville in 1943 on a Saturday night – you couldn't imagine what Nashville looked like on a Saturday night in 1943!

Really! Tell us.

The sidewalks – the street – were full of soldiers walking up and down the main drag of Nashville.

Just happy to get off the campus.

We were a small part of it. They had multiple divisions that were training – maneuvers – outside of Nashville, training for combat – for Europe and the Pacific. I don't remember which divisions, but there were a lot of divisions out there. We could see the patches on their shirts and on their jackets; they'd come in and there were literally tens of thousands of soldiers in there on Saturday night.

It was almost like being on a base again! (both chuckle)

Yes. Oh, man!

Did you go into town in your uniform?

Yes.

Always?

Yes. We had no civilian clothes. During wartime we war the uniform all the time – never wore civilian clothes, were not allowed to wear civilian clothes.

Did you have a curfew?

On Saturday night, if you were coming back – you could stay away from the base if you had a pass, so we didn't have a curfew then. But if you were coming back you did have a curfew. I don't remember the time – it was 11:00 at night or something like that.

When you were staying on the campus, was the building regular dorm rooms or like barracks?

It was regular dorm rooms.

How many men?

We had about four guys in a room.

Was it bunk beds?

We had to do our studying in the evening – we went to class all day, now you've got homework to do for the next day, so the evenings were spent studying. You had supper and you studied until 9:30 or so; 9:30 was lights out. That was not optional. There was nothing optional about this whole life! (chuckles) You went to bed when the curfew occurred and that was it. You got up the next morning early, regular time – they called us, of course – had breakfast and got ready for your next day's classes. I remember I caught the chicken pox or measles – measles! I caught measles when I was down at Vanderbilt University, and they had to quarantine me. They put me in a room in a separate building for three weeks, and I got to see no one.

Just the doctor.

The doctor and nurses. They'd bring meals to me. I had my books and I was able to study. Somebody told me what the assignments were and I tried to keep up.

How did they tell you – was it just written down?

Yes. Somebody would write it down to tell me.

Were you able to keep up?

Pretty well, but I was behind when I came out of that.

But nobody else in your room – the three other guys didn't get sick.

No. I don't know – I just caught it. I went to the dispensary to where the doctors and nurses were. They took one look at me and said, "You're going to be quarantined. Period!" That was it. Vanderbilt University was a great experience.

You were 20 at that time?

This was 1943, so I was still 19.

You were at Vanderbilt for one year. You completed the program there?

I completed the program. At the end of the program we were supposed to go to MIT in Boston. And we never got there – they canceled the program; that was the end of it.

Why did they cancel the program?

Well, they decided in their wisdom that they didn't need as many meteorologists as they thought they would. So they simply canceled the program and gave us the opportunity to apply for aviation cadet status and air crew status. And we went to the air base – Smyrna Air Base in Tennessee, outside of Nashville. It was a classification center for air crews. We took extensive exams there. Most of us, because of our math backgrounds, qualified as navigators. So that was my classification.

Now you went into the Army Air Corps hoping to be a meteorologist. Had you any desire before that to do anything with flying?

Not particularly. But this was an opportunity to become an officer, so that was …

That was the hook they used …

That was the incentive, yes. I knew I didn't want to be in the infantry, and this looked better than the infantry to me. So that's what we did. We were only at the Smyrna Air Base two days, and the next place was Maxwell Field at Montgomery, Alabama. Maxwell Air Base was where they took aviation cadets and began the training for military discipline and officers. This was a 'spit-and-polish' place! (chuckles)

And you were doing the polishing! (both chuckle)

Every place we went we marched! The thing I remember about Maxwell Field, was that at meal time they had guys with white gloves behind us as we would sit and eat. These guys would watch how you handled, if you had your fork and knife and spoon in the right position. I remember we had to take each bite, raise it up vertically, bring it into your mouth horizontally, and if you didn't do that they were on you like ugly on ape! (both chuckle)

What would they say to you – gently, of course!

Oh, yes, gently! They'd give you what they'd call 'gigs.' And a gig was a certain amount of time walking back and forth with a rifle out in the street in front of the barracks – in front of everybody.

They were going to teach you manners!

That's right! That was the punishment you'd get. Somewhere along the line I got an hour or two of that. That's a long hour, believe me! You were walking back and forth – go down this way, turn around and go back, for a solid hour with a rifle on your shoulder. So that's what I remember about Maxwell Field. And of course we had lots of classes on military history and military traditions. They taught us officer conduct and all this type of thing – leadership training.

They were really trying to polish you up so you'd be good image as an officer.

Right. They were going to make an officer out of you there. It was about three months or so that we were there – three or four months at Maxwell Field.

Was there anything there related to your job as a navigator, or this was just officer preparation.

This was mostly officer training. We probably did some aircraft identification. They would throw a silhouette of an American plane, a silhouette of a Japanese plane or a German plane – ME109, ME110, Junkers 87B, Junkers 110. They would throw them up on the screen and you'd have to identify them. They gave you an exam on them, too. They'd give you a piece of paper with all these on them, and you'd have to identify them. So that was officer training at Maxwell Field.

And how long were you there?

I'd say three or four months.

So this was 1944?

Yes.

You did a lot of traveling in the south in 1944!

Yes. The next stop was gunnery training. They started training us for specific air crew duty now – gunnery training, and then after that would be navigation training.

Did all the navigators get gunnery training first?

Oh, yeah. Every member of the crew got gunnery training – pilots and everybody.

Where was this?

That was Tindall Field in Florida.

South again! (chuckles)

Apalachicola, Florida. The field was right on the beach – right on the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, we would practice sitting at a .50 caliber machine gun shooting out into the Gulf. There must be tons of lead out in that Gulf!

Down at the bottom!

Yes. Gunnery training involved mainly the .30 machine gun and the .50 caliber – mostly the .50 caliber machine gun. And before we could qualify for that school we had to be able to take apart and put back together, blindfolded a .50 caliber machine gun.

In how much time?

Oh, probably 15, 20 minutes; probably. You had to learn each part, and you had to learn how it felt, because you knew you would have to do this blindfolded. You learned how that thing went together and apart. And we also had to practice in aircraft. So they took us up in aircraft. And we would fly around shooting out of the top turret, or out of the side turret. And we would shoot at targets that were being towed by pursuit planes. Pilots had a long string on it, and we had bullets that were color coded. So if your color code was blue, orange or red, they would look at the target and see how many blue marks, how many red marks, so they could tell how well you were hitting the target. Of course, we took a lot of courses on gunnery. We had skeet shooting so we could practice leading a target – because when you're shooting an aircraft you have to be able to lead it; while the bullet is flying from the gun to the target plane, the plane moves. So you had to learn all about that and how to gauge that; how to determine how much lead you had, and how to control the gun up there.

Had you been in a plane before this?

No.

So this is your first time in a plane as well as learning all this.

Yes.

What was your thought the first time you took off in a plane?

It was a different experience.

Were you nervous or scared?

Not too bad. Flying never bothered me. I enjoyed it. I remember flying out over the Gulf, and this pursuit plane would go by and you'd shoot at the target. I'd had very little experience with guns – I shot shotguns at home.

Hunting?

Yes, a little hunting. I was never a big hunter, but I did a little. We'd just hunt rabbits on our own property. That's all. So I knew a little bit about guns, but not very much. But the thing I remember about Florida at that time – it was summertime I think, and it was hot and it was humid. I mean we were wet from morning to night. We had all these Army clothes on. If it rained they made you put these huge raincoats on, and those raincoats were heavy …

And plastic!

And plastic. And, oh man, you were just completely soaked. And mosquitoes! I remember those.

Big mosquitoes in the south (chuckles)!

Very big mosquitoes – I remember those. So after …

You were there for how long?

Let's see. I was there for probably about a couple of months – May and June of 1944. And from June to November I went to Hondo Field, Texas. Hondo Field is navigator training – Hondo Air Force Base.

What part of Texas was this?

It's about 50 miles west of San Antonio. They had a lot of air force bases around San Antonio and Dallas because the weather was good out there for flying. So that was navigator training school. And that's where we learned how to … we went to school everyday almost all day long, with time out for the exercises …

Of course!

And some for marching back and forth. We did that. And a lot of schooling on identification. We even had training there on a Norden bomb sight. Not every aircraft had a bombardier on it, so most of missions I did the actual dropping of bombs. We were trained on a Norden bomb sight. Now, a Norden bomb sight in World War II was a strategic secret. A Norden bomb sight was equipped with a detonation device, so if it fell into enemy hands you could blow it up. It was an optical device that allowed you to place the bomb on a target. It had controls; you actually ran the aircraft from the bomb sight. And we would practice with that. We would sit in an aircraft and have a target area on a strip map down below so it would simulate a target area – it looked like you were 30,000 feet in the air and you would practice releasing bombs. You put in the altitude, the air speed, the direction, the air temperature, all of the variables; and wind, velocity and direction and compensate for all of these factors. If you did it right it was supposed to be pretty accurate. This is what we learned about bombing. And the major emphasis was on navigation. We learned four different types of navigation. We learned pilotage – where you used a map and picked out your progress on a map. Dead reckoning – where you used air speed – wind velocity – to get ground speed and direction, so you could pick out your location – your destination. Radio navigation – radio navigation then was pretty crude, because the radio receivers would point you to a radio direction finding place on the map. And the last one was celestial navigation …

By the stars.

By the stars. Well, we now have what we call GPS. Well, GPS is an old system. We used GPS, too, but we did it with stars – and it was about a million times slower than the gadgets that are doing it now! (both chuckle) Now they do it electronically from satellites, and it's almost instantaneous. Well, in order to do celestial navigation, you had to have a sextant, and you had to have a place in the airplane where you could look out at the stars, you had to measure the elevation. The two factors were the elevation, and the exact time to the second – you had to have the exact time. Most of all, you had to identify the stars. So we spent a lot of time in class identifying and learning the constellations …

A lot of astronomy.

A lot of astronomy! You absolutely had to be precise, because if you misidentified, your calculations were wrong. And then you had to have a set of books. So in the bombers, in four-engine bombers, we had a set of books up in the front end of it.

What was in the books?

The books were nothing but figures – they had the southern hemisphere, the northern hemisphere, and the had the stars – each star – and the elevation for that star for all the times during the year – the month, the day, the hour, the minute and the second.

So you had precise pictures of where each star was on any given day.

Yes. And then out of that book you got a reading, and from that reading you lined a position on a map. You took three stars -- 120° apart in the horizon – and when you got the three lines of position that would form a triangle. And, in theory – in theory – you're supposed to be in the middle of that triangle. Now, your aircraft is moving all the time you're doing this, so you have to take the first line of position, and the second line of position you have to move it forward in time on the map to match the third position. So it took a little time – maybe 15 or 20 minutes – just to get one position. Now it's instantaneous because it's done on computers.

So you had to do three positions.

Yes. And some lines you could get just one line of position on the sun, or you could get one on the moon – you could get a line position from the moon.

How fast was your plane traveling when you were doing this?

180 knots.

And how do the knots compare to miles per hour?

Okay … 6,088 feet, I think. So it's a little bit faster than ...

What types of planes were you flying at this point?

We were flying AT7 trainers. They were navigation trainers, and they had a pilot and co-pilot place. And they had three seats – three desks – and they'd take three student navigators up, and you had to navigate the flight. They'd tell you where you were going to go. They'd tell you that you were going from Hondo to San Angelo to another town, and you're coming back. The pilots knew this territory like a book, but we had to – sometimes they would use pilotage, sometimes they would use radio navigation, sometimes they would tell us to use dead reckoning, and sometimes they'd take us out at night and you'd have to use celestial navigation.

So, did they rely on you, then, to tell them which direction to take?

Yes.

And they knew how to get you back if you got lost (chuckles)!

Yes. That was the training. That was the check. You were supposed to have learned all this in class, but this was the actual practice of taking a map and marking it up.

You could do it on paper, let's see if you could do it in the air.

Yes. And then we had what we called an E6B computer. An E6B computer was like a hand device – almost like a slide-rule. You could take wind velocity, compass direction, indicated air speed, and from that you could get ground direction and ground speed. From that you could plot from one place to another and tell where you were in relation to the ground. The only thing we had to determine wind was a drift meter.

A drift meter?

A drift meter. If your wind is coming this way, the plane will go this way and will drift in accordance with that wind. So if you're going to go from this point to that point and you've got a wind coming from here, the plane will actually point this way.

So compensating for the wind.

Yes. So we had to learn how to read the wind drift meter. And that gave you pretty much the wind direction …

Velocity?

No. It didn't give you the wind velocity. That's what the computer was for, to determine the velocity. Those are the things we learned – the basics – and it took us from June to November. And in November I graduated from navigation school and was commissioned a second lieutenant. And from there I went to Topeka, Kansas for a crew assignment. Before that I had a leave of absence. I was able to get a furlough after navigation school.

Was this your first trip home?

Yes. It was my first trip home – from January, 1943 to November, 1944.

So you got home. How long was your leave?

Oh, maybe a week.

When you went into the Army, how did your family feel about it?

I was the only child.

So it was hard for them.

Oh, yeah.

Were they supportive of you even though they were afraid?

Oh, yes. Everybody knew, if you were in the age bracket I was you were going in one way or the other – you were going into the service.

So they must have been very happy just to see you come home again.

Oh, yeah. I was glad to get home, too.

Not having to march everywhere! (both chuckle)

By that time I was getting more used to the Army and the Army way of life. When you're young you can adjust.

So you were – this was 1945?

This was 1944. I was 20 years old.

Not quite 21.

Not 21 yet.

So you were home for November – was it Thanksgiving?

Yes. And from Kansas we went to Casper, Wyoming Air Base. Casper, Wyoming is a little bit northwest of Cheyenne. There our crew came together, and we practiced Combat flying. I practiced in a B24. The pilots and co-pilots had taken training in the B24 before that, so they knew how to land and take off. So we had the whole crew put together. We had the pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, radio operator, rear turret operator, ball turret operator. The ball turret operator on a B24 and on a B17 was an absolutely essential requirement, because that protected the underside of the aircraft. But it was …

A dangerous spot!

A very dangerous spot. You were rolled up into a ball for ten hours and the only way you could get out of that thing was to have that ball in a certain spot – elevated to a certain spot, rotated to a certain spot and then you could open the trap door and get out. Otherwise you couldn't. All of the ball turret operators were small guys – they didn't want any big six foot guys or basketball players in there (chuckles). You couldn't get them in there! Our ball turret operator was a small guy. The rear turret operator, also, that was a terrible place to get back to. You had very little space back there, and you're back there all by your lonesome. A dangerous spot because oncoming aircraft …

That was one of the dangerous places.

Because you were right in the firing line.

How did you communicate with the other members of the crew? How did the ball turret …

We had microphones – an internal communications system. You had microphones in your ear all the time.

So everybody could hear everybody in the plane.

Yes. The pilot could communicate with everybody, and you could call anybody and communicate directly with them. The radio operator, his job was to communicate with radio stations, to get readings on stations, and if we were in trouble they could make an emergency call – that sort of thing. Then we had an engineer who was primarily responsible for the engines and checking those before we took off, making sure they were running properly in the air. The navigator's job was to make sure we got from point A to point B – our destination. And the bombardier's job was primarily to drop bombs.

At Casper, we there probably from the later part of November to March, 1945 – probably the latter part of February, 1945. That was called the transition base.

It was transition to …

Combat. We would fly over Montana, and we would bomb targets in rural areas of Montana. We were flying low altitude and using machine guns there. We had check flights for the navigator -- we had to fly to Texas from Casper, Wyoming and back again at night for a check flight to make sure that you knew how to navigate.

So it was all those skills that individually each member had learned, put them all together in practice.

Yes – to put them all together and learn how to operate as a crew.

And this crew you were part of was the crew you would then go to combat with.

Yes. It was crew number 10043.

You still remember!

Yes.

How long were you in Casper?

We were in there from about – it would have been the latter part of November to the latter part of February.

So about four months. Oh, you said as a crew you did this together. Did you live with the crew – did they have you housed together and all that?

Well, in the Army, officers are never housed with enlisted people. So the officers were housed together, and the enlisted people were housed in pretty close proximity.

Who on the crew would be enlisted, and who on the crew would be an officer?

Officers were the pilot, co-pilot, navigator and bombardier. The rest were enlisted personnel of various ranks – sergeants and corporals, mainly.

(Tape turns over)

I remember sand in my tent. It was everywhere!

Arrival in Theater

Sand everywhere, right on the Gulf. So we're back in Wyoming and you finished up your transitional training.

The next place we go to is back to Lincoln, Nebraska for assignment overseas. There we got the assignment of what theater we were going to – to the Pacific Theater or the European Theater. We were assigned to the 15th Air Force in Italy. The 15th Air Force was based in Bari, Italy I think. And our eventual target – we were going to end up at Taranto, Italy. Taranto, Italy is where the British Navy sunk almost the entire Italian fleet in the harbor there. There were cruisers and destroyers and everything else laying in the water. It was a mess. A mess. So we flew from Lincoln, Nebraska in several stages. The first stop was Bangor, Maine; from Bangor, Maine …

Oh, at Lincoln, Nebraska we also were assigned a brand new aircraft to take overseas. It was a brand new B24J. It had been tested and just came from the factory – brand spanking new. We thought, man, this is pretty good (both chuckle) to fly this new aircraft. Little did we know!

Did your plane have a name?

No, it didn't at that point.

So we flew from Lincoln, Nebraska to Bangor, Maine. From there to Goosebay, Labrador. When we got to Goosebay, Labrador there was about eight feet of snow on the ground – level snow! Between the buildings are tunnels. (both chuckle) We landed there and thought it was the most God-forsaken place in the world. But we landed there and stayed there two or three days getting ready for … And the one thing they told us there at Goosebay, Labrador – they told the navigators – you were "way north" and there is a huge difference between the compass indication and the actual direction. So you've got to compensate for that. I remember that!

Is that because of your proximity to the North Pole?

Yes. And deflection. So we took off from Goosebay, Labrador in the middle of the night – about midnight – for Reykjavik, Iceland. I remember that night flying from Goosebay, Labrador – I remember working constantly. I never stopped. I worked giving positions and radio references …

Just to stay on track.

To stay on track and make sure it was right. I used celestial navigation – everything I knew, I used. All night long. And in the morning, early morning, we were flying and I could see the tip of Greenland and verified our location. That made me really happy! And from then on we could use mainly dead-reckoning because you couldn't use celestial navigation except for line of position from sun lines. To get your speed, you couldn't get an actual location, so we used radio navigation from Reykjavik and we could zero in on that. We landed at Reykjavik, were there two or three days. And from there we went to Wales, Great Britain on the Irish Sea. We were there for two or three days, and from there we went to Marrakech, Africa – Marrakech, Morocco. And we stayed at the Marrakech base there, which was an old French Foreign Legion post. If you've ever seen the movie *Beau Gest* with the cement wall with broken bottles on top, this is what it was – this where it happened. That's the first time in my life I had ever seen an Arab. That was new.

You did a lot of traveling for a farm boy from a small Illinois town!

Yes! And while we were there they told us, "If I were you, I would not go into town. Because they'll steal your teeth right out of your mouth!" If you went you needed to be with a group, because if you went alone it was not a friendly place.

When you stayed in Marrakech, were you in an Army installation?

Yes. It was an air base then. We stayed in barracks.

Did you get a chance to go into town at all?

No. We never went outside the base.

Just landed and took off again.

We landed and stayed maybe a couple of days. And from there we flew to Libya, and from Libya I remember flying along the north coast of Africa. We flew from Marrakech all the way to Libya along the north coast, and you could see across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. And you could see the islands in the Mediterranean Sea – all the geography just unfolded in front of you.

So all those things you'd studied you got to see in person.

Yes.

How high up were you?

We flew maybe 10,000 to 15,000 feet, probably. Normally on a bombing run we would fly 20,000 to 22,000 – something like that.

Missions

So you were only half as high as you would have been on a bombing run.
Right. And from Libya we flew to Taranto, Italy. And that's where we parked our brand new aircraft – shining aircraft (chuckles) – in this field of shining aircraft. We went to the Taranto Air Base where we were assigned to the 15th Air Force 449th Bomb Group. The 449th Bomb Group has a distinguished history. I was not in the group at that time, but they were organized in north Africa, and they participated in the Ploesti bombings – the Ploesti oil fields – and suffered huge losses there. The object was to leave from north Africa, fly to Ploesti in Romania, bomb the oil fields – that was the German oil supply – and then land in Russia, because they didn't have enough gas to get back. So they landed in Russia, and from there flew back. Ploesti was heavily defended by aircraft and by anti-aircraft – anti-aircraft guns. They lost a lot of people. It was a much decorated bomb group.

So this is the group you were joining, after that.

Yes. I flew five missions there. I think it was on the second mission over Bologna, Italy – we were bombing. The northern part of Italy was still occupied by Germans then, and the ground troops were pushing up and we were trying to push them out of Italy. I remember bombing Bologna, Italy. In a bombing run, you first go to the initial point, which is about 20 miles from the target. And the entire bombing run goes to that initial point, turns to the target, and at that point you fly at one level, one heading, and one speed – that's in order to get the bomb sites targeted in on the target. So the bombardier is controlling the aircraft. And I remember, on these bombing runs the lead bombardier – they had a lead bombardier and an alternate bombardier – but he actually decided when the bombs were to be dropped, and we dropped on him. So our job was to be ready to drop those bombs instantly when he said "bombs away."

I remember on this particular mission, one of the aircraft – were in a flight of about 30 bombers – one of the aircraft in front of us lost an engine. It came back through the formation. And I remember seeing this aircraft directly in front of us, and you could almost see the rivets in the thing. We had to dive down below – all the aircraft had to go up and zero up and go up or down; we went down – and in about 15 seconds from a group of 30 bombers headed for a target, there was not an aircraft to be seen! They were dispersed all over.

And what about the aircraft that lost the engine?

I don't know. I think they got back all right. But I remember we had to fly back to our base alone because there was nobody else there! (chuckles) I remember at that point in time we had a bomb bay full of live bombs. So we found a field in northern Italy. We scared a lot of cows, I think (chuckles). So we dropped the bombs and got out of there and headed back home. It was what was called an aborted mission.

A little pressure for a navigator!

Yes. One other mission I remember, we were flying over the Alps – the Brenner Pass from Italy into Austria – we were going to bomb Austria. And the Germans had dragged anti-aircraft up those mountains, up around 10,000 feet in the air. And they sat up there. And we were flying at maybe 20,000 to 22,000 feet or maybe a little higher – as high as you could go – and flying in that Pass. And the Germans were sitting down there shooting at you. I remember seeing those little black puffs coming at you – those anti-aircraft puffs. That was scary! But other than the anti-aircraft, at that point in time in the war the Germans were short of fuel and they didn't have any fighter aircraft they could put up against you.

Did you have flak around the plane?

Oh, yeah! That's what flak is – a burst from those anti-aircraft guns, and it goes pouf-pouf. You can watch it walk right across the sky.

Was your plane hit by any of this?

No, it wasn't hit but it was close. You could feel the plane jar from it.

The ball turret gunner must have had a real view!

Oh, yeah! But we flew five missions …

You said one was in Italy, one in Austria; where were the others?

The rest of them were all in northern Italy.

And they were successful.

The War in Europe Ends

Yes. Then – this is pretty close to May, 1945 – that's when VE Day occurred. The War was over, and we stayed around for a few days – maybe a couple of weeks. And then they decided they were going to ship us back to the States and train us for B29's.

How did you get word that the European theater of the War was ended?

I think it came down from our headquarters. I think it flashed around from 15th Air Force Command to our group.

I mean, how did they communicate with you? Was it each base – the Commander of the base let everyone know?

Yes.

What was the reaction?

We were pretty happy! We didn't have any particular celebration then …

Was it because most of you figured you would be going to the Pacific theater?

Yes. We were going to the Pacific theater.

So it was like half done.

Yes – half done. I don't remember going off the base. We didn't go off the base and participate in any civilian celebrations.

Did you see the civilian celebrations or hear anything?

No, I didn't. We were in the poor part of Italy – in 1943, 1944 and 1945 southern Italy was a very poor part of the country. It had been invaded by Germans. They had gone up through the center part of Italy. We fought – I think it was the 5th Army – and had a very tough time in the center part of Italy to dislodge them.

Going Home

So, we're ready to go back to the States. We fold up the air base, we are assigned and go back on a ship. We went back from the port of Taranto back into the Mediterranean Sea. That's when I got to see the Straits of Gibraltar. You could see this huge rock up there. It didn't seem like very far away, and the other side was the coast of Africa. It was fairly narrow. Once we got out in the Atlantic Ocean we did all kinds of zigzags because they weren't sure the Germans all had the word that the War was over. How do you know if somebody didn't get the message (chuckles).

This was a Navy ship you were on?

This was a Merchant Marine ship. It was used for carrying troops. I think it was the USS Wakefield that was the name of the ship. We flew – we came from Taranto, Italy to Boston, Massachusetts.

How long was that trip?

That took probably eight or nine days.

About how many men were on this ship?

Oh, there probably were less than 1,000. But at least several hundred.

What was the mood on the ship? Was it more relaxed?

Oh, yeah. We were stacked in bunks.

Were they the bunks that hang?

Yeah. And they were stacked from here up to the ceiling, practically. So it was not exactly good living, but …

Were they like the sling type?

No, they were stationary bunks. A lot of guys got sick, and that was bad. I never got sick.

How many men would be in one of these rooms?

Oh, they were stacked like six in a bunk.

Six high?

Right. I think there were about 50 guys in a room. (both chuckle) It was not luxurious living.

Was the military discipline any easier since it wasn't a combat situation? Or did you try to maintain it?

Yeah, it was. In combat you wouldn't – we didn't worry near as much about that. Still, the combat rules – the chain of command was intact. The airplane commander is the pilot. And he is in command of everybody on that aircraft when that aircraft is in the air. But that rule didn't change. It was firm and everybody understood that. We were taught that back in the various schools we went to – all the navigators, the bombardiers, the co-pilots; all were taught that the airplane commander was in charge. Just like the Captain is in charge of the ship.

What was a typical day like – you said you were nine days on the ship heading back – what was a day like on the ship?

Well, probably most of the time you were eating meals. There wasn't much activity on the ship because there wasn't room for it. The rest of the time you probably stood around on the decks watching the sea go by. Not too much going on.

Was it a fairly smooth sail, or did you hit any storms?

No big storms. We didn't have any big storms. But I did worry about those German submarines. A torpedo in a ship like that could take you down pretty fast.

It must have been interesting when you get out in the middle of the ocean and you see no land.

Oh, yeah. You see no land for days! It makes you wonder – does this Captain know where we are? (chuckles)

What was it like sailing into the US? What was it like when you sailed and saw that coming in?

Oh! That was thrilling to see that.

What was the first thing you saw?

The harbor! The harbor and the tall buildings – skyscrapers; there were some then, too.

What was the reaction? Was there cheering?

Oh, yeah! There was a lot of cheering. There were a lot of happy people. We were going to get off that boat and get onto dry land! (both chuckle) Get onto something firm!

You didn't join the Navy, you joined the Army!

That's right!

Did your family know that you were coming back to the States?

No.

Had you been able to communicate with them at all when you were overseas?

Oh, I could communicate with them.

Were the letters censored?

Not our letters. The letters from the enlisted men were censored. We had to read those and censor them.

You had to do the censoring.

(Tape is stopped momentarily.)

We were talking about your sailing into Boston Harbor. Did you have a chance to go see your family?

Yes. I had a furlough for probably a couple of weeks of what really amounted to a delay in transit to the next base, which was Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

When you got to Boston, did you call your family or did you just get more transportation back home?

I called them and got transportation. I took trains to Chicago and from Chicago to Aurora, and from Aurora they picked me up.

They must have been so excited to see you!

Oh, yeah, because they had no knowledge of it until I was back in Boston. You couldn't tell them when you were coming home. That kind of information was not to be disclosed.

So when you got home did they invite people over and throw a party?

Yeah. We had a family get-together when I got back. That was a happy time then.

You got to sleep in a regular bed!

Yeah. And I got to eat some of my Mom's cooking! (chuckles)

A little better than the Army cooking! (both chuckle) Didn't have to march down to breakfast. And Mom probably woke you up differently than the Corporal did!

So after the furlough and a little bit of celebrating, we went back and I was assigned to Sioux Falls Air Force Base for waiting assignment and training on B29's. That was our purpose.

And that was for the Pacific.

Yes. And while I was there we didn't do very much – some exercises and that sort of thing mostly to pass the time. And while I was there in August of 1945, World War II ended with the dropping of the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki. I was there for a few more days, and I happened to be at the right place at the right time. They didn't need anymore navigators, they didn't need anymore pilots or bombardiers or any of that sort of thing. And here we were all put together in one place – hundreds of us – so they said, "We're going to discharge you." They sent me back to Fort Sheridan, and I was discharged in September of 1945. I was one of the first ones back from the War in my community.

Discharge and Return to Civilian Life

So you went in when you were 19, and you were discharged when you were 21. Did you turn 21 when you were overseas?

Yes.

How long were you in South Dakota all together?

A couple of months.

While you were there, before the atomic bombs were dropped and the War ended, were all the men who were there – had they all been in combat already?

Yes, pretty much. Most of them came from the European theater.

So there weren't any new soldiers there; it was all experienced.

Yes.

So you got back to Fort Sheridan and you got discharged.

Yes. It got discharged at Fort Sheridan. That was in September. In December I got married.

Had you been engaged to the woman who became your wife while you were overseas?

I think I got engaged when I got home – discharged. And we arranged to get married in December, 1945. And by February, 1946 I was at the University of Illinois under the GI Bill going to school.

In Chicago?

No, in Champaign. And my wife and I didn't have a car, so we took the bus back and forth. Our transportation consisted of two bicycles that I paid a total of $15 for (both chuckle). That was our transportation!

And what did you study down at Illinois?

I studied electrical engineering. I met a guy in the service who was an engineer before he went in. He told me about his work and about the field, and that's what got me interested in it.

So you used the GI Bill to go to school.

Yes. I graduated in 1948 – I think it was about June – and I went to work for then Public Service Company at Joliet, which later became Commonwealth Edison, which is now Excelon. And that's the only employer I ever had. I worked for them for 40 years in various engineering and management spots. I've been retired sine 1987, and I keep busy – I play golf, I sing in a choir, and I sing in the Wheaton Silvertones. I enjoy music!

Did you join any veterans' organizations?

No, I didn't.

Did you keep in touch with anyone you met?

I've never kept in touch with the crew I was with, although I should have. I tried it once or twice, and I was never able to make contact, so I never maintained contact with them.

Lasting Impressions

How did your military experiences affect your thinking about war or about the military in general?

Well, World War II was an absolutely necessary war. The fate of this country and the liberty of our people were at stake. So it was necessary. But it is not something to go into lightly. I suppose it affects my thinking about this war to a certain extent, because in World War II suffering and sacrifice was shared by almost the whole population. Every family had somebody either directly in their family or a close relative who was in the service. And the pain and suffering and the sacrifice and the shortages were all shared by the entire population. In this war we're not. The suffering and the sacrifice is borne almost entirely by the military families. I think that's wrong. You should not take a nation into war unless they're willing to sacrifice something, because it takes sacrifice. We're going to have to pay for this war someday, sometime. We're not paying for it now.

That was the other thing about World War II. We paid for the war as we went. The taxes were higher. They bought, particularly the population, bought war bonds to finance the war. And now we're not being asked to do that. And I think there's something to be said for the population sacrificing. If you're going to take them in to war, you need to have that sacrifice so everybody understands what you're getting into.

How did your service and the experiences you had there affect your life?

Well, for one thing, when I got to college, I had been through the military and there was none of this partying and fooling around business in college. My goal was to get an education. And all the other GI's who were down there had the same goal. They wanted an education. We worked very hard at it, so the usual casual atmosphere of young kids going to college wasn't there.

You had matured because of your experiences.

Yes. It made a big difference. All that partying and all that foolishness was not in our thinking anymore. It would have been at one day, but not anymore.

So, your experiences in the service made you grow up fast.

Right. You had to mature really fast.

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to add before we finish?

No, that should be about it.

In that case, thank you very much for sharing your story. We're going off record.