

## Ralph Peterson Oral History Interview

ROBERT GRINSLADE: This is Robert Grinslade. Today is October 4, 2012. I'm interviewing Mr. Ralph Peterson. This interview is taking place in San Antonio, Texas, at the Crown Plaza Hotel. This interview is in support of the National Education and Research Center for the National Museum of the Pacific War Texas Historical Commission for the preservations of historical information related to this site. Okay, Ralph, if I can call you Ralph. Is that okay?

RALPH PETERSON: Absolutely.

RG: Okay, first of all I want to thank you for giving us the time today to come and tell us about your experiences in the war, your service. It's a pleasure for me to take this statement from you. I've explained some of the situations we're going to be talking about, so at this point why don't we go ahead and start out by just giving us your name, date of birth, where you were born, when you were born, things like that.

RP: Okay. This is Ralph C. Peterson. I was born December 21, 1925 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was the second son of my parents. Later on I had a sister that was born. She's three years younger than me. We had pretty much an average home. My father was in the Navy in the World War I. He trained as an electrician and worked pretty much pretty

steady. We had a home where we had meals that were paid for and things like that. It was kind of a strong family tie with the Petersons. My grandparents lived just about half a mile from where we lived, and other uncles lived close by as well. We were kind of a close-knit family. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Sunday, December 7, 1941 I believe it was --

RG: That's correct.

RP: -- we were surprised to hear about it. Just like most everybody else, we had to get out and see a map, look at a map.

RG: Now, how old were you when the war started?

RP: Sixteen.

RG: Okay, so you were still basically in school?

RP: Yes.

RG: Okay. Where did you go to high school?

RP: [Crestin?] High School, which was about a half mile from my home.

RG: Okay, and did you have any college education after that?

RP: I took one term, and then I -- well, I tell people I didn't really think I was coachable. (laughter)

RG: Okay, that's fine. Some of the greatest people I've ever known never went to high school.

RP: And so that's when I joined the Army Air Corps cadet program. I took all the tests and stuff when I was 17 years old. Within five days after I was 18, they inducted me into service. I went to Miami Beach, Florida, where we took basic training down on the beach. Kind of a tough duty there.

RG: This was what year, when you entered the service?

RP: '44. Yeah, January '44.

RG: Okay. So you had heard about the war starting on December 7th.

RP: Yes.

RG: Where were you then?

RP: Well, I was still in high school.

RG: Still in high school. Do you remember the day that that happened? Do you remember where you were, how it transpired, how you heard about it?

RP: Yeah. Right over the radio at home.

RG: Okay, so you were at home that day.

RP: Yes.

BERNICE PETERSON: It was Sunday.

RP: On a Sunday.

RG: On a Sunday.

RP: We were all home together. So then I took all the tests and did fine on them. But they came through one morning,

and they said, "Guys, we got bad news for you. We got all the pilots, bombardier, and navigators we need, and we need gunners." I was shipped from Miami Beach up to Kingman, Arizona, to go to gunnery school, which was a B-17 training center. Then, I don't know. I'm thinking maybe we were there seven or eight weeks. Then I went back down to Tampa, Florida, where I was assigned to a crew. We started training then as a crew, flying out of MacDill Field. We'd fly at night and things like this. One of the things that was kind of humorous for us is that there was a hurricane coming to MacDill Field, and the Memphis Belle was there. And so they told my pilot, and so pilot got just three or four of us guys together, and we flew the Memphis Belle up to South Carolina. I don't remember the name of the base. And so that was kind of my (inaudible) experience with the Memphis Belle, and so it was kind of a fun thing.

RG: But at the time, the Memphis Belle wasn't known as the Memphis Belle like it is now. Or was it famous then as it is now?

RP: Well, yeah. Of course, they're restoring the Memphis Belle right now at the Dayton Historic Restoration Hangar.

RG: And doing a good job I understand, too.

RP: Yeah. I saw them working on it two years ago, I was there. But after that, then we shipped up. We picked up a brand

new airplane and flew it to England. But one of the things that I was really thankful for was that both my pilot and our navigator were both Jewish. The navigator -- little short, redheaded guy, smart as a whip -- we were going to take off from Goose Bay, Labrador, and go. There was a rumor out that the Germans had a submarine with something on it or else on an island someplace, where they were screwing up the radio beam, trying to throw them off course. So this little redheaded guy, Jewish guy, I just marvel at him. He says, "We're not going to fly the beam. We're going to fly celestial navigation." We hit our landfall right on the button.

RG: Is that a fact?

RP: Yes, that's a fact. You couldn't have divided it.

RG: I'll be darned.

RP: He made several decisions like that that I thought, "You know, Peterson, you're fortunate to be flying with these guys."

RG: And how old was he?

RP: The navigator? Twenty, 21.

RG: And you were how old at this time?

RP: Eighteen.

RG: Okay, so you were still wet behind the ears.

RP: Oh, yeah. I was flying combat at 18. I was discharged when I was 19. I had enough points.

RG: You almost weren't even legal yet.

RP: Yeah. You get those air medals for every, I forget how many missions -- six missions or something like that -- and so I built up a lot of points in a hurry. But at any rate, it was a good crew. Our waistgunner was a guy that was married and had a boy. I'm repeating myself. He was a weightlifter, but just strong as an ox. He told me one day -- you know, the ball turret, so many guys get all bent out of shape about not being able to get out of that thing.

RG: Now, the ball turret's the one on the belly.

RP: Right. And so he said to me one day, "You know, Ralph, you never have to worry about going down in that ball turret by yourself. I'll stay with you to get you out of it." I tell people, "You know, the only other person that offered to give his life for me is Jesus Christ."

RG: And other American soldiers.

RP: Yeah. And so I raised a reunion -- what date was that, honey, when we went to Baltimore?

BP: I don't know.

RP: Well, at any rate it was 15 years or so after the war. [Len?] had six kids then, this waist gunner.

RG: Now, his name was Len?

RP: Eiswert.

RG: Can you spell that?

RP: E-I-S-W-E-R-T, I think.

RG: Okay.

RP: And so those six kids came from all over the East -- we were there three days -- to meet their dad -- that their dad flew with, you know all the guys. And so I took those kids aside, and I said, " I want to tell you something about your dad." I told them what he told me, that I never had to worry about going down all by myself. I was so glad I told those kids that, because Len died the next year.

RG: Oh, that's too bad.

RP: I thought, "I'm glad they know that about him." And so that made me feel good, so that was nice.

RG: It's a good story.

RP: But other than that, I guess my first exposure to combat was shortly after we landed in England. We were in the 18th Squadron, and so --

RG: Let's go back just one second. What bomb group were you with?

RP: Thirty-fourth.

RG: Thirty-fourth, okay. And what squadron?

RP: Eighteenth.

RG: All right.

RP: They came in and woke me up at 3:00 in the morning, and they said, "Peterson, you're flying." I said, "I'm not flying. I wasn't alerted." They'd always alert you the night before you were going to fly. He said, "Doesn't matter. There's a ball turret gunner that's sick, and you're going to take his place." So you get up, and you get dressed at 3:00 in the end of November. It was cold, and wet, and stuff. So I go eat and go out to the plane, meet these guys. Of course, they're all grouped together. They've been together for quite a while.

RG: So this is not your normal crew.

RP: That's not my normal crew. So we take off, and we go into a place -- not too deep penetration -- into Germany called Bad Kreuznach was the name of the town. Right over the target, we took a hit from flak in number four engine. It kind of burst and stuff, but the pilot did get it feathered. I'm not flying my own pilot now and stuff.

RG: Yeah, you don't know them.

RP: No, I don't know them. (laughs) And so then they start pulling overboost on number three engine so they can stay in formation, because that's where our protection is. And so after just a little bit, like boom they blow number three, so we got two engines out on the same side. By that time, I got up out of the ball turret.

RG: Now, is this your first mission?

RP: My first mission. (laughter)

RG: Congratulations.

RP: So I got up out of the ball turret. I said, "I'm going to stay inside the airplane in case we have to jump."

RG: When you need me, you call me.

RP: Right. (laughs) But we're flying like this. Got the channel --

RG: You're kind of flying sideways.

RP: Yeah. We crossed a channel, horsing around, and we landed. I got out of the airplane. I said, "Peterson, you're in the right airplane."

RG: Now, did this happen on the way over to Germany or coming back?

RP: No, we took the hit right over the target when we were bombing.

RG: Okay, now I'm straight.

RP: But I thought, "Wow, this is quite a way to start." But when I came back and came into the barracks with my crew, of course, "Where you been, you bunch of rookies? Listen to me." (laughs) We kind of joked about it, but we had a good crew.

RG: Now, let me ask you about some of these missions that were flown. Were they always flown in formation with several other aircraft? Nobody went solo?

RP: Oh, yeah. Nobody went solo unless they were in trouble. Then they're just trying to find their way back.

RG: So if you're shot and you're losing power or something, you're just kind of on your own.

RP: Oh, yeah right. Well, we were at the point in the war that we had fighter protections. We could call for fighter protections to come in.

RG: So this was what year, '44?

RP: Yeah, right. Yeah, I started flying around the 1st of November of '44

RG: Of '44?

RP: Yeah. I just can't emphasize enough the ability of that B-17 when it's damaged and --

RG: Sure. Yeah, I'll get to that in a second. Let me back up a little bit and go into -- you talked about your training at Kingman. That was your gunnery school, basically. How did that work? How did your training go? What did you do there?

RP: Well, we shot .50 calibers and stationary things on the ground to kind of get the feel of .50s, and (inaudible), and stuff like that. And then they had pickup trucks, and

they would have a track that'd go around all kind of curves and stuff. It'd have tripwires in it. So when you hit one of those tripwires, a clay pigeon would go off. So we're standing in the back of those trucks, and it teaches you to lead while you're moving, you see.

RG: Okay, so your initial training wasn't in an airplane. It was on a truck.

RP: Well, originally yeah. But then we did shoot at some tow targets and stuff later on.

RG: Sure, but that was once you were in the aircraft.

RP: Right.

RG: So you started out in a truck, just practicing on leading things and clay pigeons.

RP: Right.

RG: Okay, all right.

RP: Well, I'll interrupt you just for a second. I was discharged on the 9th of October.

RG: Of '45?

RP: '45, yeah. I got home to Michigan in time to go pheasant hunting for -- the season opened on the 15th. And so my dad had a couple bird dogs, and so we're out, and the dog's on point. And all of a sudden, the bird (inaudible) boom, I had the bird on the ground like that. My dad looks at me and he says, "Hey, come on. Give me a chance." (laughs)

RG: Your military training paid off, didn't it? (laughter) And you've been a deadeye ever since.

RP: Well, I haven't been hunting too much lately, but it was kind of fun. Then I finished gunnery school. Then they sent us back down to Tampa, Florida, to assemble our crew. So people say to me, "How come you flew ball turret?" I said, "Oh, here, let me show you. It's very simple. They lined us all up, and took our pictures. 'You're the shortest one. You fly ball turret.'" So that's where I was.

RG: Okay. Now, I understand in that belly turret, your hiney was pointing toward the ground.

RP: Well, no. Let me show you. Basically, when I step into that turret, I'm sitting like this. I'm looking straight down, right through there.

RG: Okay, so the turret's actually right below your --

RP: Well, yeah. The turret is pointing down right now. And so I bend down, and hook up my oxygen, my electric suit and communications. Then they would close that door, and I'd just reach up and make sure that it was locked. Then I would take the control handles, tip them like that. Then I'm up on my back like this, and I'm looking through my legs like that, you see. This way, and that way, and that way.

RG: So you're totally encased in this ball.

RP: Oh, yeah right. With a .50 caliber right along each one of my legs.

RG: Like a chicken trying to lay an egg.

RP: (laughs) I work one day a week at the air museum in Palm Springs, California. I talk to 50, 75 people a day when they come out there and go through the airplanes, easy. They have trouble understanding how I would do what I did, but it worked out.

RG: So you had to be fairly short of stature, thin to get cramped in there like that.

RP: Yeah. I'm right at my same weight right now that I was flying it. I was 139 pounds. Yesterday I was 140.

RG: So how much room did you have to move around in there if you had to move around, or scratch your leg, or whatever? Not much, you don't, huh?

RP: You don't really. Well, you got so much clothes on and stuff like that.

RG: And how did you actually aim these guns? Did you have a control handle that --

RP: Well, yeah. This way left, and that way right, down, and up. Then the triggers are right here.

RG: So you pull them with your finger.

RP: My trigger finger.

RG: Trigger fingers, okay. So when you sight in the guns, do you actually look down the barrel to see what you're shooting at?

RP: Well, in all honesty, you rely on tracers more than --

RG: Okay. So wherever your tracers go, you know you got to go down that way.

RP: Yeah, and I did. I shot down a 109. I wasn't sure. I thought I got him. The tail gunner said, "Peterson, you got him. He's smoking. He's going down." I said, "Well, good." He couldn't get his guns around enough to get down on this guy, you see.

RG: Okay, so he was coming in from low underneath?

RP: Yeah. He just came up on the overcast. I saw him come up on the cloud. I'm looking. I see sparks on his wings, you know. I say, "He's shooting at me."

RG: He's shooting at me. So you shot back.

RP: (laughs) I shot back.

RG: Good. Okay, so you're talking about your tow targets. This is once you got up in the aircraft. How long did you actually spend on the truck shooting at clay pigeons before you actually got into the aircraft to shoot the .50 calibers in there?

RP: Well, I think I only had one trip firing at tow targets.

RG: Okay. So just one trip, that's it?

RP: Just once. I don't know, I probably had 10 or 12 times around the track with the shotguns.

RG: Now, was it as easy to shoot at the tow targets as it was to shoot the clay pigeons in the trucks or similar?

RP: Well, it tougher to see if you're really hitting the tow targets.

RG: Okay, that's true.

RP: Whereas the clay pigeons, you see them that you got them.

RG: So how did they score that, whether you --

RP: I don't know.

RG: They never told you that part.

RP: No.

RG: They just told you, you passed.

RP: No, you're just a gunner, you know. (laughter)

RG: 'Go shoot something.' All right. Then you went from there -- from your gunnery school -- over to Florida?

RP: To Tampa Bay.

RG: Tampa Bay.

RP: MacDill Field.

RG: Right, MacDill, all right. And then from MacDill, that's where you got your crew.

RP: Right.

RG: Then did you do some training with your crew?

RP: Oh, sure. We did a lot of training around there, night flying and everything else. Matter of fact, we even flew the Memphis Belle airplane that had come back to the States -- we'd flown two or three times in training at night and during the day also. But then one night there was a hurricane coming to MacDill Field, and so they told [Mark?], our pilot -- we flew the Memphis Belle, like I said, to South Carolina to get away from the hurricane.

RG: So how long were you at MacDill?

RP: Three months maybe.

RG: Okay, and that was just mainly training with your crew?

RP: Yeah, right.

RG: And at that point, then you got transferred.

RP: Well, then we picked up a brand new airplane in Hunter Field, Georgia, and flew it to England.

RG: Oh, so you flew it to England.

RP: Yes.

RG: I know that some people told me that they went over on a boat and someone else took their plane around and flew it.

RP: Well, like I told you, that's when our little redheaded navigator was flying --

RG: The Dead Reckoning.

RP: -- the Dead Reckoning.

RG: So you went from South Carolina -- I'm sorry, Georgia, was it, where you picked up the aircraft?

RP: Yeah, Georgia. Hunter Field, Georgia.

RG: And then you flew directly to England from there?

RP: Yeah. Well, we went to New Hampshire, then to Goose Bay, Labrador, and then I think we went to Iceland.

RG: So any trouble with any interference on the way, or was it a pretty smooth flight over?

RP: No, it was a good flight over. It was cold. You know, we didn't have any heat in the airplane except up in the cockpit. The pilots had a little bit of heat, not much.

RG: Yeah. Now, you were talking about at one point having an electric suit.

RP: Yeah, we had electric suits that worked pretty good, and even gloves and boots.

RG: So you had to dress warm up there.

RP: Well, we used to bomb from 26,000 feet. And during the Battle of the Bulge when it was 15 degrees below zero on the ground, you lose two degrees of temperature for each thousand feet of altitude. So we had --

RG: You were darn cold.

RP: -- 70 degrees below zero, and so you're on oxygen. And you're going along, and all of a sudden you go (gasps). You can't breathe. Your mask is frozen up from the

condensation freezing. So I just hit it and squeezed it. I got air, but I had a mouthful of ice. I'd just chew it up and swallow it, because I couldn't get rid of it.

RG: Yeah, you can't spit it out.

RP: No.

RG: So when you got to England, where were you based? Where did you fly into?

RP: Well, we were at a little town called Stowmarket up northwest of Ipswich.

RG: Stowmarket?

RP: Stowmarket, yeah. S-T-O-W-M-A-R-K-E-T.

RG: Okay, that's fine. And so at that time you were in the 34th Bomb Group at that point? You had already been assigned?

RP: Oh, yeah.

RG: And what were the conditions like there at your based on England? What kind of facilities did you have?

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

RP: We had Quonset huts.

RG: Quonset huts, okay.

RP: We had a little potbellied stove in there to keep warm.

RG: So this is like a regular military based. They had the PX, and they had the chow hall and all that sort of thing.

RP: Yeah, right.

RG: So the food there was pretty decent?

RP: Well, the flying crew got better food than the other guys. Well, we got fresh eggs and stuff like that. Because we probably a lot of times had breakfast at 5:00 in the morning.

RG: Sure, way before anybody else.

RP: And we wouldn't get back until 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon. You can't eat.

RG: You can't eat when you're flying, no.

RP: No, because you got your mask on. And not till you let down. If you took something along with you, it was still frozen by the time you got back to the base.

RG: Yeah, they didn't have any fruit bars, or rollups, or things like that in those days.

RP: No.

RG: So when you got to England, how long were you there before you did your first mission, your first flight?

RP: Ten days.

RG: Okay, and what did they have you doing those 10 days that you were on the ground?

RP: Well, it wasn't so much us as it was the pilot. Getting used to the approaches, because a lot of times a new pilot would make a bank like he's going to land at a (inaudible), and he's landing at a another base so close.

RG: I guess they had them all over the place.

RP: They had them all over the place.

RG: Now the crews that were there, you had both officers and enlisted men on the flight crews? Or they were all officers?

RP: No. Well, there was only three officers, and our bombardier was a tech sergeant.

RG: Okay. Now, how many were on the crew of your plane?

RP: We flew with a crew of nine.

RG: Nine, okay.

RP: Some had 10. Some had two waist gunners. We flew with one.

RG: All right. Now, I know the B-24s had an open side gun.

RP: Well, yeah, the 17s did, too.

RG: Seventeen also.

RP: Until the model G came out, and then they had Plexiglas.

RG: Plexiglas, so you guys were open on your -- what model did you have, the F model?

RP: Well, we flew both of them.

RG: But you go up there at 70 degrees below zero, and the waist gunner, it was just an open window for him, basically.

RP: Oh, yeah, right. Of course, he had goggles and mask on, so his face was pretty well covered. And kind of a sheepskin

type of helmet. Then when the flak would start, they had a little tin cover they'd put on top of their heads.

RG: Did it do much good?

RP: (laughs) I didn't see any results of it. Of course, I couldn't wear it in the balls.

RG: No, you were pretty well -- were iced in there.

RP: Right.

RG: All right. So you had a flight of either 9 or 10 on a crew. What was a normal, typical, routine mission for you guys? What happened from the time you got up in the morning until the time you got back at night?

RP: Well, the officers were kind of removed from us. The enlisted men, we hung together at the same chow halls and stuff. Probably if you had a day offline or something like that, you might ride your bicycle into Stowmarket -- little town nearby there -- and get something to eat in there just for something different. But if you're flying -- the flying crews, like I said, we got fresh eggs because they knew it'd be a long time before we ate again.

RG: So that was kind of your first stop when you got up and got ready to go. You'd go to the chow hall.

RP: No. We'd go to interrogation. "What'd you see?" and stuff like that.

RG: This is prior to you leaving. Like when you first get up in the morning, and you're getting ready to go on a mission.

RP: Right. And then when we're coming back from the mission, that's when we went to interrogation.

RG: Right, that was after the mission.

RP: Right.

RG: How about before? Did you have a briefing of some kind?

RP: Oh, sure. The pilots had their own briefing, but we had our briefing. You'd go in there, and there'd be a great big wall like this with drapes. Then they'd open those drapes, and that would be a map of Europe. Then they'd have red yarn stretched how they're kind of zig-zagging, trying to take you around the heavy flak area and stuff like that.

RG: When they knew where the flak was.

RP: Well, they knew pretty good. But of course, the Germans had those anti-aircraft guns on railroad cars. They'd get moved around all the time, and so they weren't always too thorough about where they were. Some of those targets, it's just like you could walk on the flak.

RG: Oh, yeah, that's what I heard. So your briefing was different from the officers' in that they were kind of

telling you what to expect as far as the aircraft interception and things like that.

RP: Right. What that had experienced a couple days before and stuff like this. (laughs) But whenever you'd go into briefing in the morning and you'd see those old, red yarns going -- when they'd open those drapes, everybody goes, "Oh, no." (laughs)

RG: How we going to do this? Well, that was the pilots' problem, right, following the yarn? Okay.

RP: I guess in all honesty, being young helped. I felt so sorry for Len, our waist gunner, being married -- 26 years old.

RG: So he was the old guy.

RP: Yeah. I used to think, "Oh, it's a dirty shame they make him fly combat."

RG: So had you ever been out of your hometown up until the time of the war? Had you ever done a lot of traveling, or been overseas, or anything like that?

RP: I guess the furthest, we were in Pittsburgh once.

RG: One time just for a visit?

RP: Yeah. Well, my dad took a job down there for a while, so I don't know.

RG: But going to a foreign country, this is all new to you.

RP: Yeah.

RG: Okay. And of course, combat was a million miles away.

RP: Was new to me, too. Right.

RG: Did you have any trepidation about going up on your missions? Did you think danger? Did you think fear -

RP: Well, no.

RG: -- things like that, or you just kind of did your job.

RP: There were a few of us, we'd always stop in and see the chaplain first and have prayer (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) like that. It was assurance and enjoyed that.

RG: So when you were up there, how did you feel? Just trying to stay warm, was the biggest concern?

RP: Well, right. Plus, hey, those pot lickers are shooting at me. I'm going to shoot at them.

RG: So it's kill or be killed, basically.

RP: I work in California. We spend four or five months in California near Palm Springs. At the air museum there, I work. Two years ago a lady came through there, and she says, "I'm from [Durben?], Germany. Did you bomb Durben?" (laughter) I said, "Yes, we did." She says, "Well, I want to tell you something." I thought, "Oh, boy, here it comes." She says, "I was just a young girl, and I was so mad at you guys for bombing us. My mother came in and said to me, 'You can't feel like that. The Bible tells us we're

supposed to love our enemies and pray for them.' My mother was praying for you." (laughter)

RG: Nice to have somebody on your side.

RP: Yeah. I told her, "That was nice. I probably should've been praying for you guys, but I wasn't. I'm sorry about that." We were coming into Durben -- this was the lead. (inaudible) this guy and these guys.

RG: So you'd be flying to the left of the leader.

RP: Yeah. We turned and started down the bomb run. And just when you turned, this guy took a direct hit and just exploded.

RG: Your lead bomber.

RP: Right. Parts of the airplane even hit us. About 10 seconds later, this guy took a direct hit and just exploded.

RG: This was anti-aircraft fire?

RP: Yeah. They hadn't dropped the bombs yet, and they must've taken -- (laughs) so we're over here, you know.

RG: When's ours coming? So you guys completed the mission and came back --

RP: Oh, yeah, right.

RG: How many of your planes were in your flights normally?

RP: What was it? Well, it would be 16 in a squadron and 3 squadrons.

RG: So you'd have three squadrons going over to do the bombing.

RP: Yeah, right.

RG: What was your normal bomb load, if you know?

RP: Depending on the target. That's what it'd depend upon. We usually dropped on a salvo, everything at once. We carried, basically -- the load usually was 6,000 pounds. And so, boom, that airplane jumped 15 feet.

RG: Well, yeah, lost all that weight. (overlapping dialogue)

RP: That was kind of an elevator ride, you know? (laughter)

RG: Hope your breakfast had been settled by that time. So all those planes were flying over and dropping all their bombs pretty much the same time.

RP: Well, as they got to the target, yeah.

RG: That's what I mean, over the target area.

RP: Right.

RG: Now, did each plane drop individually, or did they take their lead (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

RP: No, the lead would drop, and they would also drop a smoke flare. As other planes reached that, then they were supposed to jettison all --

RG: Okay, so that was their signal to drop.

RP: That was their signal to drop. That was the way it was usually done.

RG: All right. Now, was that white smoke, different color smoke?

RP: Well, I don't remember. Maybe a green flare or something would be the line to drop on.

RG: Okay. Now, tell me about the weather over there. England, especially during the winter months, was pretty miserable.

RP: Yeah, we had enough -- I started flying in November, December, and January, and February.

RG: So you were right in the middle of fall and winter.

RP: Terrible, yeah.

RG: How was the fog?

RP: Well, there would be times we'd take off, you hardly could see the end of the runway. We took off one time, and we were climbing. We would climb so many feet a minute, and we'd turn. Then this, and then this. We never broke out of that soup until we were over France at 20,000 feet. We'd come up through that, and every once in a while the old plane would just rock. Or you're getting the prop wash of another plane in there. When you come up and come out of the stuff, you look around, pretty soon one pops up here. One pops up here. (laughs) You think, "Whew --"

RG: Now, as a gunner, what was your job while you were getting from the ground up to the target area? What did you do? What was your function?

RP: Basically, when we would cross the channel, I would get in the ball turret. Just be moving all the time, watching, looking. Then, of course, I don't believe I got into the ball until we broke out of that stuff.

RG: Okay. So you kind of sit in one spot in the aircraft.

RP: Oh, yeah, right.

RG: You just kind of waited till your turn came.

RP: Sure.

RG: Now, this was later on in the war, so did you see a lot of enemy fighters, a lot of enemy intercepts coming up?

RP: Not a lot. We came under pretty good fighter attack probably on 8 to 10 missions.

RG: out of 33.

RP: Thirty-three, yeah.

RG: Okay. So there were still some up there then.

RP: Oh, yeah. And plus, we had three different attacks by that Messerschmitt 262, the German jet.

RG: I was going to ask you that. What was my next question. Did you ever see a German jet?

RP: One came right to our formation. I just happened to be looking down, and I could see this oxygen mask. I told the guys, "I'd recognize them on the street.

RG: Is that right? He's that close. But they just were shooting and (inaudible), too. Faster and --

RG: What was your impression of this aircraft as opposed to the 109s?

RP: Well, I had a lot of confidence in the 51s. You see, German jets, they couldn't stay up very long.

RG: Oh, really?

RP: Yeah. They burned their fuel very fast. And so they didn't want to hang around and fight with you. Basically, they're going to start back here shooting, and they're on through.

RG: They're going to go pass and do. So they're just a one-shot deal that -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

RP: Yeah, yeah. I doubt really if they shot down very many of the 17s or 24s.

RG: Because I had a couple people ask me about some of our other interviews, asking me about, "Has anybody talked about the German jet fighters?" You're the first one I've talked to that's done that.

RP: Well, I could see his mask. I told the guys of the crew when I got back, "Hey, I'd recognize him on the street."

RG: Too close for me. Too close for me. Out of these 33 missions, what was your most memorable one?

RP: Well, probably my first one when I'm flying with another crew. Then another time, we were up near -- not Durben, but Misburg, I think we were at.

RG: Minceburg?

RP: Mis, M-I-S-B-U-R-G.

RG: Okay.

RP: Just after bombs away, all of a sudden we had all four of the engines quit running, just barely turning. We go into a glide, and the pilot says, "Don't bail out until I tell you."

RG: Now, was that your first indication that there was going to be a bailout?

RP: Yeah, right. (inaudible) And so we got to about 11,000 or 12,000 feet, and they go the engines going again. I forgot just what -- I think maybe the flight engineer screwed up. Instead of transferring fuel, he transferred from the wrong tanks or something like that. So actually, we ran out of gas up in the air.

RG: Talk about pucker factor.

RP: Until they got it switched around -- and so we leveled off. We had two 51s that came and stayed with us all the way to the channel.

RG: Okay, so how long did that go on from the time it first quit until the time they got them started? How long we talking about?

RP: Well, I don't know. It seemed like half a day. (laughs) I don't know.

RG: So was the plane in a glide at this point, or was it heading down, nose down?

RP: No, it was kind of gliding down, but it worked out fine.

RG: So it wasn't a panic situation. It was just a 'we got to get this thing going again.'

RG: Well, at first it was a pancake. Then, of course, we didn't know what was going on up in the cockpit. But the pilot just said, "Don't bail out until I tell you."

RG: Okay. Now, speaking of bailouts, where were your parachutes? Did you have them on, or were they close by?

RP: No, I'd have to come up out of the ball and snap mine right only. I had it sitting right next to the door to the ball turret.

RG: Was this thing latched down any way, or --

RP: No. Well, I could have it wedged in there, but I could snap that on and be gone.

RG: Were they pretty easy to get into?

RP: You had the harness on, and so you just snap it on your chest. They were 24-inch canopy -- 24 foot, I should say.

RG: Now, while you were training, did you go through any parachute jump experience?

RP: No.

RG: You just had to wing it when you got up there.

RP: Yeah.

RG: Your first jump would be your first jump.

RP: Yeah.

RG: No experience, no training, no nothing.

RP: No. (laughs)

RG: Okay, all right. Out of the 33, which was your most memorable other than the first one? Because that was a different experience with your crew.

RP: Well, yeah. Of course, that one to Durben where the plane blew up so close to us. Then some of them were just long missions. I had a couple missions where I was actually in that ball turret for eight hours. One of them was Schwendi, which was way past Berlin almost to Poland. That is where they are making the V-2 rockets. So that was a long mission.

RG: So as a gunner, you were never told what the missions were unless the pilot mentioned them to you on the way.

RP: Yeah, we had our briefing, and they had their briefing.

They'd touch just kind of generally --

RG: What to watch for, where you're going, and this may be the problems you have and stuff?

RP: Mm-hmm.

RG: All right. Anybody on your crew ever take any flak, or take any aircraft shells, or anything like that going through the airplane?

RP: Oh, yeah. Not those shells, but flak. Man, it'd come through and rattle around inside the airplane like crazy.

RG: So it just bounced around.

RP: Oh, yeah. We counted 50, 75 holes in the airplane one time. Because a lot of them went right on through, out the other side.

RG: I know the B-17 could take a beating and still keep flying.

RP: Yeah, they really could. I was thankful really to be flying on the 17s. Jokingly, we used to call -- "Oh, you flew on the B dash 24 crash?" (laughter)

RG: The flying brick. I've heard them called all kind of things.

RP: I sit here and think, "Well, it's nice to be able to talk about it." But it was something that you just had to do, and you did it.

RG: Any times that any flak, or shrapnel, or anything came through your turret, the glass on your turret?

RP: My door was kind of concave like that, and there was a hunk of flak that hit that and glanced off. There was a groove right in that (laughs) door in the back on the outside.

RG: So that's as close as you ever came, huh?

RP: That's the closest I've ever came.

RG: And nobody in your flight crew ever got wounded?

RP: The flight engineer did.

RG: That's the only one.

RP: Yeah.

RG: Okay, so you were real lucky then after 33 missions, coming out of it that unscathed. That's pretty good.

RP: Yeah. Like I said, honestly, I can't say enough about our pilot. He was very skilled. One time this little Jewish navigator called the pilot. He says, "This lead navigator's screwing up. He's taking us right over a heavy flak area." He says, "All you guys, hang your flak suit back on you." It wasn't five minutes that sky was just black with flak.

RG: You talk about a flak suit.

RP: Yeah, a thing they hang over on you.

RG: So it's like a bulletproof vest.

RP: Right.

RG: Does it cover your whole entire front or just your torso?

RP: No, just your torso.

RG: Okay.

RP: But of course, I didn't have one.

RG: You didn't have room for it where you were.

RP: I didn't have room for it.

RG: Any other interesting stories?

RP: I just felt I was blessed to get out of it alive. Went back, went to college for a semester and decided I really

wasn't coachable. Then I went into an electrical apprenticeship program and became an electrician.

RG: Something you can do anywhere in the world.

RP: Then I became superintendent for a large union contractor. After about six or seven years at that, I quit and started my own business. I started a non-union business. When I retired, I had 162 electricians working for me.

RG: Is that right? So you were a big small business.

RP: Yeah.

RG: Good for you.

RP: Three of my key employees took it over. They're licensed right now in 28 states. Just finished a big job in Arizona, and got another big job starting up in North Dakota. I tell them, "Well, don't forget who your teacher was." (laughs)

RG: Yeah, don't forget where you came from.

RP: Two of them are nephews, and one is an outsider.

RG: Oh, so you still got family members running it then.

RP: Yeah, but I sold them each 33 1/3 percent. But before I sold the business, I changed the corporate bylaws to read that a majority was 75 percent. I said make up your mind right now you're going to get along.

RG: How do you do that, yeah?

RP: The outsider, he tells me two or three times a year,  
"Ralph, this thing couldn't be any better." Those guys  
have bought other small businesses. They bought real  
estate together. Just a great pair, and they're all three  
good Christian guys.

RG: Fantastic. That's what you want to see.

RP: Yeah.

RG: Let's go back a little bit more, back when you were on the  
base there. What did you do during off time? You had down  
time between flights. Did you have ever a couple of weeks  
when they were repairing aircraft and things? What did you  
do with your off time?

RP: Well, of course they always had planes available for you if  
yours was down. We would get three days off probably once  
a month or something like that. So we'd jump on a train,  
go down to Red Cross in London, and try to go to a movie or  
something down there. You had a room at the Red Cross stay  
in and get something to eat. You just kind of looked  
around. I happened to be in London on VE day.

RG: Oh, good time to be there.

RP: Was about three million people. I turn around, and about  
three feet from stood a guy I knew from Grand Rapids.

RG: I'll be darned, small world. So you were there from '44.  
The Blitzkrieg had pretty much stopped in Britain, had it

not? There were no more bomb attacks or (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) attacks in there?

RP: Yeah. Well, V-2s. See that's why we went to Schwendi to take that thing out, because those V-2 rockets were really raising havoc with London.

RG: You bet they were. Now, did you get a chance to go to London and see what the damage was when you were there? Did you (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) see that?

RP: Yeah, we could go around different areas and see it. We did get to go to R&R, too. I remember the day we were down in southern England there, and it was a big home where they had a butler and everything that would wait on you, and serve you breakfast, and stuff like that.

RG: This was a private home?

RP: Well, no. It was taken over by the government.

RG: Government.

RP: But it was a big castle almost like. I remember the butler came in, in the morning, pulled the blinds. He says, "Guys, I got bad news for you. Your President Roosevelt died last night." That's how I remember that.

RG: So what was the general feeling when you heard Roosevelt passed away?

RP: Well, it wasn't a lot of remorse, but it was just one of those things that you think about. You know, well, he was old and --

RG: He had polio.

RP: Yeah, had polio. But then like I said, I went back. And then 60 years ago, [Bernice?] and I got married.

RG: Congratulations. Did you hear about all this before?

BP: Oh, yeah.

RG: Now, how was the mail delivery and mail over there? Was it pretty --

RP: Pretty good, yeah. There was some mission that the post office thought we got shot down. I don't remember what happened. I wasn't getting any mail. I went up to the post office there on the base. He says, "We're holding your mail. We were going to send it back to your folks." I said, "Give it to me." (laughter)

RG: I'm here. And how were your commanding officers over there? They all pretty good, or did you have problems with them at all?

RP: We had no problems. One was a colonel. The base commander was a colonel, and he had a P-47, the Thunderbolt, that he used to fly. He'd come up and check your formations to see how your formations were. "Come on, get those tightened up in there," and stuff like that.

RG: Excuse me, what was his name?

RP: Greer, G-R-E-E-R.

RG: Because I had heard a story about a commander that had his own aircraft, and he'd go up and fly around. That was probably him then, okay. Interesting story.

RP: Yeah.

RG: You mentioned your pilot quite a few times, saying what a good pilot he was. Do you recall his name?

RP: [Mort Feidler?].

RG: [Mark Feidler?].

RP: Yeah. I talked to him just two weeks ago.

RG: So he's still around?

RP: Yeah, but he's slipping.

RG: Well, everybody's getting up there.

RP: (laughs) Yeah, all but me.

RG: Everybody's getting up there. Yeah, you're doing well. How old are you?

RP: I'm 86.

RG: Eighty-six, you're doing fantastic for 86.

RP: Be 87 in December.

RG: You're doing fantastic.

RP: That's her.

RG: Take good care of him.

RP: She has. She's been the best wife you can ever have.

RG: And what was your scariest time? You were talking about when those two planes got shot down right in front of you. Was that probably your most scary time that you got a little bit frightened, or did you have time?

RP: You don't really have time to think about it. I was on that Dresden raid, and that was kind of a long, drawn out thing, all the planes and stuff. In my mind's eye, I kind of felt -- because we got attacked by Messerschmitts that were sitting up at about 36,000 feet when we starting to cross. Then they just came in, kind of had a lot of fun shooting at us. We didn't get hit at all. I always felt the Russians tipped off the Germans that we were coming, because they were --

RG: Really?

RP: Yeah, they really weren't our allies. The Russians weren't at that time.

RG: Yeah, they were kind of selfish (inaudible). Had their own interests at heart.

RP: Yeah.

RG: Any regrets you have?

RP: No. I honestly just feel I really had a blessed life. I've been successful in business. I have daughter that died at -- what was Susie, 30?

BP: Twenty-seven.

RP: Twenty-seven years old, and left two little girls. One was three years old, and one was five months old.

BP: Five months.

RG: Wow, they lost their mother at --

RP: Lost their mother. Bernice and I basically raised those kids, and put them through college, and they're just the best --

RG: That's why you're in such great shape right now.

RP: Yeah, but boy, those are good kids. They each have three kids now, so I got six great-grandkids.

RG: Wow, well congratulations. Going into the war at 18 years old, fresh, still wet behind the ears, how do you think that changed you as a person, your experience in the war when you went in to when you came out of it? What did you learn from it? What did they teach you?

RP: I've always kind of lived with a thankful attitude. My parents were hard workers, and kind, and good, and just... My brother was a Navy fighter pilot. My sister was a little younger, about Bernice's age. We just never had any problems.

RG: Did you feel you grew any as a -- matured more in the Air Force in your combat experience?

RP: Yeah, you do.

RG: Did you come up with a different attitude toward life, anything like that? In other words, did the war change you at all as far as your outlook goes?

RP: I look at it as it's past, and I'm just thankful I'm here, and can do the things I do, and afford the things I do. Bernice has been such a help to me. She worked in my office. I always used to tell her, "Well, anybody going to steal money, you better let me know about it." (laughs)

RG: Never had a problem, did you?

BP: No.

RG: Good. Okay. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add while we're here? Any good stories or --

RP: No.

BP: I think you ought to tell him about that German submarine that was in the Atlantic Ocean that shot down so many planes. That wasn't a fact until after the war.

RG: Yeah, go ahead. Tell me that story.

RP: Well, our navigator said that he thought the rumor was that there was a submarine out in the Atlantic Ocean, screwing up the radio beam.

RG: When you first went across there.

RP: Right. They didn't know for sure if it was on a sub or on an island someplace. We flew (inaudible) navigation. It was just one of those things you think about. You think,

"Wow, that could've been close." Because within the past year, I have received a copy of a bunch of stats that said that there were a thousand airplanes lost going to their destination of North Africa, Italy, and England.

RG: So all up and down the Atlantic.

RP: Yeah. Then you think, "Hey, they had 10 men on each airplane or 9. That's a lot of guys going into the water and stuff like that.

RG: So this would screw up your navigation equipment so that you would be off course, and maybe run out of fuel, and crash in the ocean, stuff like that.

RP: Yeah, right. Sure, they're (inaudible) right down the length of the Atlantic Ocean, and boom, you're out of water.

RG: So they could actually control your pattern of flight by this, just by the way the beam was doing.

RP: Sure.

RG: I'll be darned. That's one I hadn't heard about. I got to read up on that now, okay. Okay, anything else you want to add while we're here?

RP: Well, no. I don't think so. I'm just an ordinary guy.

RG: Just trying to get through life, huh?

RP: Right.

RG: Okay. Well, it was a pleasure for me to do this of you and a pleasure for me to hear your story.

RP: Well, thank you.

RG: And it's an honor to listen to some of the stories of all the people that fought in the war. I want to thank you for your time and thank you for your service.

RP: Well, thank you. I'm glad that Bernice could be here with me.

RG: And your name is Bernice Peterson, okay.

BP: Bernice, yeah. You're his wife. Just want to make sure we get it right for the --

RP: Sixty years.

RG: Congratulations. That's real good.

END OF AUDIO