

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Del Graunke

Conducted by Ms. Deb Barrett

June 4, 2010

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
in partnership with the Library of Congress

This interview is being conducted on Friday, June 4, 2010 with Mr. Delbert Graunke at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Graunke was born on October 7, 1923, in Lyons, Illinois. He is a retired mechanical engineer, and learned of the Veterans History Project through an article in a local newspaper. Mr. Graunke has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Entering Military Service

Del, where were you living when you first entered the service? What was your life like just before you went into the service?

Just before I went into the service I had graduated from Morton High School in June of 1941. At that time I was only 17 years old, and I had a little problem getting a job, actually, because most of the companies at that time were getting defense projects. You had to be 18 to work on those, so I became a stock boy. I couldn't work in the factory, but I could work in the stock room. So I became a stock boy and worked at General Electric down on Damen and Jackson in Chicago for until about February of 1942.

Then I was able to get an apprentice job at Western Electric in Cicero and went there. I worked there until November of 1942.

Being classified 1A and all that sort of thing, I thought, hey, I'd rather enlist than be drafted. I enlisted into the Army Air Corps, as it was called at that time. I enlisted there in November and went on active duty in February.

So November of 1942 you enlisted. Were you living at home at the time with your family? You were 17, right?

Yes. I was living at home with my parents, and they lived in Lyons. I had a fellow I went all the way through school with – both grammar school and high school. And we decided in November to go down and enlist, and we both enlisted in the Air Corps.

How did your family feel about your decision?

You know, I don't think they were too happy about it. But they saw the reality of it and everything else, and they went along. It's one of those things – it's his choice. They didn't give me any real flack or anything. My mother wasn't too happy about it, you know.

So then, of course, we stuck around through the Christmas of 1942, and in 1943, right after New Year, they called me up and I went in.

Induction and Basic Training

Where were you inducted?

I was sent to Miami Beach, Florida, where they had basic training. I trained down in Miami.

What was your basic training like?

It was basic Army training – a lot of marching; a lot of singing while we were marching. They gave us training on a gun – we never shot one or anything there.

Is that the first time you ever shot a gun?

Oh, back when I was in high school I shot a .22 a couple of times.

So you had an idea of what it was like.

Yes.

What I would have to say as far as basic training, they were just getting you ready to go on to advanced stuff.

Had you been away from home that far before?

Well, not to live, no. That's the first time I lived that far away.

How did you get down to Miami Beach?

On a train. They took us down to Chicago, and over to the LaSalle Street Station – on the Illinois Central I guess it was at that time. Anyhow, they had a troop train down there and a whole bunch of us got on a whole bunch of cars and we went all the way down to Miami on the train.

How long was the trip?

Oh, I'd say about three days.

What did you do on the train while you were heading down?

Well, they had one car that was a chow car, and we sat there, and really just rode down there and once in a while got up and had our meals and that sort of thing. They didn't do any training or anything – it was just transportation.

How did everybody pass the time? Did you read? Were there card games? What did you do?

I don't remember playing cards. I remember looking out the window a lot – watching the landscape and getting to certain towns where we'd have a little break.

They'd stop and you could get out, but then you'd have to get back on right away and that sort of thing. Mostly it was just socializing, I would say.

Getting to know the other guys.

And, of course, I had my friend along, too.

That's right. You went in together.

Yes. We went in together. But as soon as I got down to Miami Beach, they classified where you were going to go by your last name. So I went with a whole bunch that started with "G." And his last name was _____. So he went with another group that was mostly "M's and N's" and that sort of thing. And that's the last time that we were ever seen together (chuckles) after enlisting.

So much for enlisting together!

That's right! We kept in contact by writing. You did a lot of writing in those days. You didn't have telephones that were readily available and that sort of thing.

What was it like when you first got down? You said they put you together with all the other "G's." What happened then?

They put us in a hotel that was right off the strip down there in Miami. They used the golf courses that were down there for training grounds. We did a lot of marching, a lot of discipline type of thing. They were just trying to shape us up into soldiers (chuckles). And that's what basic training is for

When you got down there and they told you where you were going to sleep. They gave you supplies; they gave you shots – what was involved?

Sure. They gave you uniforms. That was the last time I wore civilian clothes (chuckles). They gave us a uniform – even undergarments and everything else; shoes. Then in our spare time – I spent a lot of time writing letters – we'd listen to the radio and that sort of thing. But we didn't really have the time to do much else. I think we went into the water a couple of times there, off the beach.

What was a typical day like for you in basic training?

Oh, boy. I've got to remember. It didn't leave that much of an impression on me (both chuckle).

They'd get us out early in the morning.

How did they wake you up?

They'd call us up in the morning and we'd have to go down and stand in line. Everyone would have to count off and say their name. Then they'd say, "All present and accounted for." Then we'd go back in and wait until we'd have chow.

You had to have the barracks set up?

No. We were actually in hotel rooms down there. We didn't have barracks.

So you missed all that inspection stuff.

Well, no. They came around and inspected. We had to make our beds – we learned how to make them – and do all that sort of thing. That's all part of basic training. Nobody served us anything in the hotel – they had commandeered the building and then they set it up like an Army barracks.

So it had Army cots and beds and all that?

Yes – Army beds and Army cots.

So you didn't have any of the nice mattresses.

No (chuckles.) I didn't have trouble sleeping or anything.

Where did you eat, then? Did they have the dining room for you to use?

Yes. They had it set up like a mess hall in the dining rooms of the hotel.

How were the meals? For example, what would you have for breakfast?

Oh, usually they'd have oatmeal and farina type of stuff. They'd have it hot if you wanted it. Or you could take your choice of having some dry cereal like corn flakes and that sort of thing. They were all right – the meals were all right as far as I was concerned.

How much time did you have to eat? Did they rush you through?

I didn't think so. I filled up (chuckles)!

Did you do calisthenics then or other types of training?

Yes. We'd go out and go through a whole routine of calisthenics and that sort of thing to keep yourself in shape.

Then of course you had training with all the marching. They'd take us out to the golf course out there and we'd be marching around all the time. I can remember my drill sergeant was from Georgia Tech – he was a southerner. And he'd lead us with the southern brogue. But he was a good drill sergeant. He whipped us into pretty good

shape, I thought. He'd yell for a left turn and somebody would go to the right and so forth, or right turn and somebody would go to the left. He'd call it to their attention and we'd start all over again! It didn't take long and everyone knew what they were doing.

And you said you were writing letters, so you were able to write home during this time.

Yes. And we were able to receive letters, too.

You probably enjoyed that.

They had mail call. Oh, yeah. Sure.

Lou, the gal who was my girlfriend was the sister of the friend of mine ...

Who you enlisted with.

And we started communicating back and forth. As a matter of fact, we did that all the way through the war, actually. I gave her a ring after I got my commissioned in 1944 and then in 1945, when I was separated from the service – that's what they called it at the time – I was a lieutenant and we got married in April of 1945. It was still during the war, and she actually went along with me after that. But I was an officer at that time.

Back to your basic. How long was your basic?

I'd say eight weeks. I don't remember exactly. Maybe I have it here (refers to things he has brought). Yes. Basic training was five weeks.

Then they sent us to a college training detachment. That was up in Cleveland, Ohio at Western Reserve University.

You see, what the Army Air Corps originally did – you had to have some college education before you could get into it. But they apparently needed guys enough that they took us who just had high school diplomas or certificates. Then they sent us to a college for almost ten weeks.

Advanced Training

What did you learn when you were at Western Reserve?

Surprisingly they were basic college courses, with the exception of one that was a history type of thing. There was some math, and I remember some English.

Science?

Yes, a little bit, but not too heavy on the science.

Physics or anything?

Yes.

Then, after I graduated from that – I think I have the diploma from that (refers to the things he brought). Anyway, after that

Del has a notebook he's put together with all his information.

Yes. After I got done with that in the second week in May of 1943, they sent us down to a classification for about three weeks in Nashville, Tennessee.

What was classification?

Classification was where they decided what you should be – a pilot, a navigator, a bombardier, a gunner; that sort of thing

What did they use to determine that?

That's what I'd like to know (both chuckle)! I had asked them to be a navigator. And, in the typical Army way, they classified me for pilot training. So I went into pilot training. And for pilot training I had to go down for pre-flight training, and that was at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama. I trained there for eight weeks.

Down there, the thing I remember most, is that they gave us more basic training. They also did a lot of fitness. I remember running what they called the Burma Road. It was a whole bunch of hills and you had to run that.

The other thing is they also had various courses. One of them was Code, and I did terrible in Code! I almost flunked out in learning the Morse Code. Basically, we didn't use it that much, to be perfectly frank. But they thought I should know it.

From there we went to our primary training. That was flying Stearman Airplanes. They insisted on making a pilot out of me. So I was flying in the Stearman's.

Do you remember what it was like the first time you took off?

Well, it really wasn't too bad. I did fairly well in it, because I had a good instructor. The instructors were civilian pilots. He was very good. He got me to the point where he decided I should solo. I can remember soloing – the first time taking off and being in the airplane alone and everything else.

I liked that Stearman Airplane, because it responded real well. I can remember only once, when I was soloing and coming in with the ship that I had a little trouble making the landing. I think I ground-tipped a little bit – the tip of one wing might have hit the ground a little bit, but not too much; I steadied it up and so forth.

In any event, I passed and went on to basic training, which was to a heavier type of single-engine airplane.

So they started you on a small light plane, and you got larger and heavier.

Yes. It had the two wings – the upper and lower. And I went to basic training.

There they had a little hotter – the engine was bigger and everything else. I went into there for only about ... I got out of primary training in September of 1942, and then I went into training – basic pilot training – up in Cochran Field in Monroe, Georgia. There I couldn't feel the stall in the airplane. I really just couldn't. It would start going out and then I'd have to recover. So they washed me out.

So they decided maybe you weren't meant to be a pilot.

Yeah, they did. They decided I was going to wash out of pilot training.

Apparently I did well enough on my test scores and all of that, but they didn't want to lose me. So they decided to send me to navigation school. The only problem was that navigation school was filled up for this time, so what they did was, instead of sending me to navigation school, they sent me down to Florida, and I went to gunnery school. They made an aerial gunner out of me down there.

I was in gunnery school from – I washed out on October 20, something like that.

So you weren't meant to be a gunner, either.

No. They sent me gunnery school down in Ft. Myers, Florida, from about the 25th or something November all the way through – I remember spending Christmas down there. That was the first time I was in the south for Christmas. It was a lot different from up north! This was 1943, and I was there through January 15, 1944. I graduated from gunnery school and they sent me to Monroe, Louisiana, where they had a navigation school.

So they did send you on to be a navigator then.

Yes. That took about four months, almost. I graduated and got my commission.

What were you commissioned as?

As a second lieutenant, around May 15 or something.

Let's talk for a minute. You said this had been your first Christmas away from home, first Christmas in the south, and it was different. How was it different for you besides your family not being there?

No show (both chuckle)! Which I didn't expect, any. My friends – the friends whom I usually celebrated Christmas with; family and everyone else – were missing. Really, they didn't have that many activities at Christmastime, so it was kind of blah. I went into Ft. Myers – they gave us some off-base time. I went into Ft. Myers and picked oranges! You don't picture picking oranges off a tree in December up here. It was a different experience, and the first time away from home.

Did you talk to your family at all or write to them? Did you get Christmas cards?

It was mostly, at that time, all mail. We were real happy to have mail call. Of course, I wanted to get a Christmas present for my girlfriend, so I wrote my mother and she picked up something and gave it to her as a Christmas present from me. So it was completely different.

So you finished and got your commission?

Yes.

And that's when you were saying you gave your girlfriend a ring?

Yes. I came back home on furlough.

How much furlough did you get?

Ten days – a ten-day delay-in-route, they called it. I had a ten day delay in route and spent it at home and became engaged.

Did you take a train home?

Yes. They didn't fly us around too much at that time. No yet.

So that made up for Christmas – getting engaged.

Yes, more or less – about five or six months later.

I had about ten days delay-in-route. Then I went to Lincoln, Nebraska. Lincoln, Nebraska was the place where they assigned you a crew – a position on a crew. They had made up the numbers of people who would be on a crew, but the crew wasn't actually formed together until we had some overseas training, which was down in Pueblo, Colorado. There I met all the other members of my crew. Actually, they were picked a day or two earlier than I was. I was the last one to be chosen – to get there, anyhow.

We spent about four weeks of training in Pueblo in a B24.

Training as a group, as a unit.

Yes, as a whole group – we always called them crews.

I had training there, like I said, for about four or five weeks.

What was your training like? What did you do?

Well, I went up. In the B24 they have both a magnetic compass and an astrocompass. The astro was used to shoot sun lines and so forth, or night stars, and do celestial navigation. So I had to go up there, and I remember calibrating the astrocompass – there was a procedure for doing that so it was accurate. Then we had various exercises that they put us through in the training – not hard or anything, but just so you got familiar with the aircraft and each other on the crew, and that sort of thing.

So you could just sort of anticipate each other.

Yes.

Then, from Pueblo, they sent us to Topeka, Kansas. In Topeka we picked up a B24 that was going overseas. (Mr. Graunke looks through his pictures.)

Is that the picture that we have to scan?

Yes. The one that you're scanning.

[As Mr. Graunke looks through the pictures, he runs across a picture of himself and his fiancé.]

Oh, is this a picture of your fiancé?

Yes. I took her down in Chicago and we had this picture made. This is a copy.

Del has some pictures of himself in uniform.

Yes. [Shows pictures.] This was when I was overseas. This was in primary training; this is the Stearman airplane in primary. [Continues to page through his scrapbook.] I even kept a thing like my Army classification and all that sort of thing. What I'm looking for in here is a map I have of our flight overseas.

Deployment Overseas

And you were saying earlier, before we started the interview, that you took the northern route?

Yes.

What was the northern route?

Well, the northern route went from Topeka, Kansas to Grenier Field in New Hampshire. From Grenier Field in New Hampshire, we went to Gander, Newfoundland. From Gander, Newfoundland we went to the Azores Islands. From the Azores – I'm getting frustrated here because I can't find what I'm looking for!

And from the Azores you flew to ...

We flew to Marrakesh, Africa – in Morocco. From Marrakesh we went to Tunis, and from Tunis up to Italy. In Italy they assigned us to our bomb group. Our crew was assigned to the 98th Bomb Group, 344th Squadron. That's what we flew on.

How long did this whole journey take – this northern route? Did you fly one leg of it and stay overnight and then fly another leg?

Yes. We stayed overnight. Around the 18th or 19th of August we were in Topeka, to the second week of September.

So about a month.

Yes. About a month from Topeka all the way over to Italy.

So when you made each leg of this trip and you landed someplace, what did you do? Was it just to get some rest and get on, or did you have other duties when you got there?

A lot of it was weather related, you see. When we got up to Gander in Newfoundland, we had some cloudy, rainy weather. So we just did the stuff you normally do out on a base – get together, maybe play cards and that sort of thing. I know when we flew to the Azores it was Legions Field. We were there only I think about a day and a half – enough so we could go into the PX. I know I've still got a couple of Portuguese dollars from there (both chuckle) – or whatever they called them. Again we're flying over to Morocco; we weren't too far from Casa Blanca. A couple of the guys flew – I didn't – but they chose to go over to Casa Blanca because they knew more about Casa Blanca than they did about Marrakesh. But I didn't bother to go there. We were only there for only a couple of days. Then Tunis, I think, was just a short stop – refueling stop or so – and then we went up to Italy.

Where were you in Italy?

We were assigned to Lecce, Italy.

When you got to Lecce, Italy your crew stayed together somewhere. What were your living conditions there?

We lived in tents. [Mr. Graunke looks for a picture.]

How many men were in a tent?

Well, the crew was divided. They had officer quarters – tents – and there were four of us in there. In the enlisted men's area they had about the same size tent, but there were six of them in there.

So it was a little more crowded.

Yes. And they were only about a block or two away from where we were. We had a lot of camaraderie. We'd go down there and socialize with them. And it would be that way, mostly, rather than their coming up to us. For some reason or other there was a

difference between the commissioned officers and the enlisted men. But, be that as it may, I went down there. It was one of the places where I learned to play cribbage (chuckles).

So you did socialize with the enlisted men.

Oh, sure – with our crew. It was until this day, almost, we kind of socialize back and forth – not after we got out of the service, not so much; it would be just telephone calls or letters back and forth.

So Lecce, Italy, then was where you had your base.

Yes.

Now, when you were there, were you able to communicate with people back home? Were your letters censored at all?

Yes. Having been engaged and everything, my wife and I both kept all of our letters. We've got them at home in a binder. Most all of that communication was by letters at that time. There were no telephone calls or anything like that.

When you wrote, your letters were censored or they went through a censor?

Yes. As a matter of fact, one of my duties as a commissioned officer was to censor some letters. They'd pass the letters out to different officers. The only thing they didn't want was that you were not allowed to write anything about what you were doing – that is, militarily. I could say, for instance, that I had a mission last night and so forth, but I couldn't say where.

Were you able to tell them where you were?

Well, yes. They knew I was in Italy. Well, I don't know if they knew I was in Lecce, but they knew I was in Italy. I was lucky enough that I all served my 35 sorties there, out of Lecce.

Tell us about going out on these sorties? You would be told that this was your mission and the crew would get together? What type of information were you generally told when you went out?

Before you went out, we had to go into a briefing room. They would hand out a sheet – they were classified and I don't have any of them – and they would give you all the pertinent information. The pertinent information was always the target.

When the heavy bombers went in to do bombing, they didn't fly directly to the target. You went to what they called the IP – an initial point – where you would form together. Then that initial point was a bomb run anywhere of about ten to fifteen minutes time. That initial point, then, you'd have to give the pilot the heading and he'd fly down

the bomb run and we'd drop the bombs on the target. I'd say that bomb run was equivalent to being in a fox hole. Because the Germans all knew. At that time they had scanners, and they had a lot of guns that would fortify these targets. So you'd see a lot of shells coming up and so forth. And you just hoped you would fly through that!

Did you see and feel the flak?

Oh, yeah! And you'd hear some of it going through the airplane. You'd seldom come back without having any flak. If you didn't get any flak in your airplane, well then they called it a "milk run" (both chuckle).

It was too easy!

Yes.

Did anyone in your crew ever get injured from the flak?

As it worked out, when I was flying over there – during that period of time – I flew with a lot of other crews. Because in our bomb group – we were stationed in Italy – and a lot of soldiers came down with yellow jaundice. So you had to fill in. I had to fill in where either they lost a navigator on a crew. And in some cases where we would be designated as a lead ship on a mission, why then they'd want two navigators.

So that's when my gunnery school came in handy. What they did, if you notice, on the B24 up in the nose, it looks like a bubble in there with a couple of guns sticking up. That's the nose turret. On a few of the missions I'd have to go up into the nose turret and fly as a gunner.

But what I also did was pilotage navigation. Pilotage navigation is just taking a map, looking down and seeing just exactly where you were.

Matching the map to the terrain.

That's right. I'd do that, and I would converse – we had a communication system, a little headset and a microphone. And then I'd relay information back and forth with the lead navigator from the turret. That worked fine, because then there's two guys watching where you're going rather than just one!

I flew a lot more missions. I was the first one to fulfill my missions from my crew because I never came down with the jaundice. And for a long time I never knew why I didn't get the jaundice while everyone else got it. What I think it was, was our chow over there was kind of limited. But one of things they gave us a lot of was pomegranates, because they grew there in Italy. When I was a little kid I used to like to get a pomegranate and eat it. So I would get these pomegranates. Well, as it turns out, pomegranates have a lot of Vitamin C, so I got a lot more Vitamin C than the rest of them did, and I think the reason I didn't get the jaundice is the Vitamin C helped.

So, when your crew couldn't fly you were still going with other crews.

Yes.

When you were acting as navigator – you were sitting in seat or ...

Well, in the B24 they had a navigator's bench in the lousiest place. It was right behind the co-pilot. I felt more comfortable being able to see out of the airplane – because behind the co-pilot the only thing you'd see is the sky. So I always went down into the nose. The lower part of the nose is where the bombardier is. Fortunately, both my bombardier, Tony Leonardi and I were slim at the time – not like I am now. So we both fit down there comfortably. I'd do pilotage navigation as well as dead-reckoning and that sort of thing.

They taught you pilotage navigation, dead-reckoning and also radio navigation.

What was dead-reckoning?

Well, dead-reckoning was, you read all the headings and you'd have to correct it for drift that you'd have – from crosswinds and that sort of thing. And then you'd have to also read fixes every once in a while – you'd go from one location to another and you'd just plot the fixes. For instance, with celestial I'd go up and shoot a sun line, and the sun line would give me an idea of where we were at. You'd check with that.

Of course, the astrocompass was way up behind the cockpit area, and I'm down below. So I didn't shoot too many sun lines that way. I shot a lot of sun lines when we went across.

My most challenging navigation was just going across the ocean.

On the way over there.

Yes. Because when you're looking out of the plane all you see is water! Fortunately, of course, when you got fairly close to your destination, you could pick up the radio and we'd use radio navigation and ride a beam right into the airport. A combination of all those types of navigation came in handy.

So when you were in the gun turret – the nose turret – were you sitting, lying; what was your body position?

Oh, I sat right in the regular gunner's seat. As a matter of fact, every once in a while we had to check our guns. And I'd shoot a couple of rounds. So I flew as a gunner, but at the same time I was doing pilotage navigation.

When you went out on these missions, how many planes normally were involved? Were they large groups, small groups?

Well, we'd go, usually, in groups. But they might at one time send the whole wing up there – the wing is the next level above the group. And so we'd form a box of our group with – there'd be ideally about seven planes in a box formation. Then you'd have four groups like that, that would be flying together like that. Ideally, like I said,

from our bomb group there'd be about seven or so in a wing. Rarely were all seven in there. We'd have three up here, three here and one down behind it like a Christmas tree (Mr. Graunke is showing Ms. Barrett a simulation of the formation). I'd say on most targets that we went to, there'd be maybe only five in the squadron formation. Other times six, or if we lucked out there would be seven. Then there'd be about four squadrons in a group.

The lead plane?

The lead – they chose a particular squadron to lead. They'd rotate it a little bit. And they'd fly in the formation. We'd take turns going over there – groups would take turns; squadrons would take turns. The first squadron would go, then the guy to the right, then the guy to the left, then the guy in the center behind the lead would just peel off and go – one after another over the target.

Do you have some missions that were more memorable than others?

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

I would say once in a while we'd have what we called "milk runs." They'd be relatively easy because they weren't as heavily defended and so forth. Of course, before I got into the bomb group and into our assignment in Lecce, our bomb group had been in the Ploesti raids. And they took some real heavy gunfire then. The Ploesti area was where Germany got a lot of fuel. There were a lot of oil refineries.

So it was really heavily defended

Yes. It was heavily defended.

I missed out on actually flying over Ploesti. The ones we had were more up into

(Disk 2)

So all your runs were into Germany, or did you fly to other places, too?

No. We did bomb up in Munich, and we did bomb into Regensburg, Germany and so forth. But most of them were in northern Italy, some over in Yugoslavia ...

[Mr. Graunke is looking through the maps he has brought.]

This is what I was looking for. This is our route overseas.

Dell has some maps he has printed off showing their routes.

So, northern Italy, Germany, and Yugoslavia?

And Austria, of course.

This is a list of all of the missions I flew. To be a little more specific, these are all the targets. This was in Vienna (refers to list), San Michele – Athens was my very first.

That was a lucky one, as far as I was concerned, because we went there to bomb the airport – because the Germans were using that airport for planes down in Greece. So we flew there. It was nice site when we got there, because I remember seeing the Coliseum and the Parthenon and that sort of thing in Athens. That's the only time I ever saw them! But it was from pretty high up.

Then we went to San Michele. I think there was an oil refinery. And then another one in Vienna. And Vicenza – this was a marshalling yard; marshalling yards were railroad yards – that was up in northern Italy. Florsdorf oil refinery, a tank factory in San Vantino, and another one in Vienna.

See, they had two different types of targets that we had. One was strategic, which would be like oil refineries, marshalling yards and so forth. And then there would be a few tactical missions, which would be helping the ground forces and so forth.

Messacorona was for us to knock out a railroad bridge that they wanted to go over. Marshalling yards at Munich, and then Florsdorf was the oil refinery.

And then Vezio viaduct was a rough mission, and that was a tactical one. What we were trying to do, Hitler's main way of getting munitions down into Italy was to go by rail, and this Vezio viaduct was a bridge up in the mountains – it was up almost 8,000 or 9,000 feet in elevation. When we flew over it, we flew over it at 18,000 and it was heavily fortified.

Very dangerous.

It was a very dangerous mission for us, because they had a lot less feet – they were closer.

So it was not just the mountains that were dangerous, you had to fly in closer and they had heavy fortifications.

Yes. They had the fortifications up on top of the mountains.

This Nova? I think was another tactical mission. Then we did the viaduct again – we wanted to be sure we knocked that out. Then we went back to Florsdorf at the oil refinery. Then we hit Vienna, and in Vienna it was mostly railroad yards we were hitting – to try to disrupt all the communications; their ability to do rail. And then Seneca.

And all of these missions I flew, for some reason or another I lost all the logs. Salzburg was up there in Austria again. And this one in Rosenheim was in Germany. And this ? and Bremner Pass, we also bombed that. ? was another one that was pretty heavily fortified.

What was there?

Oil refineries.

So you went back to the same places a few times.

Yes.

Here's one I just flew the nose turret.

When you went back to these a month or two later, how fast were they rebuilding or repairing the damage you had done the first time? Could you see the damage from your previous run?

I'll tell you, we were at such a high elevation you couldn't tell. You'd have to have good binoculars and that kind of stuff, and we didn't take the time to grab a pair of binoculars or anything like that. So I really couldn't tell.

What we had was just a target, and we had the coordinates for the targets, as navigators. We just flew over there and dropped the bombs.

Would you know how close you got to the target?

Well, being up in the nose and so forth we didn't see it very good. But our tail gunner, he would relay information to us a little bit as to how things looked after the bombs were dropped. He'd usually tell us if we hit is pretty good, or whether we were off to the left or right or something like that.

But we really didn't ... after it was done, it was done and we got out and made it back.

Do any of these missions stand out more than others for something that happened during the mission?

Yes. But I think it's one I didn't have the log for.

One time we were up over Austria. It might have been around Salzburg or someplace there. We had knocked out one of our engines. All of a sudden, the other engine on the same side of the ship went out.

That's not good!

And the pilot tells me "Give me a heading to Switzerland." Because a lot of our planes, if they got really bad shot up they'd go to Switzerland which was a neutral country. So if you landed there you might have been tied up for a while, but at least you weren't ...

In enemy territory.

Yes. So the pilot calls, "Give me a heading for Austria." I said, "270." 270 was due west and we were in Austria. So he started flying there.

Then our engineer woke up to the fact that he had turned off the gas on the second engine – engine #4. Engine #4 was the one that got shot, and to save gas he turned off the gas to that engine. Well, it so happened that when he went over, he not only turned it off for 4, but for 3.

So you really didn't lose that engine ...

So the pilot said, "We lost #3, too! We better head over." Because you'd get back maybe on only two engines on one side, but it would be kind of tough. So I gave him the heading. Well, fortunately the engineer woke up and found out what he had done and turned the gas on again. But by that time we had dropped down about 5,000 feet – we had been up maybe about 20,000. And, of course, we fell out of formation and everything else.

So, when you go back on your own – when you're not in a formation – you're very vulnerable for fighters coming after you. That was probably my most scary mission because we had dropped down and lost altitude, and we were flying at a lower altitude. And we had to make it all the way back to the lower part of Italy where we were stationed – down into the heel. But we made it!

Did any fighters come after you?

No. Fortunately, no. We were lucky enough. What we did, we really dropped down to low altitude – we went all the way down to almost 5,000 or something like that and came back that way.

So it was a little low for the fighters to come after you.

Yes. The lower you are, the harder you are to see.

So you ended up not going to Switzerland, but you got back to ...

We got back to base, actually.

One time we did have to take another air field that wasn't quite as far down as we were, but that was a different cause. But most of the time we made it right back to base.

So you were doing these missions between September of 1944 through February of 1945.

Right. The first one was on September 21, 1944, and the last one was February 16, 1945.

When you were not flying on a mission, what were you doing?

Well, mostly we'd play cards or something like that. Or we'd do reading – we had books and we'd read and that sort of thing. Or, we'd go into town. We could go into Lecce.

How did the people there respond to you?

Well, pretty good! I met a fellow who was an artist. He had been a professor at a college, in art. He had fallen on hard times and everything, like there were in Italy. He

had advertised to paint pictures. So I had, in my wallet, a copy of the picture I showed you of my wife – our engagement picture. I took that picture into this artist, and he agreed to make a painting. And I've got that painting at home yet. He painted her from that picture, and I paid him – not in dollars or even in Lire. I paid him in cigarettes!

What happened was, we were able to buy cigarettes for \$5 a carton.

This was in the PX.

Yes, on the base. So I'd go in there and buy a carton of cigarettes. And I think I gave him 5 cartons of cigarettes, so that was \$25. So I gave him the 5 cartons of cigarettes and he painted the picture, and I've got the picture.

Do you have any idea what those cigarettes were worth off base?

No, not right off hand I don't know.

But more expensive than you paid.

Oh, yeah. \$5 a carton was pretty cheap. That was 50¢ a pack.

So bartering was pretty common.

And ten packs of cigarettes in the carton. That worked out fine for me!

And you have a nice picture of you and your, now, wife.

Yes. I have the picture. It wasn't of me – he just did her. And we have that at home yet as a good remembrance.

So the people were pretty friendly.

Yes. They were beggars, too. They'd come to us, "Hey, Joe!"

Everybody was "Joe."

Yes. All these kids would come around. They were always looking for candy. And we'd pick up some candy at the base and give the kids candy and they thought that was great. Maybe their folks didn't (chuckles), but I don't know.

I did take a jeep once, and took a ride up to the hospital in Berri, and visited some of the guys that were sick – layed up over there. But other than that I didn't travel around Italy that much.

What were the holidays like when you were overseas? You spent a Christmas there. What was Christmas like for you?

They had a Protestant and a Catholic chaplain, and they had Christmas Eve service and I remember going to that.

In a tent?

They didn't have a chapel on the base. They had just a big room that they had services in and so forth. So I went to church. I don't know – some of the guys scrounged something and made little Christmas trees, little small things...

Just to have a tree.

Just to have something.
And our officers club – they did have an officers club there with a bar and so forth. We could get drinks, but I didn't drink that much when I was over there – some guys did, but I didn't.

Did you get a gift or something from home – anything from home?

I don't really think I did. No.

Cards? Letters?

Yes, I got a lot of cards and a lot of letters, but it was mostly all correspondence. I don't think they'd know what to send.

I did pack up that portrait and put it in a box, and I did send that to my fiancé at the time; wife now. And I think that's what she got. But that's about it.

Do you remember what the town was like for Christmas?

They didn't decorate.

Because of everything going on.

Yes. There were no lights or anything like that.

So how long were you in Lecce? You did these missions.

Yes. We came there in September ...

Returning to the States

It was just a little bit before you started doing these missions.

Yes. I was in Italy until about the first of March. I left Italy for USA on the first of March.

How did you get back home?

The most terrible thing I ever had.

And what was that?

It was in March, and I had to go to Naples. And in Naples we picked up a ship. They put us on this troop ship, and we went all the way across. It took me at least three weeks – about two-and-a-half weeks to on this ship. And going across the Atlantic in March is ...

Cold!

It was cold, and it was choppy – windy. And that ship just bounced around all the time. Fortunately I never got air sick or sea sick – it doesn't bother me. Even to this day it doesn't bother me to bounce around in the air or even out on the ocean.

But what was happening, was my wisdom teeth were just breaking through. And those wisdom teeth were bothering me like nobody's business! So shortly after I got home I went to the dentist and had them yanked out.

They made you miserable on the trip.

Yes. They made me miserable on the trip coming back.

So what did you do for two-and-a-half weeks on the ship?

Well, a lot of guys gambled a lot, but I never did. I never played cards, poker or anything like that on the ship. Frankly, it was mostly just reading and maybe writing a little – some letters and that sort of thing – so I could send them over. Sleep! (Chuckles)

So you didn't have any routine you had to follow on the ship. You were all going home.

That's right. I didn't have any enlisted men or anything, because I was the first one from the crew that went.

Right. Because you had all those extra missions.

Yes. See on this list (shows list) I show who the pilots were. Well, my pilot was Flournoy. The first mission was with a fellow by the name of Rawls. And then I had Cole, Gray, Wedell. All of these here were with other crews. From this time here, from November 8 to the next time I flew with my regular was two-and-a half months – the 31st of January. It was quite a while that I flew all these missions with other people

So you got on this ship. Do you remember the name of the ship?

No. I don't have any idea.

But you got home. Where did you pull into port in the United States?

In New York.

Do you remember pulling in? What do you remember seeing?

The Statue of Liberty and all that sort of thing.

What was the reaction on the ship?

Everybody was happy (both chuckle). Everybody was anxious to go. From there we went to a camp in New Jersey – I want to say Kilmer, but I don't know if it was Kilmer or not.

Anyway, they took us into New Jersey and published orders, and gave us a leave. And I went home.

This was not a discharge, this was a leave.

Yes.

And how much leave did you have?

It was long enough so that we got married!
I came home, and I think it was thirty days leave.

Did your family know you were coming? They must have known you were on your way home then.

Well, I had written them that I was going to come home, so they were kind of looking for me. But I couldn't send anything from the ship, or anything like that.

So they knew I was coming home shortly – maybe sometime in the next three weeks.

So you got to New York. When you got to New York were you able to write them then, or call and say you were here and you'd be on your way? Or did you just show up at home?

I just showed up at home.

How did you get on your leave from New Jersey to home – train?

Yes. I had to go ... It's a little hazy. A lot of times I had to go up to Ft. Sheridan, and then from Ft. Sheridan I'd take a cab. I know I took a taxicab, but I think it was just

from the train. I took the train from New Jersey to Chicago, and I picked up a cab and drove out to Lyons.

Of course my mother – she was just crying all the time, she was so happy.

Then I went over to see my girlfriend and said, “Let’s get married!” And in two weeks we got married. We had 200 people at our wedding! That was 75 years ago in April.

Did you get married in uniform?

Oh, yeah. I got married in my uniform. And I had a second cousin – a good friend of mine – who was in the Navy. And he was stationed at Notre Dame – Notre Dame had a training detachment there. And I went there – Elaine and I drove over there – and asked him if he could possibly stand up for me as Best Man – I had to look for a Best Man. So our wedding picture is Elaine and I, and the Best Man, and she had a Maid of Honor and about four other girls.

So you were kind of out-numbered!

Yes (chuckles). I was kind of out-numbered. But we had a nice church wedding.

So her brother was not able to come – the guy you signed up with.

No. He was still over in France then.

Did you have any time for a honeymoon? What did you do?

Well, I had this leave that they gave me, and then I had to go for rest and recuperation down in Miami Beach. So Elaine and I go to a train and went back down to Miami Beach and we stayed down there for a while.

Of course, I was still in the service. And after that leave I was sent to Texas for reassignment out of Ellington Field. We stayed there for – they were trying to figure out what they wanted to do with me.

I was going to ask what they did, but they didn’t know what to do!

That’s right.

We were there for about a month, I think – at least.

What did you do during the day at Ellington Field? Just waiting to hear from them?

At first they thought what I should do is ...

Let’s see. On May 1 we got down to Ellington Field. And I didn’t get out of Ellington Field until July 21. And I was assigned as a cadet adjutant in Hondo, Texas. So my wife and I went there.

What does an adjutant do?

Well, an adjutant – frankly I didn't do much of anything (chuckles). Because the war was kind of winding down a little bit. I had to get the cadets that they had there – they came out and we did exercises. And I had to give them talks on what to do. It wasn't a hard assignment at all. I was just there working as an adjutant.

It sounds mostly like you were an example – “I've been there and this is what you need to know.”

That's right. That sort of thing. And keeping those guys in line. That was the first of July when I got down in Hondo. By August they dropped the atomic bomb.

I left Hondo, then, at the end of September and was separated from the service on the first of September.

And your discharge was where?

Well, I was separated from the service. What that meant was I went on to the inactive Reserves. So I maintained my commission that way, and I stayed in the inactive Reserves.

They called me up when the Korean War came along. And I got a delay. They wanted me to go down to San Antonio and train as a navigator on a B29. But by that time I had gone through college, and I had gotten this job with Western Electric. And we were on a government contract, building magnetrons for radar. And I was working on that. So when I got these orders to come down for navigation training and then proceed all the way to Tokyo, eventually. The personnel director wrote a letter that I was indispensable on this defense project. And I took that down to Chanute Field with my orders, and they gave me a 90 day delay. I came back and waited.

When I went down to report again to Chanute Field after the 90 days, why I brought another letter down there telling how indispensable I was on this defense project. And so they said, well, we'll give you another 60 days delay. So I came back. And before the 60 days was up they sent me a letter that they had enough navigators and didn't need me.

Shortly thereafter I went in, and I just went out of the service.

Your time was up. So from the time you left Texas, you said you were on inactive Reserve. So you came back to Illinois. You settled in Chicago, or Lyons?

No. What I did was I went up to the University of Wisconsin and took my undergraduate degree. So this other stuff in the Korean War is several years later.

So you got your degree from the University of Wisconsin, and your degree is in mechanical engineering. And then you got hired by Western Electric.

Not right away. What I did was I went over for a year at Reynolds Metals in McCook – for about a year or so. Then, when the Korean War started and they got these defense contracts at Western Electric again, they got a hold of me ...

Western Electric did.

Yes. And they said they'd hire me at this amount of money. And it was more than I was making at Reynolds, so I went back to Western Electric. Then I stayed with them for the rest of my time.

So when the Korean War started and you got a 90 day delay, and then you went for a 60 day delay – you had five months of delay and they said they had enough. And at that point you were discharged.

Yes.

Formal Discharge

Where did your discharge take place?

I think it was in Ft. Sheridan. I don't recall right now how that happened. And that was the end of my military career.

So, when you formally discharged from the military, your family was probably somewhat relieved, since the Korean War was going on.

Oh, yeah. My two oldest sons had been born already when I would have been going in. I would have left Elaine home with the two boys.

So you had other responsibilities that just yourself at that point.

Right.

When you went to school, by the way, was that on the G.I. Bill?

Yes.

So you went to Western Electric, and you stayed there your whole career?

Yes. I retired from Western Electric in 1982. I was living here in Darien at that time. Then, in 1982 I decided to go to Florida, and we went down there. My son bought my house and he's still living over here in Darien.

Lasting Impressions

Do you have any close friendships from the military? Do you still keep in touch with any of those guys?

Yes. I pretty much kept in touch, with the exception of one; I was in contact with my pilot, my co-pilot. I had met them down in Florida. They've come down to Florida and visited me. We went out to the air field and saw a B24. We walked through one and all that kind of stuff down there in Florida.

But, now, it's gotten to the point there's only three of us left from the crew. We kind of corresponded – we knew where each one was living and everything else. The first one who died was one of our gunners. He was from Texas. Gradually another one, - ? , he was from Pennsylvania. He passed away.

Another one of our gunners, he came down to Florida and visited, and we got together – it so happened that the co-pilot had lived in Stewart, Florida and I was in Ocala, Florida. Then Gordon Flournoy, our pilot, he lived in Columbus, Georgia. So they came down, and we got together and socialized a little bit and that sort of thing.

But now there's only three of us left.

And you're living up here, now, in the Chicago area now.

Yes. I live up here in Chicago.

My pilot and co-pilot have died. My bombardier, a fellow by the name of Leonardi, and he came from California – his father was in the movie industry – he got into that, but now he's living with his children in Denver, Colorado. I talk with him once in a while on the phone.

So he's the one you keep closest with right now.

Right now, he and one of our gunners who was from Memphis, Tennessee, he's living in Mississippi, right on the border between Tennessee and Mississippi down there. I visited him, and he (chuckles) – my wife liked it because he lives near Tupelo. And in Tupelo they've got gambling places – so he took us over there to have dinner and do a little gambling on the slots and that sort of thing. He's still alive, but all the rest of them are gone.

Do you belong to any veterans' organizations?

Only this bomb group organization.

And you meet with them regularly?

They have an annual thing, and I went to one of them when we were living in Florida. I went to one in Florida. But I haven't gone to the others, because I haven't really established a firm association with any of them.

How did your experience in the military affect your life, and how did it affect your thinking about things?

Well, I think it's a fast way to grow up. I was only 17 when I graduated from high school and experienced a lot of this sort of thing. I was pretty immature, as I reflect on it. So it's a quick way of coming into a reality rather than a juvenile type of environment. I don't regret it. I'm glad that I signed up and went into it. As a matter of fact, I'm sure – I wasn't from a wealthy family or anything – I'm not so sure I would have gone to college. I'm almost sure I wouldn't have gone to college if I hadn't been in the military and picked up the G.I. Bill. That had a big, significant effect.

The four years that we – Elaine and I – were up at the University of Wisconsin, we were in a campground up there that was called Camp Randall, which was a Civil War camp at the Civil War time. They set up a whole bunch of trailers there, and we lived there for the four years I was going to school in a trailer. And it was a good experience. Elaine got a job working for an insurance company up there, and I went to school.

And after I got my degree we came back and I worked here.

It had a lot of influence on my life. I would have had a whole different life if I hadn't gone through that experience.

How did affect the way you think about things? When you see what's happening in the world today, how does your military background, your experiences, affect what you see around you?

Well, as you get older and older – I'm 86 now – a lot of things have changed, obviously. I still make certain judgments, or have certain ideas about how things should go. But I realize I don't have much that I can do to influence things, so it's a go-with-the-flow type of thing. But, in general, I think it molded me into a much better person than I might have been if I hadn't been in the military. I really think so.

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to discuss? Anything you'd like to share?

Well, I'm willing to share almost anything (chuckles)! But maybe I'd bore you to death!

No, no – not at all.

Well, if you don't have anything else, we'll go off record. Thank you very much for sharing your story.