

Wendell Wilkins Oral History Interview

ED METZLER: This is Ed Metzler. Today is the 31st of August, 2012. I'm in Austin, Texas. And I am interviewing Mr. Wendell Wilkins. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to this site. So, let me thank you, Wendell, for taking the time to share your experiences with us. And I'd like to get it started by having you introduce yourself -- full name, date and place of birth, that kind of stuff.

WENDELL WILKINS: All right. I'm Wendell Wilkins.

EM: And where were you born?

WW: I was born in Eagle Township, Michigan.

EM: Okay. Where is that in Michigan?

WW: It's a little ways from where I live now, and that's near -
- it's 15 miles from Lansing.

EM: All right. So, you're in the lower part of Michigan, kind of in the middle, a little bit up north from Indiana.

WW: Yeah.

EM: Now, what did your dad do for a living?

WW: Farmer, all his life, nothing but farmer.

EM: What did he raise, potatoes?

WW: No, corn, wheat, soybeans, things like that. And then he had beef cattle. He had hogs.

EM: So, a family farm, the old traditional family farm?

WW: That's right.

EM: Brothers and sisters?

WW: I have -- I had a sister. She died a couple of years ago. And, no brothers.

EM: Okay. So, what was your date of birth?

WW: Date of birth was 10-24-21.

EM: It sounds to me like you are coming up on 91 years old.

WW: That's right, next month.

EM: That's wonderful.

WW: Yeah.

EM: So, did you go to school there in the area?

WW: Yep. Everything was located in that area. I went to Grand Ledge High School.

EM: So, you were about eight or nine years old when the Depression hit, didn't you? You had some good times in there as a farmer, and then things got ugly, I bet.

WW: Yep, although not nearly as ugly as some people had it. Farmers could at least raise food.

EM: They could feed themselves anyhow.

WW: Yes.

EM: Yeah. So, you went to high school in the Depression years.
You graduated from high school.

WW: That's right.

EM: When did you graduated?

WW: I graduated in 1939. And then, I went to Michigan State
University.

EM: Spartan.

WW: Yep, Spartan. That was just 15 miles north of us. And, I
went there. I only put in two years there. And then, the
war started getting everybody's attention and did mine,
too. And, I went and enlisted in the air force. And, I
became a...

EM: Were you figuring you'd probably get drafted if you didn't
do something?

WW: That's right. I'd get drafted anyway.

EM: And you didn't want to live in a foxhole, right?

WW: That's right.

EM: You think I've heard this story before?

WW: That's entirely right because when I was at Michigan State
University, I took ROTC there, infantry ROTC. And even
that, it would expose me to all the things that you're
required to know and be knowledgeable of. And I thought,
that doesn't appeal to me. So, I enlisted in the air
force. I only went...

EM: Well, it was army air corps, right?

WW: Yes.

EM: Okay. So, you're really going in the army. But you're wanting to be a cadet.

WW: It was army air corps.

EM: Yeah, right. So, how'd that go?

WW: Well, it went pretty good. But I only went two years when I enlisted, and I was gone. And, I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit here.

EM: Okay, let's don't do that.

WW: I'll come back to it. But I only went to college the two years because when I came back I was kind of a wreck there, in a way. And, I couldn't picture studying. I just couldn't do it. I had to do something with my hands, one thing or another. So, I went to work for a construction company. Now, to go back to before that...

EM: Well, yeah. Tell me where you went to boot camp. Let's go back to the real basics here.

WW: Yes. Well, I went to Fort Custer for processing, in Michigan. And then they sent me to Biloxi, Mississippi to go to basic training. Did that.

EM: That must have been an eye-opener.

WW: Oh yeah.

EM: It's slightly different than Michigan.

WW: It was a tremendous difference there. Anyway, after I got through basic training there I stayed there at Keesler Field. And I went to tech school there for aircraft. And we studied B-24s. Well, I wound up staying with that program. And after I left Keesler Field I went to New Jersey to an engine school. The humorous part of that is that the engine school that they sent me to had no bearing on B-24s. It was a different engine entirely. But anyway, you get introduced to that type. They were large...

EM: Radial, multi-bank.

WW: Radial engines, yeah.

EM: Yeah. What engine did they use on the B-24?

WW: Pratt & Whitney.

EM: So, Pratt & Whitney what, 18-cylinder?

WW: Yeah, 1830, R-1830s. So, after I got through with that, I was sent out west. And, I was in Colorado and not in Texas but in most all the other states, taking training for my career there in the army.

EM: So, what are they making you into here -- a mechanical specialist?

WW: I was an aerial engineer. That's what they made me into.

EM: Now, what does an aerial engineer do?

WW: He keeps track of the mechanical end of the airplane. And, during flight, when you weren't busy with something else, I

would stand up on the flight deck between the pilot and the copilot and read instruments and report anything that changed such that the pilot ought to be watching.

EM: Yeah, and might not be because he's busy, yeah.

WW: Yeah. If he was busy, I kept track of it.

EM: So, how many crew do we typically have on a B-24?

WW: 10.

EM: 10? So, pilot, copilot, bombardier, navigator, tail gunner, nose gunner...

WW: Two waist gunners, upper turret gunner, nose gunner. That about covers it. And I started out, I was intended to be an upper turret gunner. And I flew on my first mission up in the upper turret. And, when I got back from that mission, I told the pilot, I says, "I think I'm in the wrong place." I said I just...

EM: Why did you say that?

WW: I says, "I'm working my butt off climbing up into the turret there, hook up all the wires that go to it, one thing or another, get settled. And someone calls, they want this checked out. So, unhook all this stuff, go back maybe to the waist area, walk down this catwalk that's about seven inches wide down there, and go back and check." The first time I went back there, you have -- of course, we were up on oxygen then. When you get over 10,000 feet, I'd

go on oxygen. And, that was a strange affair there. I got a call -- urgent, come back to the waist. And I come back there, put on my oxygen, walkaround bottles they call them, about so much like that will last you about, at the most, five minutes. And, I started back through there. And, of course, our bombs were hanging on the racks there. And, I had my flak suit on already. And I could hardly squeeze through there. I was squeezing through there. And when you do that, you use up your oxygen fast. I didn't realize this at the time. But finally, the pilot calls back to one of the waist gunners and he says, "Has Wilkins come back there yet?" And he says, "Nope." He says, "He should be there." He says, "Go check on him." He says, "He must be in the waist." And, come to find out I passed out there, see -- lack of oxygen.

EM: You used up your little supply?

WW: I used up my supply. And, without it, you could last four, five minutes and you were done because you can't...

EM: Things shut down.

WW: Anyway, he went back there, and he brought a walkaround bottle, fresh one, snapped my other one off, put this on. And I just --

EM: Came to life again.

WW: -- came out of it again. Well, anyway, I got back there. And it was just stuff like that, generally. Most of my work was up on the flight deck. And, depending on the time of the mission, if you were half-done or so, I might transfer some fuel. I always had to transfer fuel out of the wing tips. And, that was kind of an iffy thing because you couldn't tell. They had gauges there that we could look at. But you couldn't really tell. I went mostly by my pocket watch that I had, what the capacity of those pumps were, put it back there. And anyway, every mission I transferred fuel. And that wasn't a bad job or anything.

EM: Well, I'll tell you what. I'm guilty of getting you ahead in the story. And that was really neat. But I want to go back now and kind of work chronologically up to when you actually were in combat, okay? That's my fault. I shouldn't have pushed you forward like that. But that was an interesting story. Now, where did you first really get involved with the B-24s? I know you were doing some technical studies, you know, with the engines and stuff. But they were different engines. And you were in Biloxi. And now I need for you to pick up the train and take me forward now.

WW: Well, we got introduced to the B-24 there at Biloxi. I didn't know flying or anything, just where things were and

what their function was, things like that. And, I got more of that after I got shipped out west, Utah.

EM: Where in Utah were you?

WW: I started out at Wendover Field, Utah.

EM: Is that up by Salt Lake?

WW: Yes. It's just beyond Salt Lake City. And so, I worked there. And then, somebody come along, sold me a bill of goods that I ought to be in army specialized training program, which was not an air force. Get in that and become an engineer and all this stuff. I thought that was a mistake that I got because it wasn't long until I washed out. In fact, they washed all of our people out at that base within four months, all of them.

EM: That doesn't make sense.

WW: They changed their mind.

EM: That's what they did. They changed their mind.

WW: They changed their mind. It wasn't here anymore. So, I went then to Kearns, Utah. And, I looked out the windows there on the train that would run, pulling in there. And I thought, oh boy, what have I got into now? This is not air force. This is ground crew. And, I saw a fellow that was working there. And I says, "What's the program here?" And he says, "This is labor battalion. You'll be on burial details. You'll be on crap missions all the time." I

says, "Boy, what a comedown that is. I guess if it can be done I'll function. But, that wasn't what I had in mind with a couple of years of college and one thing and another." But anyway, I went in to be interviewed, and I said I had kind of a rude awakening of what goes on here. They were having bayonet practice out my window, too. Oh, golly. I don't dig this. Anyway, he says, "Don't worry." He says, "You'll be shipped out of here within two or three days." He says, "You'll go back in the air force." He says, "We aren't going to waste all that we've spent on you so far."

EM: You're overqualified.

WW: Yeah. I thought, well, good. So, I got out of there. And so, I went back to what I was doing. The only thing was I gave up sergeant stripes to go there. And when I come back out I was PFC again.

EM: That's no good. But at least you weren't on the burial detail.

WW: Boy oh boy oh boy. All they had there was a bunch of idiots doing that stuff. And I didn't want to be in there with a crew of that kind. But anyway...

EM: So, where did they send you to?

WW: Well, I went back into the works to -- let's see, which field was it? Oh, Buckley Field, Colorado, and more

training there. And, they weren't quite ready for me there, so I took basic training over. And, that wasn't too bad, basic training over again.

EM: That's something you only want to do once in your life if you can help it.

WW: Yeah, but I did it twice. And anyway, we shipped out of there. I went to so many bases. There was 20-some bases that I went to.

EM: Holy mackerel, all before you went overseas?

WW: No, about five after I come back.

EM: Okay. My gosh.

WW: About 15 when I went over.

EM: Boy, you jumped all around.

WW: Yeah, all over. But, I got good training. After Buckley Field, they says the air force is running into a snag. They're losing a lot of airplanes. And, they need gunners. They didn't ask me anything else. They just says, "You'll be a gunner." I says, "Okay." And, anyway, got into that, took gunnery training. And, all through that, that was in Nevada and Utah, places like that.

EM: So, when did they form you into crews and start acting like they were going to use you for something?

WW: That came next. I went to a field in Nebraska. And they had all of the crew there assembled already that I was to

be on. And, they says, "This will be your crew. You'll be first engineer there. You'll have an assistant, so forth." And, well that worked out all right. I did a lot of gunnery training, air-to-ground gunnery and air-to-air. Air-to-air is when they tow a target behind an airplane and you shoot at that target.

EM: Yeah, shoot it.

WW: And they keep track of how you're doing because those bullets are all dipped in paint. And if you happen to hit your target --

EM: You get a splatter?

WW: -- they get a record of it. But anyway, I trained there. And then I went to Mountain Home, Montana. I was there more training. And, there was just no end of training.

EM: Yeah, that's the impression I get is a lot of you guys just trained and trained and went around and bounced around.

WW: Yep. Anyway, how detailed do you want this?

EM: I just want you to tell me what you remember.

WW: Well, so we'd go out to fire from the airplane, air-to-ground gunnery. Then, air-to-air, air-to-ground again, and, gee, we used up an awful lot of ammunition. But, when I got back to this group that I was in to stay, I was going to be assigned to that group. And, that's who I'd go

overseas with. And, most of those fellows now are deceased, all but a couple of us.

EM: Was it a good group?

WW: Yeah, a good group.

EM: Guys were from all over?

WW: Yeah, all over, had one fellow there was to be my assistant engineer. He and I didn't hit it off at all. And I see what he had in mind was entirely different from most of the rest of us. And, after about a week of training with him, I went to my pilot and I said, "I'd like to have you transfer that man out to someone that he fits in with. There must be a crew here that he'll fit in with someplace. I'll take anybody else, but not him." So, when I did that, we had a good crew, very good crew. And, we wound up going to Newport News, Virginia to be shipped out. And, we didn't fly over. We had to go by water, boat.

EM: Slow boat to China, only it wasn't to China.

WW: Yep. And so, we loaded up and went to trip to -- we went out of Newport News, Virginia. We tried to find out where we were going, but of course we couldn't find out until we got almost there.

EM: So, what year is this that you're shipping out? You've done so much training I've lost track.

WW: Forty-three.

EM: All right, '43.

WW: Forty-four I shipped out, and we went overseas.

EM: Okay. So, what were you on, a Liberty ship or what?

WW: Yes, I was on a Liberty ship.

EM: Do you remember the name?

WW: Yes, the USS Joseph Gale.

EM: Boy, you've got a memory.

WW: I remember those things, the USS Joseph Gale. We were in a huge convoy. You couldn't see one end of the convoy or the other. Of course, they were spread out apart. And then at night the destroyers and destroyer escorts were zipping in between us looking for subs. And it wasn't a bit uncommon for them to start throwing out ash cans. We never knew what was going on, though, didn't know whether they hit anything, whether anything was there or not.

EM: You could just sit there and go...

WW: Yeah. But those ash cans went out at night, terrific explosions.

EM: It rattled those ships, didn't it?

WW: Yep. Joseph Gale is mass-produced, and it had a lot of creaks and groans.

EM: Yeah, there's a few dubious wells in each one of them, I suspect.

WW: But you said that I remember the name of it. I remember the name of the ship that I came home on.

EM: Well, we'll get to that. We'll get to that. Remind me to ask you that. So, how long did it take you to get across?

WW: Twenty-six days.

EM: That's almost a month.

WW: But, you see, they'll go out, and then they'll stop. You stop dead still for maybe an hour or two. And then you take a different heading here. You do that every day, because they're trying to throw you off, trying everything to -- just like I volunteered for KP on that boat because it was something to do. And it was just boring as hell just laying there doing nothing.

EM: Twenty-six days of nothing is a long time.

WW: I helped carry out the garbage. We had to throw it out at a specified time every day. You don't throw anything out except when it's specified. They kind of throw...

EM: So you don't leave a trail, probably.

WW: That's right.

EM: Yeah. Isn't that something?

WW: Yeah.

EM: Did you get seasick?

WW: Yes.

EM: I shouldn't have asked.

WW: I did, same as I got airsick when I started gunnery training.

EM: Ah, but you got over it.

WW: I got over that. I got back on seasick, and boy that ocean was rough. Oh, it was rough, pitching and then it'd drop clear down, and then you're up here. And you do that all day, and mine couldn't take it. It finally did before we got there, but we got over the rough part of the voyage. So then, we came to the Straits of Gibraltar. And when we went in to the Mediterranean, then I pretty much knew where we were going. And, one of the navy guards on the ship, I struck up a conversation with him. I says, "We must be headed to Italy." He says, "Yep." That's all he said. So, we went into Naples.

EM: Straight into Naples, right through the Straits of Gibraltar?

WW: Yeah. We crept along the very edge of Africa. And then all of a sudden we'd swing up and go in there.

EM: Took a run for Naples?

WW: Yep.

EM: What did Naples look like?

WW: Terrible.

EM: Really?

WW: About like Detroit.

EM: Does now, huh?

WW: Yeah.

EM: Bombed out?

WW: Yeah.

EM: Really?

WW: Yeah. It was bombed out. A lot of ships in the harbor were sunk. And just tops of masts were sticking out of the water, that's all, a lot of them. But, you keep getting introduced to this stuff gradual. And you see all those ships in bad shape there sitting on the bottom. And so, got into Naples. We got assembled there.

EM: So, did you get shore -- you went ashore in Naples?

WW: Yes, we went ashore in Naples.

EM: So, it was just a -- I mean, people were -- it was bombed out and everything or just rough?

WW: Well, we didn't stay in Naples very long until we moved to a town, a city called Caserta. That's not important.

EM: Caserta, yeah.

WW: But that was outside of Naples, two miles. And, from Caserta we then got to talk with knowledgeable people on what we were there for. And, they told us we would be shipping out on a rather -- shipping out, I guess you could call it that, loading up on trucks and headed for other bases that needed them.

EM: In Italy?

WW: Yeah. And, I remember we pulled into -- went through Manduria, which is a big city, and then from there to a small city, San Pancrazio. And, we went in there like that.

EM: San...

WW: San Pancrazio.

EM: Pancrazio, okay. It sounds Italian.

WW: And, we got in there, and some of the guys would say, "Well, we've got fresh meat."

EM: That made you feel good, didn't it?

WW: Yeah. We needed more. We got fresh meat now. I said, woe be to...

EM: What am I doing here?

WW: What am I doing here, Mr. Custer? And anyway, we went into San Pancrazio and got to works there, training. We started flying practice missions.

EM: Had you flown much in a B-24 at this point? You'd had a lot of training.

WW: Yeah, quite a little, quite a little. And so, we flew practice missions. And, we only had that about ten days, practice missions. And then you're ready for anything now.

EM: Ready for the big show, huh?

WW: Yeah. And so, they says, "You'll be told when your first flight mission." And, it turned out to be Munich.

EM: Munich?

WW: Yeah. It's a big, big city.

EM: I know where Munich is. I've been there. But that's a long ways away from Italy.

WW: Well, most of our targets were.

EM: Well, it's a long-range bomber.

WW: Yeah. But anyway...

EM: So, where were you stationed at this point?

WW: Stationed at the San Pancrazio. Yeah, stationed all the time. That was the end of the transferring for me until we came home. But, we flew -- like the first mission, I says, "Now, do you want me to stay in the turret or what?" Pilot says, "No." After this mission, that's when he said no, because I says, "I'm working my butt off." I says, "I'm not much value to anybody doing that."

EM: Okay, and this is what we were talking about earlier when you just can't be in two places at once, and it took too long.

WW: And forget that I'm on limited oxygen, and you don't even know when you pass out. You don't know that. You just...

EM: Things go blank.

WW: You just drop. I dropped on the catwalk and was hanging in there between the bombs. They were helping hold me up, you see?

EM: Holy crow.

WW: But, good thing they found me before...

EM: They dropped them.

WW: Before they dropped them, or it would have been goodbye. But anyway, I remember that you stand up there, looking out. The pilot's here and copilot's over here, and I'm in between here. And I'm reading instruments for them and telling him. He wants to know what I found out. When we got close to Munich, I was just standing there like that between these cloth seats that they have. They have big iron seats there which gives you a little protection from flak. I had just air for me.

EM: Well now, were you wearing flak jackets and that kind of protective...

WW: Oh yeah.

EM: So, describe your protective clothing. What did it consist of?

WW: Woven wire, fine wire woven. And they're heavy, this jacket. You put them on, hang them over here. It reminds me of when I go to the dentist and...

EM: And you do the X-rays?

WW: Yeah. They hang them over you front and back. But I remember that first sign that I saw of Munich. And from there on it was always that way. You look out, and then you see the black smoke over town firing. It'd be firing at you.

EM: Only it ain't black smoke. It's flak, right?

WW: Yeah, it's flak.

EM: So, this is your first mission, the Munich mission. So, how did it go?

WW: It was kind of a mixed-up affair for us. The whole crew was new and one thing and another. And, it wasn't smooth, as I'm trying to say it. The pilot then told me to go back to the waist, stay there. And he says, "I'll give you the signal when you start throwing out the carpet." Well, that's a name for these little packages of steel to throw out to help screw up Germans' radar. You just throw those out. And when they hit the slipstream air, it rips them open. And it's sifting out this wire all the time. It's supposed to raise Cain with the radar. Sometimes it probably did, sometimes. But, that wasn't as bad mission as later.

EM: Later?

WW: Yeah.

EM: So, did your aircraft sustain any hits with flak?

WW: Yeah.

EM: So, you got the normal holes when you're coming?

WW: Holes all over.

EM: But you finished the bombing run.

WW: Yep, and dumped the bombs and got the hell out of there.

EM: Did you have fighter escort protection?

WW: Yes, most of the time we did. Sometimes we didn't get them. I don't know what happened to them. We never knew. But we had P-51s or P-38s.

EM: Those are good aircraft.

WW: Yeah. And they were these black pilots from Detroit.

EM: Oh, really?

WW: Yeah.

EM: Was this the old Tuskegee guys?

WW: Tuskegee...

EM: You had them, the Red Tails.

WW: Yeah, we had those all the time.

EM: I'll be darned.

WW: Tuskegee Airmen. Former mayor, ex-mayor of Detroit, he flew with them.

EM: Is that right?

WW: Yeah.

EM: Did you ever get a chance to meet any of them or talk to them?

WW: Yeah.

EM: I'm going to diverge here for a minute. Tell me about that.

WW: Well, at that time, I hate to say it, but the air core was all -- I should say the armed services were very segregated. And, some of them figured that they were doing the Tuskegee airmen a big favor by letting them work with us. Actually, the opposite was true. Boy, those guys were a godsend to us. They'd fly in close enough you could look out there like that, and I could see a black guy sitting in there. And, I'd wave at them. They'd wave back. But we didn't go to their base or anything. You couldn't do it then, couldn't do it.

EM: It seems so strange.

WW: But, once in a while something would get mixed up, and we were supposed to -- we were told when we would pick up escort, fighter escort. You didn't pick it up until you got to a certain point before they -- because they couldn't stay up near as long as we did. And, they would be in there for a while. They didn't go over the target with us, naturally.

EM: Well, no, but they...

WW: Nobody would.

EM: They thought it through, didn't they?

WW: Yeah. They'd wait for you outside, pick you up again.

EM: Yeah. Did they ever have to fend off fighters from German fighters? Did you ever need the escort, from what you remember?

WW: Probably, yes. One time -- I say probably, sir, didn't you know that? Probably, because we'd lost two engines when we got near the target. And, we couldn't keep up with the rest of them. There we were in the target area, couldn't keep up. We were falling back. And one of those P-38s came in right close to us. Boy, that gave you a feeling of -- because right out there you could see them around, ME-109s. They were out there off our wing tip. They were waiting. All they did was wait for cripples. They didn't go in after these large groups of bombers. But they knew that sooner or later some of them would be straggling out here. They can't keep up. And they're ours then.

EM: Just like wolves, yeah, waiting for the stragglers.

WW: Yep.

EM: So, did you get any up close and personal looks at ME-109s?

WW: Not close. But they were out there. I think the closest was one time in North Italy by Brenner Pass. They were out there just out of gunshot. They're out there following right along on our wing tips, out there. And we just, all we do is watch them. You don't waste any ammo firing out

there when you can't hit anything. But, they did a good job of hurting us. I saw some where they went in after them, and it wasn't pretty. All I could think of was a hawk after a pigeon.

EM: Yeah, a pigeon, yeah.

WW: Yeah.

EM: So, you saw some B-24s go down because of that?

WW: Yes, yeah.

EM: Were the guys able to bail out?

WW: Sometimes we'd see them bail out. Sometimes we wouldn't see them. If they got hit by flak, most of our problem was with flak. If they got hit by flak, they'd go into one of these fallen leaf deals where it goes around like this. And you'd watch her, say, "Come on, bail out." But sometimes when they're in that falling leaf, the centrifugal force puts them against the wall like that, and they can't resist that.

EM: Yeah. You can't get to the door.

WW: They don't have enough strength to overcome it. Not always like that, but it does happen, or it did happen, I mean. But, as far as our crew in combat, the 109s were always -- not always, but they were there pretty often. And, we were lucky to be -- our formations, the pilot would say, "Okay, sock it in close." And they would get in there. We'd

almost overlap wings. Not room for them to fly, because if they had room to come in between, they would cut one right out of there. You've got to keep a close formation, very close.

EM: It's almost like circling the wagons if you're in a wagon train.

WW: Yeah. But, I was very fortunate that things turned out the way they did.

EM: So, you described to me the first Munich run. What other targets did you make sorties to?

WW: We went to North Italy quite a bit. And, they had a lot of hot targets there. Of course, they were all German gunners. And, they had hot targets there. We went to Brenner Pass.

EM: Brenner Pass, yeah.

WW: And Austria, a lot of missions to Austria, a lot of them to Yugoslavia. And, some of the others, southern Germany just occasionally, Regensburg.

EM: Regensburg, yeah.

WW: Some of those. But, our target that most of the fellows that I knew, that we hated worse, was Vienna at that time.

EM: Really? Why Vienna?

WW: Vienna was a terrible target.

EM: It's just, what, heavily armed?

WW: They had a lot of flak there, just a lot of it. And, if they exploded a shell in front of the airplane up here, or I was watching the front, I'd see that big red flash. And we'd fly right through that.

EM: You don't have a choice, do you?

WW: You could smell that. Flew right -- we didn't have any choice. You can't wander around there. You've got to stay here because there's a lot of planes there. When you go wandering out, you're going to have a collision. But anyway, I'd see that.

EM: So, what did it smell like, just gunpowder?

WW: Cordite.

EM: Yeah, cordite, yeah.

WW: Yep, that was quite a...

EM: Did you hear the flak hit the plane?

WW: Yep.

EM: What did that sound like?

WW: Those are the ones that didn't really bother us too much. It was like somebody standing on the outside with a bunch of pebbles and throwing them. You'd hear them clattering. But, those didn't bother too much. The ones that were close, the shell that was close, there'd be a lot of concussion from it. And it might wreck your airplane right

up on one wing like that. And you'd fall out. You'd wonder if you're going to collide with anybody.

EM: So, the pilot's got his hands full.

WW: The pilot has. My hat's off to the pilots. They had a job. I was just a passenger there. But, by golly, they...

EM: You were literally in their hands, weren't you?

WW: Yeah. When they would -- that airplane would shake and throw you up there -- in fact, you'd get beat up quite a bit, just flying from one side of the airplane to the other, hitting yourself.

EM: How many missions did you fly, you remember?

WW: Yes, I definitely do. I kept track all the time. And there's -- I flew 50 missions. Now, some of these missions, an individual mission is really called a sortie. And so, you could finish your flying with 50 missions or 35 sorties. And so at first we were always talking missions. But, when we get to talking with the 8th Air Force guys, they were all sorties. And they flew 30, 25.

EM: Twenty-five is the number I had heard in the past.

WW: Yeah.

EM: When did you talk with the 8th guys?

WW: Some of them would come into Italy.

EM: Really?

WW: Yeah. Once in a while they'd...

EM: They just get transferred over, you mean?

WW: Once in a while they get some of them brought in to fly with us on a mission.

EM: They mostly flew B-17s, right?

WW: Yeah, mostly. But they did have 24s, too. We had all 24s except about, oh, three squadrons of 17s.

EM: Did you fly 17s at all?

WW: Not in combat. I flew it a lot in training. So, I knew the airplane and how it reacted to things. I had no quarrel with 17s or 24s. 24 was a little bit tough getting used to after flying 17s.

EM: Why?

WW: Oh, they called them "flying boxcars." But, they thought that they were designed crudely or something.

EM: Well, they weren't as pretty.

WW: No, they weren't. They weren't pretty at all.

EM: Nobody would ever call a B-24 pretty.

WW: No. But, they were an efficient airplane. And I got so I liked them.

EM: But it always brought you home, didn't it?

WW: Yeah. And sometimes I thought they wouldn't when we flew over Vienna. See, another stroke of luck of mine was I never had to fly over Ploesti.

EM: Yeah, I've heard stories about that.

WW: That was the world's worst as far as I'm concerned. Of course, I'm not knocking anything like the 8th with Berlin. That was terrible.

EM: Ploesti is famous.

WW: But Ploesti, that first low-level air raid there was an absolute disaster, just terrible. They lost over three quarters of their planes shot down, the first one.

EM: Did you talk to any of the guys that had done the Ploesti run?

WW: Mm-hmm.

EM: So, they said it was a mess, huh?

WW: Yeah, it was. They had to keep up. They kept going back there because they'd try rebuilding it. Ploesti, they produced more fuel for the Wehrmacht.

EM: What kind of housing did you guys have at the air base? I mean, did they...

WW: Tents.

EM: You were in tents?

WW: Yeah.

EM: The whole time?

WW: Yeah.

EM: Crud.

WW: I was.

EM: Were the officers?

WW: They weren't. Many of them, some of them were in tents. But most of them in -- they call it tufa block. But it's limestone block building. They'd hire some of those Italians to build a building there. And they'd have it to live in.

EM: It gets cold in Italy.

WW: It does. We got snow once in a while. And it gets cold. But I know once in a while I'd have to go out early before any of the mission with a heavy rubber scraper, get up on those wings and scrape the snow off. You can't fly with snow on there that's frozen down. The contour of the wings...

EM: Oh, I know. That's what the de-icers are all about, yeah. Did you have any leave or liberty that allowed you to go into the town or mix with the locals?

WW: Yeah.

EM: What was that like?

WW: Well, the little towns around us were quite unfriendly.

EM: Really?

WW: Yeah.

EM: Why?

WW: Well, I don't know. They had been occupied by Germany. And, in fact, the Nazis had built our air base that we flew out of.

EM: So, it just changed hands?

WW: Yeah. In the bigger cities -- like, we went to Rome a few times. That was nice, a nice relaxation after having nervous breakdowns, to get into Rome.

EM: Yeah, a little bit better than combat.

WW: Yeah.

EM: So, the people in the local villages, did they just ignore you?

WW: Yeah.

EM: I mean, if you went in for a meal or something, you weren't going to be treated right.

WW: Uh-uh, you weren't going to be served.

EM: Really?

WW: And, we didn't test it.

EM: You got the message, didn't you?

WW: We had the message. And we wouldn't go in there. They'd be standing out by the road as we were driving through this road, going to the one that was bigger, friendlier. They'd just stand there and look at you, real cold looks. But we went back there. This'll get ahead of the story a little bit. We went back there a few years later, a group of us, for a visit. There was about 25 of us wanting to go back and see how things were.

EM: A few years later? What kind of -- how many years later?

WW: Oh, 25.

EM: Okay, so 1970, let's say? And what was it like?

WW: They'd cleaned up a lot there. And, I talked with a lot of the locals there -- in fact, a couple of policemen. When we came back, they came out there on motorcycles, motorcycle policemen. When they saw us coming in, they came out to meet us and escort us.

EM: So, it was a little friendlier this time?

WW: Yes, escort us into town. I would talk with them. And I was happy to see -- none for me, thanks.

EM: Oh, you don't need any? Okay.

WW: I was happy to see them. In fact, those policemen were very friendly.

EM: Okay. So, you did 50 missions. And then, once you achieved that they did what, send you home? Or what happened?

WW: You were eligible for rotation to go back home. And if they didn't need you again, you didn't come back. But, when we went home, while we were coming home on the USS Mariposa, a big troop ship, we came home. And they told us that we were now going to go training on B-29s, take on Japan. About two or three weeks after that is when they dropped the bomb. They says, "Hold on that."

EM: We don't need you now.

WW: Don't need you because we can take them out with one bomb, which must have been awful.

EM: Well, yeah.

WW: It'd take out a whole city, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

EM: Nagasaki, yeah. So, what was the food like when you were over there? Did they feed you right, or were you eating out of a can or what?

WW: Food was pretty good. A lot of guys said it was horrible, but I didn't think so. Like, we'd get eggs. And we'd have scrambled eggs. And sometimes we'd have them sunny side up. And they complained about those, said they weren't very good. Well, I liked them.

EM: They weren't eating powdered eggs at least.

WW: Yeah, most of them. The scrambled eggs were powdered.

EM: Yeah, that would be true.

WW: Yeah. And I didn't mind it at all.

EM: So, what was the low point for you in that time over there in combat, when things were the toughest for you?

WW: Well, I guess to keep sweating out missions taking off. Nothing was more frightening than taking off in a mission. We'd have a full bomb load, full gas load, and we're running there with a plane that wasn't in too good a shape. And that was very tough to get it up in the air. In fact, when we get out near the end of the runway, the pilot was

smart enough. He would bounce that plane right in the air with the stick like that. He'd bounce it and get up there. And when he did, he would full-throttle it and bring the wheels up. And it would sag down like that. He'd bring those wheels up. And, I'm telling you, I was so exhausted from that. I knew what was going on and could see it. But that used to get me, day after day of that -- takeoff. The landings weren't so bad, but the takeoff...

EM: If you had four engines...

WW: Yeah, if you did. And, we'd come in after a bad run someplace and have a couple of guys hurt. And, I would -- as we got near the base, we'd make one little pass over it like that. And I would take this, what they call a Very pistol -- shoots flares -- and put it up to the roof like this and give it a half-turn. And it locks in there. And you fire it down, and it shoots up a flare, red flare. That meant that we had wounded aboard, and get the meat wagons out there.

EM: Whoa. So, you had some of the crew injured on some of your flights?

WW: Oh yeah.

EM: So, this is shrapnel injuries?

WW: Shrapnel.

EM: Through the walls of the aircraft?

WW: We had four guys get Purple Hearts, four out of the ten.
But I was -- there again, I was lucky. I didn't get hit.

EM: That'd be good.

WW: But, when we were over a target one time, and I was sitting on a bench like this, huddled up, trying to be as small as I could, and the guy in the upper turret was right here. And, he was hanging there like that. And he got -- a piece of flak hit him in the arm. And that was right over my head. See how lucky I was?

EM: Sure were.

WW: It was Jim (inaudible). It wasn't too bad a hit. But, he got hit. The tail gunner got hit. Nose gunner got hit twice.

EM: All on the same flight?

WW: No.

EM: These are different stories?

WW: That nose gunner deal wasn't a very good deal. You're looking at -- you'd see every target that they were firing at you.

EM: You can almost see too much up there.

WW: Yeah, you could. You really could see too much. Glad I didn't get that. I couldn't have used that because you go in, you're sitting like this in the turret, and it's hooked behind you like that. And then you could, with hydraulic

electric, electrohydraulic, you would turn it like this around. But if something happened, in order to get out of there, the bombardier or navigator had to let you out because that door behind you was hooked. And, that didn't sound like a very good way to have it. But, that's the way it was. I don't know what else you could do.

EM: So, how did it feel to come back home after all that?

WW: Like walking on air. Yeah, it did. It just felt so good that I counted my blessings all the time over there. And, when I come back, that's good.

EM: Now, did you write home or get letters from home?

WW: Yep, got lots of them. I was married.

EM: Okay, so you were married before you went over.

WW: Yep. And, I was about 20 when I went over, 22.

EM: Did you come back a different person?

WW: I don't think so. I don't think so, no. I came back in a heck of a lot better shape than a lot of them did. So, that's why I said I didn't have any horror stories to tell.

EM: You sound like you had some close calls.

WW: We had close calls, but they didn't materialize.

EM: That's true.

WW: Yeah.

EM: Thank goodness.

WW: I'd look up and see an ME-109 right out there just a little ways from us and figured he was going to start making a pursuit curve at us any time. We knew he was there. And, we were on interphone, and we'd call out over interphone. Swing your guns all the time. Keep them going. No firing, but keep them going. Don't let the guns be still because if you're still they're thinking that everybody's hurt or gone from his turret.

EM: You don't want them to think that.

WW: No. And so, keep the guns going. And, came home, went to rest camp in Miami Beach.

EM: That sounds better than over Munich.

WW: Ah, you know, much better.

EM: But, the war was still on? Or was the war over at that point totally?

WW: The war in Europe --

EM: Was over?

WW: -- ended while we were on our way over home, going home on the boat. And, strangely enough, there wasn't any celebrating. We didn't celebrate when they announced that the war in Europe is over.

EM: Really?

WW: Nope. The reason? Because they knew they were all headed for Japan then. What difference does it make? And, we didn't know what was coming.

EM: Yeah. You're out of one frying pan and into another fire.

WW: Yep.

EM: What do you think about the Germans? You fought them.

WW: Well, they were very skilled people that were educated and so forth. But they just, their leaders led them on the wrong road entirely. The thing of it was, you say, well, they didn't have to follow them. Oh yes they did. They'd be dead in an hour.

EM: I think you're right.

WW: Yeah.

EM: Do you ever think about the war after the war was over, dream about it?

WW: Yeah. I still think about it on different occasions -- what went on. I think about sometimes narrow escapes that I had and things like that. I think, boy, I wonder if it's that way now. I don't know. I don't think so. Different kind of war.

EM: Yeah. Yeah, it's changed.

WW: But, I guess that's mostly what I would report. I could go on, but it's a little bit redundant.

EM: Okay, that's fine. I wanted to go back to one thing you mentioned earlier. You said when you came back, you went back to school. School just didn't seem to work for you. You needed to work with your hands. Tell me about that.

WW: Well, I went through a period there where I was kind of nervous.

EM: After you came home?

WW: Yeah. I was kind of nervous. And, I started looking at those textbooks. And I said, "I don't think I can dig this." I don't know why because others did. But I just said, no, I'm going to go to work with my hands.

EM: So, what did you do?

WW: Well, I started out a general laborer. And then I got promoted to cement finisher.

EM: A what?

WW: Cement finisher. You pour cement in shapes and paving and all that.

EM: Oh, cement finisher, okay.

WW: And, you make all sorts of foundations.

EM: Yeah, yeah, okay. I know what you're talking about now. Well, you were working with your hands.

WW: Yeah. And then, the boss came to see me one day and wanted to know if I wouldn't come in the office. And, I says I

haven't had any training at that. He says, "You'll train yourself." I did. And I worked at that, oh, 20 years.

EM: So, why did you go back to Italy?

WW: Why?

EM: Why?

WW: I wanted to see how the people reacted to us and see what they'd done to the damaged buildings. And were they trying to improve their lot again or what? I say mostly they were, mostly.

EM: Italians are quite different than the Germans, aren't they?

WW: Yeah. They were way behind the Germans in every aspect.

EM: Yep, except maybe food.

WW: Yeah, maybe that.

EM: But you don't know. They wouldn't serve you.

WW: I don't know about that. But, I got to know some Italians there. In fact, we used to hire some of them to work around our tent and do cleaning because they didn't have a darn thing. It sounds ridiculous now, but I could go to a little building that they had, a barber. They'd give me a haircut for a nickel, if you can imagine that.

EM: Isn't that something?

WW: I gave them more than that, but one guy warned me on it, says, "Don't go overboard on that."

EM: They'll run the cost up too much. They'll figure out they can charge a dime.

WW: Yep, they did. There was one -- are we about through?

EM: Any time, any time you're ready to quit.

WW: I can make a short story of this.

EM: That's all right. There's no rush.

WW: Little humor to this one.

EM: All right. We can do that.

WW: When I first got overseas, we didn't know the score on different things. And I was in Caserta. And, the guys in our crew says, we don't have anything to do with the rest of the day. Why don't we go to town, just down here? Caserta was not more than eight, ten blocks from us. Okay, we'll go to town. We'll go get a pass and go. The guy says, "Oh, baloney. You don't need a pass here. You can just go." Okay. I'm naïve, I guess. Anyway, we went into town, hit a bar and had a couple of drinks. Then we were out walking around looking to see the town. And, a couple MPs came up to us and says...

EM: Where's your pass?

WW: Those jackets you've got on, B-10 jackets. They were a nice jacket. They had a fur collar, fur cuffs. Anyway, he says, "But they're unzipped. You've got to zip up." They says, "But it won't matter now because we're going to take

you in and lock you up so that you can think about this."

I says, "You mean you're going to lock us up for having our jackets unzipped?" He says, "Right, and don't get smart."

So, I shut up. I didn't anymore. We went into the jail.

And, big old building. It had bars on it.

EM: Now, these are MPs that are doing this?

WW: Yes. And, some reason or other, they didn't like us, these MPs. They thought we had too many breaks. They didn't like us. Anyway, we got in there, and they says, "Just relax. Someone will come and get you later." Okay. So, we lay down on the floor there, and I took my jacket off, wound it up, used it for a pillow. Laid there like that, and after a while people were coming in, officers were, to get different ones that was in jail. They'd take them out. And we saw how it went there. So, when this MP says, one of them said, "Okay, your truck is here. They'll take you home." He says, "I hope you remember, keep your jacket zipped up. Any damn fool ought to remember that." Yeah, okay, we'll remember it. And, I started for the door there in the line. And a guy comes up aside of me right there. And he says, "Keep your mouth shut." And he took that jacket away from me. I didn't want to cause any fight with him on that because I didn't know what was going to happen in there. Anyway, we got to the door. This guy was right

behind me in line. And I went through okay. And, finally the guard spun me around, and he says, "Where's your jacket?" I says, "The guy behind me took it." I says, "He didn't want to give it up." Oh. Boy, he grabbed that guy. These guards wore leather gloves.

EM: Oh, yeah, I've seen them.

WW: Yellow leather gloves like that. He slapped that guy around, and he says, "You aren't going out of here for a while. I'll tell you that right now." And so, I left. But I thought, you get over here, you don't know. I tried to keep from getting involved in any altercation because I don't know what's going to happen. But I learned. I learned. After a while I learned to keep my mouth shut.

EM: Lay low, huh?

WW: Yeah, and be cool.

EM: Yeah, okay.

WW: But I often wonder what happened to that guy. But, the guards outside told me, he says, "You know that some of those guys that you were in there with were murderers?" He says, "There's all kinds up here." And Americans and Italians are mixed together here in this jail. But, a lot of Americans went to jail, a lot of them. They did it, I think, purposely to get out, to be locked up. They'd rather be locked up here alive than out there dead.

EM: Yeah, okay. All right. Well, let's go ahead and end it then?

WW: Yeah.

EM: All right. Thank you for spending the time, Wendell. I appreciate it.

END OF AUDIO FILE