

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Robert Johnson

conducted by Martin W. Thomas

June 5, 2003

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
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Part 1: Introduction:

This interview is being conducted on June 5, 2003 at the Indian Prairie Public Library. My name is Martin Thomas. I am speaking with Robert C. Johnson. Mr. Johnson was born on March 22, 1921 in Chicago, IL and now lives in Des Plaines, IL. Mr. Johnson learned of the Veterans History Project through his daughter, Mrs. Cathy Hochberg, whom I met through the Austin Healey Club of America, Midwest Region. Mrs. Hochberg is sitting with us today, with Mr. Johnson's permission. He has kindly consented to be interviewed for the project. Here is his story:

Part 2: Entering the Military:

Bob, when did you enter the service?

The 25th of August, 1942.

And where were you living before you went into the service?

In Chicago.

What were you doing before you went in?

I was working at Western Electric Corporation.

Where was that located?

It was in Cicero, IL.

Were you drafted?

I enlisted.

What branch of service?

Army Air Corps.

Why did you enlist?

Because I didn't want to slop around in the mud. (both laugh)

You knew that if you didn't enlist you would be drafted into the infantry. Where were you inducted?

In Chicago.

Part 3: Training:

Tell me a little bit about your boot camp training experiences. Where did you go for basic training?

For basic we went down to Sheppard Field, TX, Wichita Falls. Six-week basic training, but about two weeks into training somebody in the barracks came down with meningitis, so we were quarantined for six weeks, and then we started basic all over again. So we put in 14 weeks in basic training. After basic, I went to aircraft mechanics school at Sheppard Field, TX. Finished there in the early part of December of '43. We were sent down to Buckingham Army Air Field at Ft. Meyers, FL. It was a flexible gunnery school.

Now that gunnery school, was that something you volunteered for? I mean, you already had mechanics training, right?

Yeah, but then this was another part of the training, for aircrew. The radio operators went to radio school, and then they went to gunnery school or vice-versa, the tail gunners went to armorer school and so forth. After the six weeks at gunnery school, I got a ten day delay in route, which is the same as a furlough, and went home. Cold weather, after leaving Florida it was terrible. Then went down to Barksdale Field, LA. Went through some processing down there. From Barksdale was sent down to Lake Charles, LA, which was a training center.

When would this have been?

Lake Charles Army Airfield. That was in, I'd say around February.

Of '44?

'44.

Question. You went to mechanics school right out of boot camp. They hadn't determined yet that you were going to be part of an aircrew?

No. No. That's what we're getting into right now.

OK.

At Lake Charles we were assigned to a crew that we would go through as replacement training. There was a pilot, copilot, the bombardier, the engineer, which I was, the radio operator and the tail gunner. And there we went through all our training together and, if things went the way they were supposed to, we would go overseas as a group. I think that was another six-week thing. We had just finished up our training program and we were put on alert. Pack our bags and be ready to go. They took six pilots and six engineers. I don't know where the pilots went, but the six engineers, which I was one of, we were sent to a troop carrier in North Carolina.

Before we get you going overseas...

I'm nowhere going overseas. (all three laugh)

Well, what I'm trying to figure out is, out of basic training you went to mechanics school,

and I would have thought that was strictly for ground crews.

But when we went to gunnery school, that's when we were put on flying status.

Was it normal for somebody to go to mechanics school and then go to a flying school?

I don't know if it was normal or not, but it was normal when we did, because there was a whole bunch of us that went down there.

Now before they decided that they were going to put you in the schools that would have you flying, did they have any kind of special tests to make sure that you could tolerate altitude?

We got into that when we got down to Ft. Meyers.

And what kind of tests did they give you to see if you were suitable for flying?

They had the altitude chamber. That's where they would decompress until it was about equivalent to 20,000 feet, and you would sit there until you could get used to that.. And then if you wanted to volunteer, you could take off your oxygen mask to see how long you would last.

Did you?

I did. It was...you didn't. But as soon as you put the mask back on it was like nothing was wrong.

So they did screen you to make sure you could fly. And some people didn't make that, right?

Oh, sure. It was because there was physical....there was some guys down there that I don't even know why they were there to begin with. But, anyway, when we got done there they took the six pilots. Where they went, I have no idea. But we were sent to Maxton Army Air Base in Lawrenceberg, NC, which was a troop carrier base. Towing gliders and whatever. As soon as we got down there we went up to Headquarters and asked, "Why are we here?" because we had no training for any of this. So they started the ball rolling, and we were there, I would say maybe a month, and they put us on orders to go down to Tampa, FL to a replacement center down there. Before we went there we got another ten-day delay en route to go home. And that wasn't too bad because it was during the summertime. But, what could you do? You couldn't do anything, you couldn't get gas and whatever.

At that time, what training had you had, and what was your occupational specialty?

Well, my training then was that I had been trained as an airplane mechanic and I had been trained as an aerial gunner. So my MOS (military occupational specialty) was a 748.

And what's the nomenclature for 748?

Engineer. Flight Engineer.

OK. So the training you've had to become a flight engineer, the gunnery- what else does a flight engineer do?

If something went wrong with the airplane during flight, if you could fix it, you'd fix it.

So you did have to have some mechanical training to be an engineer. You had to go through that to become an engineer. I really don't know what questions to ask about the mechanical training. Was it to work on the hydraulics on the plane?

Everything. They had different sections. They had hydraulic section, electrical section, engines, propellers, landing gear, all of that.

So you had to have proficiency in all those things?

Had to have knowledge, yes.

Sort of like first aid. A medic wouldn't be a doctor, but he'd be a first aid tech.

Yes.

That's the mechanical side of it. Now for the gunnery. How do they train you to become a proficient gunner?

We were trained both in turrets and hand held; they were mounted on posts, Browning 50 caliber machine guns.

Was that twin barrel or single barrel?

Each gun is a single barrel. But, see now, we'll get into that in a minute. The training down there, in order to get you used to tracking, they use skeet. They had regular skeet ranges set up. You'd go through each post and shoot skeet, and every day you'd get more birds.

Here you were firing from a fixed post on the ground, correct?

Here you were using shotguns, a regular skeet range. Then, they had an oval course set up with traps along the sides with trip wires across the road, and on these two-ton trucks, GI trucks, they had rigged a safety circle. You could stand in there, and they drove around this track, and when they'd hit the trip wire the bird would fly out. But you wouldn't know where it was coming from, so you had to be watching for the birds all the time, and then start shooting. Because like a plane's coming from here or here (gestures) the bird would come from here or whatever.

Do I understand right? You're on the truck, your machine gun's mounted on the truck driving around, and then at some point you don't know the bird will fly and you try to knock it down? (aside to daughter) Do you know how much people would pay to do that today?

(laughs) That was a nice one. At the end of the course they asked if there was any place where you'd like to be stationed, and everybody wanted to be on that one. But whoever was already there, they were there for the duration.

So your training to become a gunner on a plane starts out a fixed post shooting at skeets, then you move to the mobile platform which is on the back of a deuce and a half truck and you're shooting at skeets, and then what? Do you ever fire from a plane as part of your training?

They had B-17's, and you were going to fire so many rounds, and rounds were marked, dipped in paint where the tips were a certain color, and you were told what your color was. And then they

had tow target planes, AT-23's. And they would fly out there and you would shoot at the flag, the rag behind them. And then, hopefully, if you didn't cut the cable they could see how you did. That was to teach you how much you had to lead so they would fly into your bullet pattern.

Do you remember approximately how long the towing cable was?

I have no idea.

Did anybody ever come close to hitting the tow plane?

I did. No, the tow plane? (both laugh) That thing was out behind quite a ways, but evidently somebody just wasn't paying enough attention because one of the instructors told me that somebody had shot the tail on a tow plane. But I clipped a cable. (laughs)

I would think that means you were really a good shot.

(laughs) We lost the target.

The cable would be pretty hard to hit. (laughs) I would think that they would think that was a good shot.

I wasn't aiming at it, but I must have been leading too much and caught it like that. Then we had to learn how to take a 50 caliber machine gun apart, put it back together again, and then the last test was take that thing apart, put it back together again blindfolded. And find any defect that was in there that would affect the thing.

And you said that was a Browning 50 caliber?

Browning 50 caliber.

So then that brings us back to after your training where you were before you were sent overseas?

Then, after we were done with training, that's when we were sent to Barksdale Field. They did some more interviews and stuff like that.

What were the interviews?

I don't know. But anyway, from there we were sent down to Lake Charles, LA, the airbase down there, and that's where we were put into crews. And we did all our flying together. Daytime flying, round robin flying where you're (gestures) from here to here to here, nighttime flying, the same thing. We would fly over the gulf and shoot into the gulf so you could see what the bullet patterns were like.

Part 4: Going Overseas:

So then they're ready to send you overseas?

Well, when we got done there, that was about a six-week thing. Then you're ready to go overseas. From there we were sent to Hunter Field, GA, which was a staging area. There it was determined whether you were going to fly a plane over there, or if you were going to go by boat. This was in

October of 1944. As far as I know, nobody flew because they had an abundance of planes over there. From Hunter Field- we were only there a week or two- we went up to Camp Dix, NJ. We were there about a week and then we were put on orders to ship overseas. On Halloween night of 1944 we went down and got loaded on the Ile de France.

I don't know the Ile de France. Was that built as a troop ship or was it a converted...

No, it was a luxury liner.

...converted luxury liner.

It was a real, it was one of the better ones before the war. But anyway, we were on there for two weeks. We were all by ourselves because it was pretty fast. But the two weeks you spent zigzagging back and forth. At night you could go up on deck but you couldn't smoke. No lights, nothing like that. But it was bright. The moon was shining and we were up there one night, just sitting there and enjoying the thing, and all of the sudden, out over the side of the ship this submarine came up. I was scared. That's the one time I was really scared. It turned out it was a supply...one of our own. They brought mail and stuff like that. But the food was terrible. It was an English crew, and all they had was mutton. Greasy mutton, I mean you'd go down there and the grease was going back and forth in these pans, and the meat was floating around in it. You ate, but you didn't want to eat. The guys from the infantry that were there, they would eat and then throw it right back up again. They were seasick, and the food didn't help at all. We landed in Greenoch, Scotland. By train we went to down to East Anglia, which is down near London. That was another replacement depot. We sat there for, God, it seemed like forever. We were living in Quonset huts. Food wasn't...they still had English cooks. From there, we were flown across the English Channel, I don't know to what town, but from there we were put on GI trucks.

What country did you fly to?

We flew to France. And we were put on trucks up to our new base which was at Cambrai. Where we were going to be stationed at in France. It had been a German airfield, and we lived in these concrete block barracks that the Germans built.

The Germans built them for their own air force?

Yes.

Did your crew all travel on the trip together? The six of you?

Yes. Well, on the same ship, but the officers and the enlisted men...

Part 5: Combat Zone Duty

I don't know if you told me on record or off record, but you were assigned to the 9th Air Force?

Yes.

What was the squadron and bomb group?

394th Bomb Group, 586th Bomb Squadron. Cambrai, France. C-A-M-B-R-A-I.

How many planes are there in a squadron? How many were in your squadron?

Well, I never really counted them. See, there are four squadrons in a group.

And how many groups were in the 9th Air Force? Do you know that, by any chance?

I'd say at least eight.

The plane you were on, you told me off record I think, you trained on the B-25 which was made by North American, and then the B-26 which was made by Martin Aircraft. And for the record, you brought a lot of photographs. Your daughter and I were scanning them in (on a computer), and some of those are going to be in this report. The photographs are of the B-26?

Yes.

Two of them are in combat. One is dropping bombs, and one's got flak around it.

Yes.

And I could see that it was a wing-over plane with two engines.

Yes.

And you already told me there would be six crew members?

Yes.

Those would be the pilot, the copilot-pilot,..

The bombardier, engineer, radio operator and tail gunner. Armorer-tailgunner.

What was the armament on the B-26? What were the guns and where were they?

There was a single 50 caliber in the nose, for the bombardier. There were two package guns on each side. They were fixed guns. They were 50 calibers that the pilot had control of.

They were facing forward?

Facing forward.

On the wings?

No, on the fuselage.

OK.

There were two 50 calibers in the top turret.

Who operated those?

The radio operator.

OK.

There were two 50 calibers in the waist, one on the right side and one on the left side. And that was the engineer. That was my job.

How could you operate them both? Would you go from one side to the other, depending on where the action was?

I was right in the middle, but I didn't have to go back and forth. I could stand right there and go back like this (gestures) because it rounded out like this. See, the windows pointed down to the ground. I didn't know at all what was going on above. The only way I knew there was flak, was it sounded like a hail storm.

These waist guns, were they twin 50's or singles?

A single one on each side.

A single one on each side, and you say you were standing?

I was on my knees.

Well, what holds you in place if he starts taking evasive action? Are you strapped to the floor in any way?

Evasive action, it was just back and forth, it wasn't any going up and down or diving, or anything like that. It was all just what the group did.

When you were talking about the training and being on the backs of the trucks you did say you were standing there, and I didn't quite get that.

Down there they had them mounted on posts, and they shot out over the swamp.

I'm just having a hard time understanding how you can keep your footing or even kneeling, how you can stay in place on a plane when there's all this action going on, and you've got to be taking some evasive action. If he wants to turn right or left, you're going to roll a little bit.

Just roll with the plane. And then there were two 50 calibers in the tail.

Twin 50's?

There was like a turret back there.

So, the tail gunner's in a turret, the top gunner is in a turret- are those the only two turrets?

Yes.

OK. Then the bombardier's firing a fixed gun out the nose?

A fixed gun through the Plexiglas nose.

OK. And then you're defending both sides of the plane...(Mr. Johnson is selecting photos from a pile) You've got a photograph here of ...(both look at photographs of B-26's. None show all gun positions clearly).

Now, I did more when we were in a combat zone. We had packages of chaff. It was like Christmas tree tinsel. My job was, throw it out the windows.

Fool the radar?

Screw up the radar.

You had a box of it and you'd hand throw it out the window?

No, it was wrapped loosely, so when it hit the turbulence from the propellers it just unraveled and it went all over the place. It just looked like Christmas tinsel, but it wasn't that heavy.

But you literally just threw it out the window?

Just threw it out the window. Both arms, because I had five or six boxes of it, and the boxes were 3 by 3 by 3. And I would empty those things.

So you'd just throw it out by the handful.

By the handful. By the package, yeah.

Well, that is going to lead into a question I'm going to ask you in a minute, and that's "What were your other duties as assigned on the plane?" First I want to say that while we were off record so we could pull those photographs and look at them, I was asking you about the armament on the plane and who fired what guns, and you mentioned that you fired the waist guns, and you told me that they were just guns mounted at open windows, so we were looking at the planes to see if we could see those windows. I can't really see them, but roughly, what would you say the size of those windows was?

They were big enough for a man with a parachute to get out.

(laughs) I was going to ask you if they were big enough for a man to... Now did you wear your parachute at all times in the air?

Yes. In combat, yes. It was a chest pack.

So, if you did accidentally go out the window, you had a parachute.

It was pretty hard to accidentally go out the window, but if you had to go in a hurry you didn't want to be running around looking for a parachute.

While we were off record I asked you what a package gun is. Would you describe a package gun?

A package gun was mounted on the side of the fuselage. There were two on the left side, two on the right side. They were regular caliber 50 machine guns, but they had a housing over them, just to streamline them.

I'm going to go back to those windows, because when you mentioned that it reminded me of something else. Were these two side windows open the whole time?

They were open all the time when we were in combat. They had to be, so the guns could be outside. It didn't make that much difference if they wanted to pull the guns in and close the windows, because we didn't have any heat.

That's what I was getting to. What altitude were you flying?

We were about 15,000 feet.

Were you on oxygen?

Yes.

And, since the windows were open and you were at 15,000 feet, and you just said you had no heat in the plane, how were you dressed? How did you keep warm?

We had flying suits.

And would you describe the flying suit?

Winter, regular flying suit. It wasn't the sheep lined ones like they had before, because they were kind of cumbersome. But these were kind of flexible. I don't know what they were made of, but they were warm, and I was so doggone busy throwing that crap out, I kept warm like that. The tail gunner had a little canvas partition that he could put up, to keep the wind from blowing back on him, and if he had to get out in a hurry it was just a quick breakaway thing on snaps. And the turret gunner was up getting all that sunshine up there, so he was warm. If he had to get out in a hurry, all he had to do was, the seat dropped and he was down on the floor.

You told me about your job to throw the foil, or chaff, out the window to fool the radar. What other duties did you have when you were in the air?

That was about all. In combat, like I say, I was in the back of the ship and there wasn't much I could do, just with the guns. Normally, when we got back on our side, when I could go back up in front, I'd check to make sure all the bombs had dropped. I would transfer fuel from auxiliary tanks to the main tanks, because we had a system in there. On those planes you would switch from right

auxiliary to right main, and then you would set the switch which way it was supposed to go. Because if you switch it the other way, it would pump from the main to the auxiliary to the outside. Because the auxiliaries were just small tanks. We started out with a thousand gallons of gas. There were sometimes toward the end of the war where we were really going out. They would send us- we could safely go for, oh, five hours without wondering about running out of fuel. But sometimes they were sending us out five and a half hours. And the older planes where the engines had more hours on them were a little worn, they used a lot of fuel. But the plane we had was practically a new plane. With power settings- we sat down and figured power settings and everything. We always came back with an adequate amount.

This would be a good time to ask you about your plane. You told me off record that you stayed with the same plane the whole time, unlike some of the other groups that would have whatever plane was ready for them that day. What was the name of your plane?

(Mr. Johnson begins laughing, which starts his daughter laughing; the interviewer laughs too, but isn't sure why)

Is this something you can say in front of your daughter?

I don't know who got this name or where it came from, but they had this picture...

We'll go on record that you didn't pick the name.

No, I didn't pick the name. I didn't even think about picking a name. Somebody had this picture of this cowgirl bending over, and it's really supposed to be "Little Lass," but you read it fast and it's not "Little Lass."

(laughs) We'll try to make sure we have that picture accompany this interview. So, just out of curiosity, we've all seen pictures of the war planes, especially the bombers, and they had nicknames and pictures on them. Do you know how those pictures got on them? Do they employ local painters? Talented Air Force guys?

They had talented guys in there.

So, just somebody in the squadron might be doing the decorating.

Yes, somebody that could do it. I don't remember which squadron it was, but they had one guy in there that evidently was an air brush artist, and they had some fantastic nose art. It was terrific.

What was your squadron's mission?

We would bomb railroad yards, bridges. It was a tactical group.

It was tactical, as opposed to strategic.

Yes. Towards the end of the war our job was helping General Patton. On his quick trip through Germany there. The problem was, by the time we got briefed, got out and ready to go, he had already taken the target.

You mentioned railroad yards and bridges, transportation infrastructure. Did you ever have live combat targets like a group of tanks or a convoy of trucks or...

No. Well, we had one time, they said it was a maximum effort, that you flew out and they put you on your own, and whatever you saw you could shoot up.

Target of opportunity?

Yes, target of opportunity. Most of the time, for the railroads, the trains themselves or the convoys, there were fighters, because the fighters could come down and strafe the whole line.

So yours were fixed targets.

Yes. With the trains, what I saw on this day when we had a maximum effort, when we were allowed to do what we wanted to, there was what looked like a troop train. So we circled around, and what had happened, the engineer had pulled the locomotive into an overpass. Left all these cars full of soldiers sitting out there with nothing. But the cars were empty, so we evidently we weren't the first ones to get there. Other than that, airfields, I saw one airfield there that the planes were all lined up, guys were looking at us, watching us. They didn't have gas to put in the planes.

Did you bomb the planes, then?

Strafed them. We were bombing railroad marshaling yards one day. It was a fairly clear day where you could see the ground, and you could see these boxcars, just like coming up in the air and turning circles when the bombs hit.

Where was that?

I don't know what town it was, but it was wherever there was a railroad yard.

That was in Germany, correct?

Yes, that was in Germany.

How many missions did you fly altogether?

30.

When was your last mission? Approximately what month?

Just before VE-Day.

Why did you not have to fly any more missions after that?

The war was over.

You mentioned what your routine missions would be, railroad yards, bridges, tactical targets. Were there any missions that were particularly memorable to you? Any incidents on any of them?

Just the heavy flak. We had three areas where operated in. One was the Rhineland, and Central Europe, and when it came up, the Battle of the Bulge, Ardennes. We would go in the Rhineland. We would go right up the Rhine River. And you never knew where you were going to get hit. You knew you were going to get hit, but you didn't know where, because they had all their flak guns mounted on barges. And if the flak gun was here today (gestures), tomorrow it'd be up here, the next day over here, but it was never same place twice. As soon as you turned up the Rhine River, in Kolon or Koblenz, that was when you could expect to get hit.

The anti-aircraft barges, were they camouflaged?

They couldn't camouflage them.

Were they ever targeted? It would seem like you want to have them as one of your targets.

They might have been a secondary target or something like that, but they weren't a primary target, because you never knew where they were at. Maybe they wouldn't even be there.

How effective were they? Did they hit any planes from your squadron?

Oh, we got hit. We got flak holes. The flak, it sounded like, it came down, you'd swear you were in a hail storm. It was so thick. What I could see sometimes, it was just black out there. My radio operator, he was up in the turret, he says, "My God," he says, "It was like in the middle of a thunderstorm up there, there was so much flak."

Did any of your planes get shot down? Any from your squadron?

Well, the only one I can remember was when we were assigned to a plane to fly our first mission. We got briefed and pre-flighted the plane and went out, and in the meantime a jeepload came down with guys, and they told us that we got bumped and they were going to take the flight.

Did they say why you got bumped?

No, just that these fellows were almost done with their tour and they wanted to get them done, probably to try to get them home by Christmas. This was pretty close the Christmas in 1944. That plane got shot down. That plane had 95 missions on it before it got shot down. There was one other incident where one of the crews that went over with us got shot down. The bombardier got killed. He got killed because his parachute was soaked with hydraulic fluid and didn't open. There was one other incident one day where there was only one burst of flak, and the tailgunner on

the plane alongside of us got hit. He got just a small piece in his hip. He was a big fellow. He was over 200 pounds then. They had no way of getting him out. He could walk, so the flight surgeon says, "Go over to the ambulance and they'll take him up to the hospital." So, they get him up there and get him undressed and X-ray him and the doctor says, "Well, why did you walk in here?" He says, "Because the flight surgeon says, 'Go ahead and walk.'" He says, "You know what?" He says, "If that piece of flak had gone another quarter of an inch, you'd have been crippled for life!"

You said this was the plane next to you in formation....

Just one burst of flak!

....and you said your planes were just 15 feet apart.

I think the burst went off on the other side of their ship. But other than that, he was the only one that got wounded and that bombardier was the only one that got killed, which is kind of a freak thing.

Of your 30 missions, how many do you think you encountered some kind of hostile activity?

Oh, every one of them! I mean, it was almost like they knew where we were coming. And what direction we were coming from.

Was there any way that they would know that? Like, did you always take off at a certain time of day? Was there any pattern that they could pick up on?

There was no fixed pattern.

(END OF TAPE)

We just turned the tape over to the second side, and you were telling me about the fact that you had encountered flak on every one of your 30 missions. What was that like, being inside the plane and it's you they're shooting at?

It's just like being in a hailstorm. Pounding down on the top, on the plane, and the wings and the fuselage and stuff like that. And the turret gunner told me one time that it was like being in the middle of a thunderstorm, it was so black. The flak was so thick.

Now, you're saying the flak was coming down like it was hail. Did they ever have bursts underneath you that were hitting you from the underside?

Yes, but most of the time...evidently they figured shoot over because you have to fly through it. I guess it was pretty hard to hit a plane at 15,000 feet going around 200, 225 miles an hour, accurately from underneath. If the flak did go off underneath, it really didn't do much damage. With flak, it wasn't a matter of the plane getting hit, it was a matter of the plane flying through the flak, where the engines would suck it up or something like that. Or going off alongside where it would blow off all the control surfaces, which were like canvas, painted.

You showed me a picture, a photograph of a plane that had surface...

The rudder completely shot off, yeah.

...and I imagine they could hit your control hydraulics and so forth too?

Well, I think this one crew where the bombardier got hit, it must have hit in the bomb bay, because the accumulator, which is where hydraulic fluid was, where the pressure was originated. It blew, and all the oil came out. The plane went down, because the crew bailed out. They all got out. He got out, but his chute didn't open. They all got out and his chute didn't open because it was soaked with hydraulic fluid. Where he had it, I don't know. He was the bombardier, and he was up in the nose.

Would he typically be wearing his chute?

He should have had it on his back because he had a different kind. See, bombardiers, the pilot and the copilot had...the bombardier had a backpack, and...well, I guess they all had backpacks because some of them used to have the kind they would sit on, which was real cumbersome. Trying to squeeze out with one of those things was something else again.

So, what was the worst damage done to your plane done by a flak burst?

The worst damage was on one mission, we had just turned off the IPs and started our bomb run, and no more evasive action, and got some flak in the right engine and we lost the right engine. And flew the rest of the mission on one engine.

How did the flak knock the engine out?

When they pulled the engine and took it apart they found that just a small piece of flak had gone in through the carburetor air intake into the impeller and chopped up all the blades on the impeller. The impeller is what I guess the common person would call a supercharger.

So from then on that engine wasn't working?

That engine was gone. When we got back on the ground the plane was grounded, they pulled the engine and put another engine in.

You're saying this engine was out at the beginning of the bomb run? They completed the bomb run on one engine?

Yes.

Now, this is probably a good point to ask you, and we did talk about it off record a little bit, if for some reason you weren't able to bomb your target for whatever reason, what happened to those bombs after that?

We had secondary targets. If the primary target wasn't clear enough, or (whatever reason) if we couldn't bomb there we had a secondary target to go to. After that it was up to you, if you couldn't use the secondary target just to salvo the load rather than try to land with a shipload of bombs.

When you say "salvo the load" you mean drop it in some other authorized area?

Just some other area before you got back to the battle line.

Did you have maps to show specifically where those bombs could be dropped?

We had no idea where they would go.

Were you ever flying over water?

No.

So you were always dropping them on land.

Yes.

Did you have any sort of guidelines as far as trying to avoid civilian population areas, anything like that?

I guess you would try to avoid the towns, but when you're flying, most of our missions were flown with 10/10 coverage. On a scale from one to ten, ground cover, ten it was solid. I mean they couldn't see you, you couldn't see them. So you didn't know where you were bombing.

So you might just be bombing through the clouds.

Just drop them. Get rid of them. As long as it was on their side.

How many bombs would you carry, typically?

Depended on what the load was. What you were going for.

What would be the maximum, in terms of numbers and weight?

Well, maximum load was about 1,000 pounds, two 500 pound bombs.

What type of bombs typically were you carrying? Incendiary, high explosives, or something else?

Both. But, see, incendiary was something else. Antipersonnel bombs were something else. These big bombs were like when we would go into the railroad yards and bomb freight cars and stuff like that. If we were going into an area where they could use incendiary bombs, they had cluster bombs. There were a whole bunch of small bombs in a cluster to put in the thing, and they had a barometric fuse on it. At a certain altitude they would explode and all these little bombs would go out, and they would drop and explode when they hit the ground. The same with antipersonnel bombs. They were like that too. And if we were dropping leaflets, they were like that. Leaflets were the

propaganda sheets you used to drop, telling them, you know, a bunch of crap about what's going on...

(laughing) Were any of your missions to drop the propaganda leaflets?

Oh, yeah, we had one.

You didn't keep a copy of one of those leaflets, did you?

I did, and she took it to school (gestures toward daughter) and the other ones took it to school for German classes, and over the years it just disappeared. She told me one time what they said but...

What the leaflet said?

(daughter) Yeah, that's going back a few years. (all chuckle)

We've talked quite a bit about the missions, what your targets were, what it was like in the plane when you were going through the mission. One thing I wanted to ask you, was there anything that lightened your day? Any humorous incidents that happened while you were in the air?

No.

Is there anything else about the missions that I haven't asked you that you'd like to talk about? Anything that comes to mind?

No.

Before we get to your separation from service and your life after the service, I have some questions about when you were not flying. First of all, were you near any town or population area, where your base was?

The town was a pretty good-sized town, the one in Cambrai. But there was nothing to do there.

Did you ever go in to town?

No.

So, what was life like for you when you weren't flying? How did you occupy your time?

Playing cards. Playing poker. We had a poker game that started in Georgia and was still going on when I left, Venlow, Holland.

When you where?

Venlow. After the war.

I won't ask you whether you came out ahead or behind. What was your rank while you were over there?

I went over there as a corporal and I came back as a tech sergeant.

So, we talked about your life on the base as just basically card playing. Did you have any contact with your family?

Just by mail.

What kind of mail?

Regular mail. The V-mail, I tried that V-Mail but it took so long to process it because they had to unfold the thing and take a picture of it and refold it.

So your letter was shrunk down by...

No, the regular mail was just like regular mail, but if you went V-mail, that was free mail and it just took three, four, five times longer to get there.

Well, just briefly, with the V-mail, you said you tried it and it took too long, or you just knew other people who tried it and it was taking too long?

I tried it and I think some of the stuff was just getting there that I tried when I first got overseas after the first of the year.

What was the process for V-mail? You'd write it out on a form?

Yeah, it came as an envelope on one side and then you wrote on the inside and folded it together and wrote "free" on it and where it was to.

Then what was the next step? You mentioned something about photographing it.

Well, I was told that they photographed it and then sent it. I don't know. I have no idea what it was about. I didn't bother. After that, I just bought stamps and sent it that way.

The V-mail, I've heard, was censored. Was that your understanding?

All of it was supposed to be censored.

If you didn't use V-mail, you're using a French postage stamp, is that right?

Yes.

OK, and then you put into their postal system, and it goes...

No, not French. We bought, we had American stamps, because it stayed right in our postal system.

Oh, so it went right through the Army Air Force Postal System.

Yeah, but see, our officers were supposed to censor them.

So any personal letter you write, somebody that you know and who knows you is the one that's doing the censoring?

Yes.

Who did you keep in contact with while you...

I wrote home.

To your parents?

I had one friend of mine that we were together from grammar school and whatever, and he was a B-25 pilot. He got killed in 1944. In Italy. So, I didn't have anybody to write with then.

On your time off, did you ever get any passes or leave to go anywhere?

Well, every so often we would get a 48 hour pass when we were down in France, in Cambrai. We would hitchhike up to Charleroi in Belgium, because you could get meals up there. You could get steak up there, and ice cream, and milk if you wanted to take a chance on unpasteurized milk. So, we would hitchhike up there and have a couple of good meals and hitchhike back.

When you hitchhiked were you getting rides with locals?

On trucks, whatever came along.

Oh, military trucks?

Yeah. They didn't hesitate to pick you up. And then we got a flak leave.

You called it a flak leave?

A flak leave was because some of the guys were going nuts from flak. It would drive you crazy. It was a form of R and R. We went down to the French Riviera, which was nice. We stayed at the Hotel Beau Rivage. (actually in Nice, France) They had French chefs cooking our C rations, and you would never know it was the same food. The food was terrific. And you could buy champagne for fifty cents a bottle. You couldn't go in the Mediterranean because it was all polluted from the invasion, and I guess there were so many bodies in there. There was no sand because the Germans had used up all the sand to make fortifications along the beachhead there. But it was a nice, quiet, whatever.

How long did it last?

A week.

Cambrai, is that in the north of France?

Down at the Mediterranean. Down on the Riviera.

How far away were you, Cambrai from the Riviera?

When we got that flak leave we were up in Holland. They flew us down there. We flew over Switzerland, made a circle around the Matterhorn, flew over Lake Geneva and all of that stuff, which (laughs) at least they weren't shooting at us then.

What kind of plane would they fly you down in?

A C-47. One of those old, slow things.

So you would go down there and have a week of...

Have a week of this, do nothing.

You called that flak leave because it was sort of a rest and recuperation?

Yes, because, to get you away from the flak. Although this was after the war.

Were there any USO shows ever in your area?

I never saw any.

We're about to the point where you get out of the service unless you there's anything else you can think of that I haven't asked you about.

What we did after the war.

Well, first let's get you out of the service...

Well, I mean before I was discharged.

Oh, you were discharged after the...

I was discharged, the war ended in June and I was discharged in October.

Oh, OK. What happened between June and October?

We were stationed up there in Venlow, Holland.

Let me ask a quick question here. The war in Europe was over in June. Were you still susceptible to being sent over to the Far East?

Yes. Yes. We were given a choice. But anyway, right behind where our plane was stored, our hardstand, was a heavily traveled road with all DPs (displaced persons) on it. I mean it was constantly, all the time, day and night. But it was also easy to get across into the air base there. So, our plane was out for, I think a 100 hour inspection. The normal ones were 25, 50, 75 and 100. This was more really everything but an overhaul. So, they got it ready to fly. They got all their inspections done, so we got the call to try it out, give it a test flight. So, whenever that plane left the ground it always had three men in it, the pilot, the copilot and an engineer. We started the thing up, checked all the power out real good on both engines, and taxied out to the end of the runway, got

clearance to take off, and got about 50 feet off the ground and the right engine quit. So, just feathered that engine and poured everything into the left engine and got enough altitude where we could circle around and come back in and land. They towed it back and the crew chief had to take over, do whatever he had to do to find out what it was. He called us back that afternoon and they said they changed the plugs on it; they found the plugs were fouled out. Everything checked out fine, took off, got about 50 feet again and the left engine cut out. So, we went through the whole procedure again and got back, and this time they grounded the plane indefinitely. They pulled the engines and sent them back to Wright Field to find out what was wrong with them. Well, they found out that the white powder that was on the spark plugs was the same as moth balls. Somebody had contaminated the gas in the tanks. We don't know what it was.

You mentioned in the beginning about the DPs walking by. Was there some connection there?

They think... Well, after the war there was, like they're having trouble in Bagdad now. With these sharpshooters and stuff like that. These were "The Werewolves," they called them. Most of them were just young kids. They were like the kids that had been in Boy Scouts or something like that, but they were in this other thing that Hitler called the Youth Group or whatever it was, and they were trained like this. That's the only thing they could figure out as what happened there. But, anyway, they put two new engines in it and when I left it was still flying.

So, after peace was declared in Europe you were still in flying status and actually doing some flying?

Well, we were flying, yeah. We had to fly four hours a month in order to get our flying pay. So we would fly around, just sightsee, just see what you could see. Our crew chief, his grandmother lived in Lithuania, so he asked my pilot, "Do you think we could go to Lithuania?" And Al says, "Yeah, I think. Well, I'll find out." So the OKs went all the way through until it came to the Russians, and the Russians said no. So, that was when I got my first idea that something isn't going to be right when this war is over.

Not allies anymore.

Yep.

You mentioned flight pay. What was flight pay at that time?

At that time it was 50% of your pay.

What happened in October of '45?

October? Well, at the end of September I got sent down to Camp Lucky Strike. It was a deportation point. And sometime early in October I got put on a liberty ship. We got in the North Sea, and all of the sudden we just practically stood still. There was a storm and we were going up and down, bouncing all over, and come to find out, there was an emergency appendectomy and they just carried enough, about three knots, just to keep the ship moving around. And we went through that. Man, it was really something else. That was two weeks before we got back into Boston Harbor. That's where we landed. And then stayed at Camp Miles Standish overnight. They put us on the train, and we went to Camp Grant in Rockford, IL, and there I was discharged.

You were discharged when?

25th of October in '45.

Part 6: After Service:

What did you do the day you were discharged?

Went home (laughs). There was nothing to do. I got discharged, it was after supper.

How did you get home from Rockford?

On a train. It was like a commuter train.

Did your family know you were coming home that night?

No.

What was the reunion like?

Nothing unusual.

They knew you were coming home sometime.

Yeah, they knew the war was over. But, see, before that we were interviewed about what we wanted to do. And you were given your choice, you could stay there for the army of occupation, you could volunteer and go directly to the South Pacific, or you could go back to the States and go to the South Pacific, and they said, "If you want to stay in, reenlist, we'll make you a Master Sergeant and we'll let you stay on flying pay." It was a temptation, but I figured the peacetime Air Force is not going to be like the wartime Air Force. So I said, "No, I'd rather go home."

To your recollection, was there anybody that volunteered to go fight in the Pacific?

I don't know of anybody that elected to go fight in the Pacific. I met a guy about ten years afterwards that stayed in. I met him and he says, "You know what?" he says, "You were smart to get out." He says, "It changed so much, you couldn't believe it, the way it changed. When you were in, it was relaxed, because you depended on him and he depended on you." But he says then it was like a...a military. Which was what I was afraid was going to happen.

So you got out, and then what did you do in the days and weeks after?

I went back to work at Western Electric.

Were they required to hold your job for you, or were they doing that as a...

They weren't required to, but they did.

What was your job at Western?

After the war they were building switchboards. They were trying to get caught up on all the switchboard stuff that they had done, and my job, along with all these other guys was adjusting these relays for switchboards.

Did you go to school at all on the GI Bill?

I went to school, to an auto mechanic school, but it wasn't as a profession. It was just more or less...

For your own benefit?

Just to get a pretty good idea what everything's all about.

I think you told me off record that you hadn't met your wife before you went in the service. When did you two meet?

Afterwards. A long time afterwards.

And you obviously have a family. Your daughter is sitting here. Did you have any contact with any of your wartime buddies after the service?

No.

Just the one that you said stayed in and you happened to meet.

Yeah, and I don't even remember, he knew me and we were in the same squadron but I couldn't even tell you what his name was.

Did you ever join any veterans' organizations?

I joined the VFW for awhile, but I had a conflict on meeting nights so I dropped out of the VFW. But then I belonged to the B-26 Marauder Historical Society and Ninth Air Force Association.

I believe you told me off record that the Marauder Historical Society has a museum in Pima?

They have a museum in Pima, AZ.

Have you ever seen that?

No.

You mentioned that one or both of these have newsletters? Does the Ninth Air Force Association have a newsletter?

Yes.

And you get that?

I get that once in a while. I think it comes once a month and the other one comes once a month.

The Marauder Museum, do they have some of the planes there?

Well, they have whatever the guys could contribute. There was only, I think there's one B-26 now, and that's in California. There was another one, and that was being, this is going back maybe five, six, seven years ago, and they were flying that to Baltimore, to the Martin factory, and it crashed in Ohio. I don't know what happened. So now there's only just the one that's left. The one that they know of.

Do you have any idea how many Martin Marauder B-26s were made?

I read it one time but I don't remember what it was. It wasn't a whole lot of them. I wouldn't even hazard a guess.

Part 7: Closing:

I think I've asked all the questions I can think to ask. I'm ready to close if you are. Well, first of all, is there anything we've talked about that you want to go back and elaborate on?

No.

In closing, let me ask you this, Bob. How did the service and your experiences over there affect your life? Do you think things turned out differently for you than they would have had you not been in the Army Air Corps?

I don't think so. One thing that has affected me, Fourth of July drives me nuts.

Why is that?

When those big aerial bombs go off.

Because they remind you of flak?

Boy, I jump a mile.

Well, that's probably a good point to close the interview. I thank you very much for participating in the interview and...

I thank you for your interest.

And Cathy, thank you for introducing me to your father.

Sure.

We are going off record.