

George Theis Oral History Interview

CORK MORRIS: This is Cork Morris. Today is October 25, 2012, and I'm interviewing George Theis. This interview is taking place in San Antonio, Texas, 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. I appreciate you taking a little time and chatting with me.

GEORGE THEIS: Thank you.

CM: I'd sort of like to begin with who your mom and dad were, when you were born, where you were born, and go from there.

GT: Well, I was born in Denton, Maryland, October 4, 1924. My father's name was [Irvine?] Valentine Theis. My mother's name was Ruth Viola Theis. Parker is her maiden name. My father's middle name was Valentine, and his father's first name was Valentine. His father came over from Germany in the 1850s time frame, and settled in Ohio, and that's where my father was born. And then my grandfather moved the family to Denton, Maryland, a little farm, and semi-retired. And we lived there -- I lived there until I was 14 years old. Then my father moved to Salisbury, Maryland, where I graduated from high school. And I graduated when I

was 16. And in that particular time, there was only 10 grades of school. They didn't have the 11th grade. So I couldn't wait.

World War started. I couldn't wait to enlist -- I mean, to get in the Army Air Corps. But I took the test when I turned 18, and I couldn't pass the eye test for aviation cadets, so I was real unhappy, because I knew I was going to be drafted, and I didn't want that. I wanted to fly. And so the recruiting sergeant told me that, oh, just a minute, there's a new program you might be interested in. And he said, it's glider pilot. I said, glider pilot? Does that mean I get to learn to fly an airplane? And he said yes. I said, I'll take it. So that's how I got started in the US Army. This is in '42. Then I was told that I had to enlist in the Army Air Corps, in the reserves, and be called to active duty when they got to my name. So I went home and waited, and waited. Finally, I got tired of waiting, because I wanted to get in the service in the worst way. And I contacted a friend of my father, who was a CAA officer or administrator up in New York. And I rode a bus up there to see him, to see what was going on, because I was told that CAA was going to schedule me -- Civilian Aviation had a program called CPT,

civilian pilot training program. And that was in several colleges all over the country. And those glider pilot candidates that had no flying experience had to go to CPT first, and learn how to fly an airplane, before they could go to dead stick school to learn to fly a glider. And they didn't have gliders, enough of them, to train, so they took Piper Cubs, single engine airplanes like a Piper Cub, and you took off, climbed up to an altitude, cut your engines off, pulled the nose up to cause the prop to stop wind milling, and then you were a glider. And that was how we got started.

We had other groups that went into what was called -- they'd already had flying experience. They were sent to dead stick school. And dead stick school -- dead stick was a nickname for the fact that you were flying an airplane dead. (laughs) Dead stick was the name. And a long, long story. I don't want to get into that. But I was -- I bypassed the glider pilot program quite by accident. While I finished the first two phases of CPT, and normally I would have been called to active duty -- by the way, I was still in the reserves and not being paid. I was going to college -- I was a student going to CPT program only. I wasn't enrolled in academic college training -- in

Lynchburg, Virginia. I finished the first two phases, and the plan was that I was to be called to active duty, given my basic training, and then sent to dead stick school. But because a glider had a wing fall off in St. Louis, and the mayor and 10 officials were killed, that program got put in suspension, and I was just sitting there doing nothing. And they said, well, why don't you just stay in CPT, because there's other programs.

One of them is service pilot. Another one's a flight instructor. And that meant I wouldn't be flying a glider, and I wanted to fly power. That was my desire. So I stayed in the CPT program, became -- I went to cross country training at CPT, at Lynchburg, the third phase. And then they sent me to get my -- called me to active duty, and now I'm an aviation student, getting paid, and have my uniforms, and I was a cadet -- an aviation student rather than a cadet. And they sent me to Burlington, Vermont, for instrument flight training. I got my instrument rating. And that service pilot program was shut down, because they didn't need any more service pilots to fly ferry command, because the women were doing that. So that became obsolete. And so the only phase I had left was to be an Army primary flight instructor.

So I went to (inaudible) Military Institute to learn how to be an instructor. And I was supposed to go from there directly to Randolph Field, get certified as an Army flight instructor, and then they were going to give me a discharge, and give me a civil service rating, and I was going to be an Army primary flight instructor as a civilian. And the reason they decided to do this was because the powers that be thought that it would be intimidating to have an officer as a flight instructor teaching new cadets. And they felt a civilian instructor would be more of a family guy, and it wouldn't be military, and so forth. And therefore, they used civilians as flight instructors at Randolph for the cadet program. And then that program shut down, because this is now early -- late '43, early '44, and they didn't need any more flight instructors. The war was almost over, they thought.

So now what was I going to do? They said, well, we're going to send you back to reclassification, and you're going to pick up a specialty, and that's what you'll be. Meanwhile, I had completely forgot about the glider program, because that was gone, as far as I knew. And when I got to Greensboro, North Carolina, for reclassification,

and I saw this long line lined up, and I said, "What's that line?" And the guy said -- oh, first of all, they told me I was going to be a gunner on a B-24. That's what I was going to be, a gunner. And I didn't want to be a gunner. I wanted to fly. (laughs) And I said, "What's that line over there?" They're all lined up. He says, "Those are glider pilot candidates that are out of CPT, and they're going to become glider pilots." I said, "Gee, that's what I want to do."

So I got back in the glider pilot line in January of '44. I was back in the program. So I had a long delay getting from enlisting to actually getting into the program. So they sent me -- by that time, I had over 250 hours of flying time. I was ready to be a flight instructor. So they sent me to what they called basic glider (inaudible) in Wichita Falls, Texas, Sheppard Field. I got my basic out of the way, and then they sent me to Lubbock, Texas, for the advanced glider pilot training program, where I saw my first CG-4A glider. And then I graduated September of '44. Finally, I was a flight officer rated glider pilot. From there, we were sent to Laurinburg-Maxton for tactical and instrument-type training. And then from there, overseas.

And I wound up in Europe in early January of '45. They reassigned me as a replacement to the 440th Troop Carrier Group in Orleans, France. "Or-lee-an," we'd call it. And I got there about the 15th or so of January, in time enough to train and get ready, and I flew the only -- the last glider mission in Europe, which was the crossing of the Rhine in March 25, 1945. And that was my first and only combat mission. It was the last one in Europe. And that's the story about my training and becoming a glider pilot. I landed a glider, carried in four troopers and a Jeep. That day, there were 1300 gliders in the air, including the British.

CM: Did they use Wacos?

GT: "Wah-co." Now, it's "Way-co," Texas, but it's "Wah-co" airplane.

CM: No one's corrected me until you. So, okay, "Wah-co." I assume there were different sizes of gliders?

GT: There was only one tactical glider that was used in combat primarily. That's the CG-4A, Waco. But there was a Waco CG-13 that was supposed to be used. It carried double the capacity of the CG-4A. It went -- it carried about 30 troopers, whereas the Waco only carried 13 troopers. That -- there was one CG-13 used in combat, and that was in the

Philippines. Only one. And they had another glider called a CG-10, which was a fairly large, metal -- all-metal glider. It was called the CG-10. It was supposed to be developed for the invasion of Japan. Since the atom bomb was dropped, and they didn't need an invasion of Japan, all that program went down the tube. I stayed in Germany another year and a half after the war, flying L-5s in a little liaison squadron. Now, to go back to the actual gliders, the smallest glider was a two-place glider, that was designated as the TG-4. There was a -- they took the engines off of the Cubs, Piper Cubs, the (inaudible), Taylorcraft, and I think that's it. They removed the front engine and added a third seat, tandem, and made it a glider. And that was what the glider pilots had to train in before they got the Waco. It hadn't even been designed, or hadn't been off the assembly line, when we had all these people waiting in pools to learn how to fly gliders. So a lot of the training was done with two-place gliders, which was the worst thing you could do. How you're going to learn how to fly a cargo glider with 13 men, when you only have a sailplane with two. But they had to do something. They had these guys waiting (laughs) to get into war. So there was that. And the CG-4A was a 15-place glider, 13

troopers, and a pilot and co-pilot. And that was it for the size of gliders in the story.

CM: So your standard Waco held 13 guys with all their gear.

GT: And the pilot and co-pilot. Now, they also, as an alternate to all passengers, there were a Jeep and four men, a Jeep trailer and four men in another glider, an antitank gun with four men -- airborne troopers -- or a howitzer with four. They even had bulldozers, over in Burma. And they used pack mules in Burma, and they carried one airborne guy with a rifle, with instructions to shoot the first mule that started acting up, because they didn't want them to kick the side out of the glider.

CM: How many mules can you carry?

GT: Oh, six, probably. They also used the glider to carry stretcher patients out of Burma, and also they used it -- they did it one time in Europe, in March of '45. They actually loaded six stretcher patients, lashed them in, and snatched the glider out of the field, back to the hospital area. So it was a multiple thing. They had all kinds of bulldozers and whatnot that they carried in the glider.

CM: Well, actually, this is a question that we were talking about during lunch. Doing the snatching thing, the actual torque involved, is there something like a bungee cord?

GT: Well, first of all, the nylon rope is nylon. It stretches 30 to 40 percent. One foot of nylon rope was equivalent 40 women [sic] hose. On that snatch rope -- it was a special rope -- with a link, what they call a safety link, that was smaller than the rest of the rope, so that if the recoil was too much, that link would break, hopefully. In addition, in the tow plane, there was a winch with 600 feet, roughly, of steel cable, that would reel out as the airplane was accelerating, to absorb some of the shock of the load. And they even had an explosive charge, that if things didn't work right, that explosive charge would sever the cable, and it would all go out the back door.

The actual snatch pickup wasn't that bad. It was equivalent to 1.8 CGs. That's 1.8 times your weight, which isn't much. It's like a jolt in a streetcar when it starts off or stops, so it wasn't really bad. And it was enough to make you reel back in your seat. And I was short, and I had to reach up and hold the steel bar in front of me, part of the fuselage, to keep from being tossed back in the seat, because if I was holding onto the wheel with one hand -- with both hands, I would naturally stall out the glider. So to hold onto that -- I made sure I didn't reel back. And I had no trouble at all.

I flew four snatch pickups, recovering gliders, during the interim between the time I got overseas and the time I flew the actual -- actually, some of it was after the combat mission, where we recovered gliders that were scattered all over Germany, and Holland, and Belgium. And we recycled those, and they were reused. And the one thing that I was told, since some of these gliders had been out there during the winter, their wings had filled up with moisture, with water, because of the condensation. And that was a lot of extra weight, and it was probably out of balance, so one wing would be lower than the other wing, and that wasn't very good. So I was instructed, when I got out of the C-47 to go get in the glider, to take a pencil and stick it in the grommet holes of the wings to let the water out. And on one occasion, there was water still coming out of the grommets when we were snatched out. (laughs)

CM: Very high tech.

GT: We were getting rid of water. (laughs) So that's the story about that.

CM: My dad was in World War II (inaudible) combat engineer, and I don't believe he ever flew in a glider, but he was trained in a glider, trained how to (inaudible). How did that work? I mean, did you actually take them up and...?

GT: Well, some of the glider pilots were sent to Pope Field and actually work with the Airborne, and had -- we had Airborne that worked with us down at Laurinburg-Maxton, but it wasn't a scheduled training for them. It was a training for us. Whereas they had other troop carrier groups that actually sent glider pilots down to help the glider forces learn how to get on the glider, and how to do this, and how to do that. And they actually had some practice missions. I didn't get involved with that. I just know what I was told about that part.

CM: So, okay. Well, let's talk about crossing the Rhine.

GT: Okay. When we took off, it was around eight o'clock on the 24th of March, 1945. And we were scheduled on a previous mission, and that was cancelled. And then the 17th Airborne was brought, and it was their first airborne combat experience. They had previously been on the ground and used in Bastogne, as I recall. But that was their first airborne mission, so we trained with them first. And then on early morning of the 24th, we went out and loaded up the gliders. Meanwhile, my -- I took in a Jeep, so they loaded my Jeep and got us all ready. And when the scheduled takeoff -- we had to do an assembly over the field. The first glider would take off, followed by the second, and by the third, all the way up to 90. We had 90

gliders, and 90 tow planes, single tow, departing, to get overhead and form up into echelons of four, where they had a number one tow plane with a number one glider, number two tow plane echeloned to the right, number three echeloned to the right, and number four echeloned to the right.

And so that particular wave that I was in, the number one glider had a Jeep, number two glider had an antitank gun, number three glider had a -- I was number three glider. I had a Jeep. And number four glider had a Jeep trailer full of ammunition. And when we went in, this Army -- they called it a train, a glider train. It was so long that it took three hours for the -- if you were standing on the ground, looking up -- for that entire train to pass overhead. Three hours. That's how long that train was. Four gliders wide, and many miles long.

And so we got to the target area where we had to cut loose. Number one -- we got the single from the astrodome in the gooney bird, saying it was time to release. Number one would release first, would make a left turn. Number two would follow, left turn. Number three would follow, too, left turn. Number four would follow, left turn. And we did a 270 pattern; losing altitude and turning, until we

got to the last turn. Instead of it being a turn, it was really a sideslip. Wing high and you lost a lot of altitude, and you didn't gain a lot of speed, and that's what we wanted. We wanted a slow landing, because we didn't want to be landing on the ground and go a country mile. We had to get stopped in a hurry.

And all this time the people are shooting at you with small arms and artillery pieces. They had 88 -- German 88 was very accurate, and they were knocking gliders out of the air like ducks. Fortunately, in my area, there wasn't any -- I didn't recall any small arms fire. I didn't recall any artillery shots. I didn't see any tracer bullets. Some of the people had a lot of trouble. And when I cut loose, I couldn't see the ground. It was covered with smoke from the smoke generators that the British had set up on the Rhine River to cover their crossing. So I couldn't see the land where I was going to land. All I could see was smoke. And I just cut and followed the leader. And as we got lower, the smoke broke up enough that we could see land, and I could see this church steeple almost dead ahead. I was sure I was going to run into it. But it turns out it wasn't that close. And I was able to do my sideslip like we were trained on the third turn. And you

recover from the sideslip just in time to make contact with the ground. You land with full brakes on, and you rock up on the nose and skid. And if you needed to dodge an object on the ground, you could use your rudder pedals, which had brakes, to steer the glider on the ground, tail high, and steer around obstacles, and find a place. I didn't have that problem, because there were no gliders in my way.

CM: I didn't even know this thing had -- oh, I guess I knew it had wheels.

GT: Full brakes.

CM: I never really knew it had brakes.

GT: Yeah, full brakes.

CM: So you sort of like -- like a bulldozer.

GT: (laughs) Yeah, that's right. Steer it. Now, let's see.

CM: So if you landed in a very rough field --

GT: Not [ours, the field?]. It wasn't rough at all. Oops. Go back. See, that's it. There's a Horsa glider. There's a couple American gliders. And there's me. I had no trouble. Some of the people in the other landing zones were on top of one another, in trees.

CM: Who's the Horsa glider? Is it British?

GT: The Horsa glider was a British glider. It carried double the capacity of a Waco. And on Normandy only, American glider pilots were cross-trained to fly British Horsa

gliders, because they didn't have enough American gliders overseas at the time, and they needed more capacity to go into Normandy. And so they took certain units and cross-trained them to be Horsa glider pilots. And I've heard stories that they either hated the glider or they loved it. There was no in between.

CM: I was going to ask, is there a (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

GT: It was all wood, made out of all wood. This had -- the Waco had metal tubular fuselage construction. The Horsa was all wood. And it had to break apart. Let me see if I can show you that picture.

CM: When you say break apart, do you mean come apart for transport or something?

GT: To open up the cargo -- I don't have it on this --

CM: Oh, to get [all the stuff?] out?

GT: To get the stuff out. I've got a picture of a Horsa, but I'll have to go in on the cloud. (laughs) Yeah, here it is. Now, these pictures are being fetched from my home in Roanoke, Texas.

CM: I know. It's amazing. The CIA'll be here in a minute.

GT: (laughs) There it is. That's what a Horsa looked like. That was off my right wing.

CM: I'll be darned. They had to (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) them apart.

GT: They had to blow them apart. And see, it's a tricycle gear.

CM: Looks like it unscrews. (laughs)

GT: Well, they actually had bolts, and they had -- I think they even had explosive charges where they could blow them apart. The idea was that you could -- once you blow it apart, you could actually -- two men could actually drag that all out of the way, and the idea was to get it out of the way, so you could unload. That's the Horsa. And there's the American glider. See, the American glider has its nose down and the tail high, in order to get the Jeep out. And that's -- his nose canopy is still up in the locked position. I think that was the trailer that was taken out of that glider, waiting for a Jeep to come pick it up.

CM: Actually, whereabouts on the Rhine did you cross, or did you land?

GT: Okay. There's a little town called Wesel, spelled W-E-S-E-L, and it's a little south of the Dutch border, on the east side of the Rhine River. The landing zones were defined for the Americans and the British. Let's see if I got that picture.

CM: When you say defined, you mean, that's who has responsibility for --

GT: Well, for example, I went in in landing zone S, S as in November [sic]. And the other American gliders went into landing zone S as in Sam. The British had X and B, and whatever. I thought I had a map. It's on another display. Another thing. And I don't. I'm surprised I didn't have that.

CM: So you -- you talked about the British smoke generators. Were you attached to the British, or just --

GT: Oh, no, no, no. There was a separate operation to build pontoon bridges across the Rhine River to get the people over there from the west side. And they decided to start these smoke generators to cover them as they crossed. And that smoke built up, and it was so bad that a lot of people complained about it, because they missed the -- one of the tow planes missed the drop zone, because of the smoke. And they were strictly on dead reckoning, and they thought they were where they were supposed to be, and they dropped the people where they weren't supposed to be, (laughs) and that happened. I forget the name of the drop zone. They defined them as DZ for drop zone and LZ for landing zone. And ideally, the paratroopers would go in first and clear up the area, so then when you came in with gliders, it was

all clear, but that didn't happen. They dropped paratroopers and gliders all at the same time, or real close together, I should say.

CM: Okay. Once you've landed and gotten rid of your stuff, what are you supposed to do [when you first land?]?

GT: (laughs) Well, it varied from mission to mission. It was really hectic in the Holland mission, which I didn't go on, back in September of '44. I was still in training when that happened. As a matter of fact, I graduated the day before the Holland mission. The stories I hear is that they didn't have any plan, other than get home the best way you can. And so some of the guys were told to hitchhike -- believe it or not -- get rides to Belgium, and they would pick them up in Belgium. Well, some of them didn't quite make it to Belgium. They decided to have a vacation. We called it AWOL, A-W-O-L, [action?] without leave. And it took them 30 days to round these guys up that didn't want go back to England. But in our case, there was a scheduled departure, approximately two days after the landing. We were to be assembled at an airfield on the west side of the Rhine River, in Holland, and then the C-47s from the various troop carrier groups, scattered all over France, would fly in and land at this airfield. And I forget the name of it. Seems to me it was like Hellman, or something

like that. And you look on the tail to see the designation of the group -- or the squadron, rather. And if that squadron was at your home base, you got on that airplane, and you went home. It didn't have to be your squadron. It had to be any airplane that was going back to Orleans, France. And that same thing happened to all the others.

Now, immediately after we landed and got our equipment out of the glider, the glider pilots were not part of the airborne, to dig in and fight. We were supposed to go to our command post, which was designated at a certain place on the map, and report in, and then we were to be assigned an area to dig in our foxholes, in what was called a inner perimeter defense. There was the outer perimeter, where the infantry dug in, and then the inner perimeter was anybody they could have, including glider pilots. So we were assigned a certain area, and we each -- we carried trench tools with us.

CM: Did you have sidearms and stuff, or...?

GT: And we had pistols, sidearms. Then we had either a Thompson submachine gun, or I carried what's called a burp gun -- I mean, a grease gun. It was a metal -- it looked like a grease gun. I chose that because it was lighter, and I thought it was very accurate, for me. Somebody said

they weren't worth a damn, but I liked it. Uh-oh. Network error. I've lost my contact. Oh, let's see. Oh, I have another -- I've got my -- I need to have internet in order to have access to this, but I do have a picture album on here. Come on. Where is it? Here. Oh, I'll be damned. My picture's not in here. I've got to get rid of this one. Well, I carried a trenching tool, and dug a trench, dug a foxhole. Let's see. Is my co-pilot's picture there? It's not there either. Anyway, we dug in, and we were told to stay in our foxholes after we got in there, and not to get out, because they had machine guns behind us, so that they could spray anything that moved in the night. So once it got dark, we didn't bother to get out. We couldn't get out. And during that night, there was one mortar attack by the Germans, and one of the mortars landed in a foxhole near me, and killed a pilot that was in that foxhole. That was the only casualty in that area. But then previous to that, one glider pilot was killed in his landing. We only lost one glider pilot out of the 90. Actually, 180 glider pilots that went in, in our group. A hundred and eighty. Only one was killed in an accident.

And then one -- he wasn't even a glider pilot. He was a power pilot that was flying a C-47. He was shot down, and

he landed, crash-landed, survived the crash. And he knew from other intelligence where we were going to be digging in, and he found us, and they gave him a trenching tool, and said, here, dig your own hole. And he got in, and he was hit with a mortar and killed. Now after that evening, things had pretty well settled down where we could move around. The next day, we were assigned to march to another area, and then at that point, they assigned us to guard German prisoners. And here's a picture -- whoops. These are all glider pilots, and these are the Germans that we were -- we escorted them back to the Rhine River and turned them in to the POW camp.

And then -- let me see. I don't have that picture either. The network shut me down. Anyway, we crossed the Rhine River -- oh, I can show you that. We crossed the Rhine River in amphibious Ducks. This was a DUKW, or a DUWK, and these were amphibious trucks. And they picked us up on the east side of the Rhine River and took us across to the west side. And there's the west side, and there's one of them coming out. And then we walked up here. And I don't remember how we got from here to the airfield. I don't remember whether we walked, or --

CM: So is this part -- this is --

GT: That's on the west side of the Rhine River.

CM: So these are the good guys, and the bad guys are over there.

GT: Well, they're no longer bad. They're all prisoners (laughs) in that area. So they sent us to a camp that the British had set up in Holland, in an artillery camp, with tents and cots. And if I had that picture, it talks about -- it's not there. It said 65 rooms, no running water, all cold water, no toilets, Duck service available, and [returning?] glider pilots. So that was our way to get home. I spent two nights there, and the next day, we -- I found a plane ride back to my home camp. Now, the one thing that the history should record that's not too well publicized is that two months before that mission, General Miley, who was the commanding general of the 17th Airborne, and his staff, realized they were short one company of soldiers to dig in, in the outer perimeter. And he was short and desperate. How are we going to cover that one spot? And so he said, well, why don't we consider using the glider pilots? They don't do anything after they get on the ground. Let's have them form a company and fill up that gap. Because they're all trained as infantry officers, so they know how to shoot pistols, they know how to shoot bazookas, they know how to fire machine guns, they

know how to do this. Let's just use them. So they got a unit to volunteer, one unit. I think it was the 434th.

And they sent specialists down there to train them two months prior to going on the mission. That was [by?] January. And they said they were completely organized as an Army company, with platoons and squads. So when you took off, you were a flight officer in a glider, and when you were on the ground, you became a platoon soldier. It's the only time in the American history where a complete company of nothing but officers were in combat. It's called the Battle of Burp Gun Corner. Tonight, there will a presentation of the story about Burp Gun Corner, and our friend from Holland is going to give a presentation. He's writing a book about Burp Gun Corner. The Burp Gun Corner name was given to it by a reporter for the *Stars and Stripes* over in England. And it was because the Germans had a gun that they referred to it as a burp gun. And that area where they had that battle, they call it the Battle of Burp Gun Corner, corner meaning the crossroads. The lady who's going to help in this presentation went back there to investigate, because her father was on that mission as a co-pilot on a glider. He wasn't even a glider pilot to

start with. He was a power pilot. He got shanghaied into the glider program, to be a co-pilot on that mission.

So Hans is writing a book, and Patricia went over there, and he helped her find the actual place where her father had landed, and where the Battle of Burp Gun Corner took place. And they're going to give their presentation about that.

CM: Was there actually a battle there? I mean...?

GT: One glider pilot got the Silver Star for knocking out a German tank with a bazooka. They were using machine guns. They were flushing civilians out of their homes, getting them out because they didn't know whether they were German soldiers or not. And I actually have been back there, and I took pictures of Burp Gun Corner with my video camera. And a friend of mine, who's a historian in Germany, a German fellow that I got to know real well, took me over there. And he was helping me show the place, and I had my video, taking pictures, and tripod. And up comes this German, who says, "*Was ist los?*" He wants to know what's going on. And he said, well, I'm here with this American looking at this battle where they knocked that -- he says, "I was here. I was a younger fellow." He said, "I saw the whole thing happen. I saw all this tank come down, and it

turned around, and backed up, and they knocked it out with a bazooka." (laughs)

So I didn't understand what they were saying, because I can't speak German. I know a few words, but that's all. Anyway, that's the famous battle, and Hans will give that presentation tonight. But it's the only time that American glider pilots were actually trained and instructed to be combat. The rest of us were there, more or less, as cab drivers, to drive these guys into combat, and then we were to go home. And the reason we were supposed to go home is, we weren't expendable. We weren't considered [available?], because we were highly trained, skilled, to fly for the next mission, on a resupply mission or whatever. But there were only eight missions in the entire war, so that's hardly an excuse. But thank god we didn't have to stay and fight. I mean, I was home, (laughs) back in my bed. Well, I said home. Back in my barracks. Okay. That's the story.

CM: That's the Rhine, huh? So what did you do after that?

GT: Oh, after the war?

CM: Well, after -- you said you spent another --

GT: When I went back, we got rid of all our gliders. I can start off with telling you another story. In January of

'45, when I hit France, I was a replacement glider pilot. And they were looking for people to form a volunteer dance band for the 440th Troop Carrier Group. And I had on my military record that I played the saxophone. And I was playing in the dance band in high school and after. And they said, would you be willing to volunteer to play in this dance band? Like a Glenn Miller band, four or five sax, and trumpets, and trombones, and piano, and bass fiddle. I said yeah. Another glider pilot played the trumpet, and they asked him. He came in about the same time I did. They asked him if he would like to play trumpet, and he said yes, so there's two glider pilots playing musical instruments in this band. All volunteer. All the rest of them are enlisted.

And then our exec officer of our squadron, who played a ukulele, said, "Would you guys like to have a leader like me?" He says -- he was Major [Hanson?]. He was our exec officer -- he says, "I can arrange to get transportation. We're going to go to Paris, do this show, air shows, I mean shows at the hospitals, and the other..." So we said yeah, come on, Major. So he was our leader. He was the other officer. And then we had a captain, [Janung?], who was

from the special services group that went along as an announcer. He did the announcing and other things.

And we had a very nice band. As a matter of fact, the group commander loved us so much that he directed that when the war was over, he did not want the band to be shipped home early. See, we went home based on the points you had. If you had low points, you had to stay for the army of occupation. If you had high points, you're going home on the first ship. And the reason to get those guys home is to get them ready to go to Japan for the invasion. Now, because I was their saxophone player, and I didn't have enough points to go home anyway, I was still behind as people left and went home. And then we got rid of all the gliders. We got rid of all the airplanes. We got rid of all the vehicles. We got rid of everything, and there were only eight officers left, [Jack C. Wright?], the trumpet player, and myself, because we were held back, and the other officers that were there for one reason or another. And we sat there waiting for inactivation orders.

And finally we inactivated that group, and we took over the 50th Wing. We got the general's staff car, which was a Cadillac with a right-side steering wheel, and we had the

colonel's Ford staff car, and we had a one six-by we kept, and one sergeant we kept to drive this six-by, and the nine of us drove into Germany for reassignment. We went to Wiesbaden, and Jack and I got there, and we were both glider pilots. And the guy, the personnel guy, was looking to assign us. He says, "Glider pilot? We don't have any job for glider pilots. They're gone. The war's over. Forget it. You're going to be quartermaster officers. We're going to ground you, take your flying pay away from you." Because they had no gliders. I said, "Well, I've got a case of scotch that I'll bet you can't find me a flying job." He said, "Well, what kind of airplanes can you fly other than a glider?" I said, "I can fly L-5s, I can fly co-pilot (inaudible)." He says, "L-5s? We got a vacancy down in liaison squadron, because all the enlisted pilots that flew L-5s are gone home, and we need pilots. And these fighter pilots don't want to fly these little Piper Cubs."

So where'd I get that case of scotch? When we closed down the officer's club, each one of us got two cases, and we put that in the six-by and hauled it (laughs) into Germany, and I didn't even like scotch. So he got one of my cases, and I got a job flying L-5s. And I loved it. It was real

fun. We went to a place down in Holzkirchen, south of Munich, in this [what was the?] 70th Fighter Wing.

Fourteenth Liaison Squadron was attached to them. And the fighter pilots in the 70th didn't want to go down there, and they were desperate to get pilots to fly these L-5s, because they were supporting General Patton's Third Army headquarters, which was in Bad Tölz, right close to where these field was.

However, the day I arrived at Holzkirchen from Riesbaden, Patton was killed in an automobile accident. So I never did see him personally, but I heard a lot of stories about Patton, and what he did, and what his dog did, (laughs) the way he cussed people and whatnot. He came in the operations room one day, and he said -- he opened the door, and he slammed it, and hit this corporal in the back with a door. And the corporal yelped when he got hit in the back. And he says, "Corporal, what are you doing?" Or he says, "Corporal, what in the hell are you doing?" (laughs) I better watch my language. And he says, "Sir, I'm sharpening my pencil." He says, "Oh, okay. Continue," or "at ease," or whatever. And he would just come in and dog follow them, according to the story. But he was quite a character. And the men that knew him professionally

thought he was an excellent officer. He had some bad habits, using a lot of four-letter words, (laughs) but anyway. That's his story. But I adored the tour I had in the L-5.

CM: So what were you doing, just shuffling people around?

GT: Well, we'd take mail. We'd pick up passengers and go from one airfield to another. See, we were supporting our Third Army headquarters. Army Air Corps squadron was supporting Third Army headquarters. And then I had dated a girl -- I only knew her five days before I went overseas. And we were corresponding all that time. We met in December of '44. And this was February of '46. And we'd been corresponding. And I noticed the letters were coming farther and farther apart, and I figured, well, something's gone wrong here. And we had no commitment. We were just pen pals.

So I heard that there was such a thing as a 45-day R and R, rest and recuperation leave, but you had to come back after the 45 days to continue -- and I was supposed to be there another six months, to finish my year tour of duty in the army of occupation. See, I got there in March, and this was February of '46, and I was going to be back to another

-- I was supposed to be there -- I got there in November, I should say, and this was February, I think.

So I signed up for this R and R, with the understanding that I had to return at the end of the 45 days. And I got home in June of '46, and I met my pen pal, and we resumed our relationship face to face. And I decided right then and there, I didn't want to go back to Germany, because I heard -- well, first of all, I called this colonel, the same colonel that was our group commander, who was down in South Carolina. And he was running a glider operation down there; training power pilots how to fly gliders. They were using a glider up in Greenland. They took them -- had special heaters on them to warm them, to keep them warm. I don't figure what -- they were training them, but they were starting to use power pilots for that, and getting rid of all glider pilots. See, glider pilots didn't have too good a reputation. They looked at us [as if?] we were all grounded, washed out cadets, which wasn't true. We were people who couldn't pass the eye test, mostly, or we were too old. The age limit was raised from 26 to 32 for a glider pilot. Is that -- thank you. Thank you. Sorry about that.

CM: No problem.

GT: Now I don't even remember what I was talking about.

CM: You came home and met your pen pal.

GT: Oh, yeah. Yeah, pen pal. (laughs) Thank you. I called this colonel, and I said, "Is there any way for you to get me transferred down to South Carolina?" And he said, "Well, haven't you heard? All glider pilots are being grounded. They're not using glider pilots anymore. It's gone. When you get back to Germany, you'll lose your flying pay." I didn't want to go back to Germany, so I said, "How do I get out of this Air Force -- or, Army Air Corps?" He said, "Well, there's a Major So-and-So up in the Pentagon. Go up and see him." Within 24 hours, I was out of the service. I never did (laughs) go back to Germany. And then I continued my career, and it goes on, and on, and on.

CM: What did you do? I mean, after (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

GT: Well, the first few years, or first year, I was helping my father with some construction. He was building some homes. He was moving old homes and renovating them. And I didn't particularly want that. I was having to bend nails that I pulled out of two by fours, so he could use them. You couldn't get anything. The war -- everything was --

CM: (inaudible) everything, yeah.

GT: So I called the recruiting officer to see, can I get back into service? Because I was in the reserves. I was in the Army Reserves. That's before the Army Air Force was started. I was in the Army Air Corps. They called it the Air Forces later, US Army Air Forces. He said, "Well, we don't have any job for a glider pilot. What else can you do?" I said, well, I could do this -- and meanwhile, I had gone to Spartan School of Aeronautics and gotten my A and E mechanic's license, civil aviation, and my multi-engine rating, and my instructor rating. So I was ready to go into civilian aviation somewhere. And I had a job offer from a company that was going to make me a relief co-pilot on a small airplane, small airline, and then a mechanic, doing two jobs. And that company went into bankruptcy, and I was kind of desperate. I didn't want to move out of town. I didn't want to do this. So I said, I want to get back in the service. He said, "Well, you've got this A and E ticket. You can qualify as a staff sergeant in the Air Force as a mechanic." I said, "Good. I'll do that."

So I enlisted in the Air Force, and I had a reserve commission in the Army. And the law said, at that time, that you could not have a commission in one branch of service and be enlisted in the other, so I had violated

that rule when I enlisted. I didn't know it. So how do I get my commission back? Well, they said, we'll transfer it to the Air Force from the Army, and then you'll have your reserve commission in the same branch of service as you're enlisted. Fine. So I put in the paperwork, and I had been promoted to first lieutenant in the Army, so I put down on my application to transfer, First Lieutenant George Theis. And then sent it back disapproved, because they said, "You never signed the oath of office, and you can't assume the rank until you sign the oath of office. Therefore, your commission has been revoked."

So I wrote congressmen here, and senators there, and so forth. Finally there was a federal law passed that allowed you another year in order to transfer your commission. The extended the rule. And I was able to get it. But then they said, only in the grade of second lieutenant, because you never really were a first lieutenant. You didn't sign any oath. So I became a second lieutenant in the Army Air Force reserve, and I was a staff sergeant in the Army. But I didn't become a flight line mechanic. What I did was, I went to flight engineer school and became a -- I wanted to fly. I didn't want to just use a monkey wrench on a flight line, so I became a flight engineer in B-50 bombers.

CM: B-50?

GT: B-50s. Down in Savannah, Georgia. And from there, they were bringing out the B-36. The B-36 had two flight engineers, and one was commissioned. And there were commissioned flight engineers during World War II flying in B-29s, but they got rid of the B-29s. They got rid of the flight engineers. And there were some reserves out there. And they decided to recall formerly commissioned flight engineers to fly as a flight engineer on a B-36. And I said, boy, because it was like a B-36 flight engineer was the Cadillac of all the flight engineer jobs (inaudible). You had six engines and four [burning?]. Ten engines bomber. (laughs) Of course, the flight engineer only took care of the six radials, and the pilots took care of the jet engines.

But I was recalled, and then because I was on a (inaudible) select crew as a flight engineer -- enlisted -- and then I got my recall as a second lieutenant -- as a glider pilot -- to fly as a flight engineer on B-36s, which was kind of unusual. And since I was on a lead crew, and we were scheduled to go to England for 90 days, they got a delay on my assignment to Rapid City to be a flight engineer, and sent me over to England with my bomb unit until they could

get a replacement trained. While I was over there, they said, "Well, since you're an officer, and you're in an enlisted job, we're going to have you in charge of the -- you're a staff officer in charge of the flight engineers section." Because they had a squadron flight engineer, and squadron navigator, and squadron this.

And so they made me the acting squadron flight engineer, even though I was on an air crew. And then meanwhile, I got a guy transferred, who got trained to take my place, and they decided to keep me in that squadron and not ever let me go to B-36s. I stayed with them. I spent that full 90 days over there. Now I'm a staff officer, not a crewmember. And I finally got my aeronautical rating as a commissioned flight engineer. That was another thing. I was administratively all approved by SAC headquarters. So now I'm an authorized, official, legal flight engineer on a B-50 bomber. And from there, I went to KC-97s.

And then they said, okay, with the jets out, we don't need any more commissioned flight engineers, so you're going to be grounded unless you go to nav school. So I said okay, I'll go to nav school. So I became a navigator. I left Homestead, Florida, as a flight engineer, and went out to

(inaudible) to be a navigator. At the end of the nav school, I was supposed to be assigned in the pipeline to any kind of a crew they wanted to assign me to. But meanwhile, the colonel that I had worked for down in Homestead wanted me back, because that position that I held was still vacant. And it was -- a navigator could fill that vacancy slot. It just had to be an officer. And he requested with the colonel to get the general to request me by name to be returned to Homestead, Florida. I never did get in the pipeline. I never did get on a flight crew. I was a staff officer from that point on.

And I went right back to Homestead, Florida, and now as a navigator. Still getting my flying pay, and I'd fly as a navigator rather than a flight engineer. And I went to -- from Homestead, I went to Griffiths Air Force Base for 18 months in a staff position, and then I went to SAC headquarters. And I retired from SAC headquarters in December of '69, as a lieutenant colonel.

CM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) career out of it.

GT: Twenty-six years, lieutenant colonel, retired. So I was a glider pilot -- first I was CPT trainee, glider pilot, flight engineer -- oh, no, let me start over. CPT, glider

pilot, liaison pilot, flight engineer, navigator. Five aeronautical ratings. (laughs) That was my career.

CM: Well, that's pretty good.

GT: And my last six years at SAC headquarters, I was involved in computers and data processing. I learned to be a programmer, systems analyst. And my first civilian job after I retired was as a director of data processing for the state of South Dakota. Another staff position. I reported directly to the budget officer. And then I was appointed -- I had an appointment under the governor's approval. I wasn't in the civil service side of the state government. So the governor approved me, and I could be hired and fired. Served at the pleasure of the governor. (laughs)

And then I moved to Delaware and became data processing director for the state of Delaware. And the reason for that was, the job opened up in Dover, my mother was living in Denton, near Dover, and my mother-in-law was living in Salisbury, near Dover. And it was good for my wife and I to get back on the east coast with our two mothers, who were widows. And so we applied for that job, and I got the job. Governor Sherman Tribbitt, state of Delaware, and I was the data processing director. And after five years

with that, I got tired of government. I got tired of politics. I got tired of the -- see, the computers in state government get blamed for everything that goes wrong.

CM: So this is, like...?

GT: Seventy-three, seventy -- well, it was --

CM: You're just coming out of punch cards, right?

GT: What's that?

CM: You're just coming out of punch cards.

GT: Oh, I went through the punch card system. I went through the wiring board system -- at SAC headquarters. Now, we had a fairly nice computer system even back in those days, compared to what we had years ago. We had two computers in South Dakota, and we got two in Dover -- one was in Wilmington, the other was in Dover. It was a very interesting career. I stayed with the data processing. Then I got out of state government and went to work for System Development Corporation. It was a think tank type of company, nonprofit. And they worked with the Air Force for command and control, and for air flight controller programs to manage aircraft across the country.

And from that, I went to -- System Development Corporation was bought out by Burroughs, and then Burroughs bought UNIVAC, and called it Unisys. And I was with them 10

years. And fully retired ever since. And I've been running around the country. I've got my -- sold my home in '99, got a motor home, and went out on the highway. We lived in the home. We were called full-timers. And we visited every state in the country except Alaska. We visited that by air, but we didn't take our RV. We drove all the way up to Alaska -- we went to Hawaii, rather. I did drive the RV up to Alaska. That was quite a trip, on the Alaskan highway. And after seven years, my daughter said, "It's time for you to get off the road," and so she was divorced, and all her kids were on their own, so we decided to buy a home in Roanoke, Texas, where she was living at the time. And my son lives in Roanoke. She lives in Roanoke. My family's up there except for the grandkids. One of them is in North Carolina, and the other one's in Denver. The others are in the Roanoke-Fort Worth area, just about 20 miles north of Fort Worth.

And I've been working with Glider Pilots Association as director, on the executive council, as the national treasurer, and then my recent job, in addition, is reunion chairman. And I developed the database system, and I developed the webpage for our association. And that keeps me busy. Full-time job. No money. Don't get a penny. I

just get the satisfaction of meeting a lot of people and enjoying what I do. And I'm 88 years old, and I feel good. Except I had a quintuple heart bypass. They took out an artery and a vein out of my leg, and an artery out of here. I've got a zipper here. (laughs) And I've recently had a pacemaker put in, because I was having trouble with my heart not running regular. So I got a pacemaker, big cut here. I've lost my gallbladder. I had to take that out. I had an attack. I had problems with my eyes. I had cataracts, and I got cataract surgery, and I've got glaucoma in both eyes. And I guess I'm still here. (laughs)

CM: Well, this side of the ground, as they say.

GT: Yep. Anything else?

CM: No, unless you (inaudible), we'll wrap it up.

GT: Well, my final wrap-up is that I thoroughly enjoy working with veterans of the World War II era to keep our story going. We have a large group that are in this glider pilot association, primarily because we were fairly well organized to start with. We insist on paying dues, so we have money to keep operating. We have a fairly substantial checking account -- savings account that's accumulated, and we're able to have these reunions, and able to do a good job. We've gotten to the point where most of the glider

pilots are dead, and so we have to have something to keep us going, and it's the families that keep us going. Last year, we had 185 at our banquet, and only 24 were glider pilots. The rest were families, widows, children, grandchildren. And at Oklahoma City, we had two families there with four generations. Glider pilot and three generations. That's quite [an accomplishment?]. The troop carrier community, the different troop carrier groups, were having difficulty keeping enough members to keep their individual reunions, so they combined, and about four or five of them got together and called themselves the troop carrier community. And then they got down to where they only had 50 people that could afford to come to the reunions, and so I invited them to join our association. And 70 of them did. And 35 showed up at Oklahoma City. And I don't have the count right now, but we have about 20 to 30 that are here. And they bring their family members. And they're just part of our family. We're a troop carrier, even though they're not gliders. And we had a second group, the 315th, that joined up. Only six members joined, because they didn't do a very good job of promoting it.

So that's the 315th, and they have a special display they brought here. And so the troop carrier power pilots, and mechanics, and crew chiefs, and whatnot, and their families, keep us going. And we have a good program tomorrow. That C-47 -- it's going to be quite an experience to see that airplane. It flew seven combat missions.

CM: Where is this? At the airport?

GT: At the airport tomorrow. The pilot -- I could take all day talking about that, but the pilot offered to fly that airplane in here and give rides to anybody who was a troop carrier veteran. Now he's opened it up to anybody who wants to get on it. If they're at all part of our group, they can ride in that airplane. He's going to fly them. And we designate, on our membership, a star indicating that they signed up to go to the airport, and paid for the bus trip. And they're going to have a box lunch out there, and they're going to go to a museum out there at the airport.

CM: Is this -- what plane is this? Is this the one out of --

GT: No, it's a C-47 --

CM: Well, there's a couple here in Texas, I know.

GT: Well, there's one that flies a parachute jumping team around. They're quite famous for flying around. They charge for their rides. But he bought this because of his

interest in the C-47 -- DC-3. He bought this thing thinking it was a DC-3. Actually, it was a C-47. He later found out it had a war history. And he got -- with help from another guy -- there's an article written, and you ought to have a copy of that book. I mean, it's a wonderful story. *Warbird Digest* is where it was published. The author of that article is going to be here. The widow of the pilot that flew that airplane on six of the seven missions is going to be here. Her family is going to be here. The pilot's family's going to be here. Glover, from Mt. Pleasant, Texas. And the daughter of the glider pilot that that airplane towed into combat is going to be here. And the other people haven't even met her yet. It'll be her first trip. So we're going to have quite a celebration.

Tomorrow night we'll have a dinner, and after the dinner, they're going to tell us the story that I just told, in detail, how they all got together. But see, the pilot that has that C-47 had it completely restored with its original World War II colors and all the things that they had. They got the number of missions that were flown, the number of resupply missions. It's all on the side of the airplane. He found us out, and he got to meet the widow, and he got

the logbook -- not the actual logbook -- a diary that the pilot -- the husband -- every trip that airplane took, he wrote it up in a diary. And the pilot's got that. I mean, it's quite a story.

CM: It's amazing that all this stuff is together.

GT: That's right. That's right. Well, I don't have anything else to say, unless you have your final questions.

CM: No, I'm good.

GT: I probably talked long enough.

CM: I appreciate you giving us a little bit of your time here. I want to thank you for your service, of course.

GT: Well, thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE