

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

NUMBER

1413

Interview with
DAVID L. RUCKER

July 16, 2000

Place of Interview: Kerrville, Texas

Interviewer: William J. Alexander

Terms of Use: Open

Approved: David L. Rucker

Date: July 16, 2000

Oral History Collection

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Mr. Alexander: This is Bill Alexander interviewing Dave Rucker at his residence at 17 Loma Linda, Kerrville, Texas, 78028. The interview is taking place on July 16, 2000. I'm interviewing Mr. Rucker in order to get his experiences as a member of the 346th Bomb Squadron, 384th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force, in the European Theater during World War II.

Now, with that all finished and done, I would like to ask you, Dave, where and when were you born?

Mr. Rucker: I was born January 2, 1921, in a western Kansas town by the name of Hartland, Kansas.

Mr. Alexander: What town was that near?

Rucker: It is near Lakin, Kansas.

Alexander: Tell me the names of your mother and father.

Rucker: My mother was Grace Rebecca Cristensen.

Alexander: Is this a Swedish name?

Rucker: No, it is a Danish name. She was born in Buckingham, Iowa, in April, 1902. Dad was born in Lebanon, Missouri. His name was John William Rucker. He was born in 1895.

Alexander: What about siblings?

Rucker: I have one brother, James F. Rucker, who lives in Houston, Texas.

Alexander: Is he older or younger?

Rucker: He is five years younger than I; he is younger.

Alexander: So, he was born in 1926?

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: Was he also in World War II?

Rucker: Yes, he was in the Navy.

Alexander: Okay, we will talk about him in a minute. I would like to get a little feel on that as we get on in here. So, it was just the two brothers?

Rucker: Right. There was one brother between us, but he died in infancy.

Alexander: Yes, that was very common. Did you go to

school in the same town that you were born in?

Rucker: My dad worked for the Santa Fe Railroad, which made it necessary for us to move at times.

Alexander: What was his position?

Rucker: He was a telegraph operator. I started school in a town in western Kansas, Coolidge, until the sixth grade, at which time the railroad moved my dad and our family to Lamar, Colorado. There I finished school. I graduated there.

Alexander: You graduated from high school?

Rucker: Yes, from high school.

Alexander: Oh, you did? What year was that?

Rucker: This was 1938.

Alexander: You graduated from Lamar?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: What did you do after you got out of school?

Rucker: I went to college at Western State College at Gunnison, Colorado.

Alexander: That is great.

Rucker: I did not graduate. At that point in time, what I wanted to do was fly.

Alexander: Oh, you did?

Rucker: I wanted to fly real early in life.

Alexander: Let's go back to Gunnison to ask you a little

about that. You went to school in 1938, and you dropped out of school when?

Rucker: I didn't go away to school until 1940.

Alexander: So, from 1938 to 1940, what were you doing?

Rucker: I went to a junior college in Lamar. I took a few courses. Then decided I wanted to go away to school. That is when I went to Gunnison, in 1940.

Alexander: Did you have to have a major at the time when you got in?

Rucker: At that point in time, I thought I wanted to be an accountant, so I took a lot of accounting and all of that. But in the second year, I said, "I don't like this. What I really want to end up being is a doctor." So, I switched over to science with the idea of someday becoming a pilot and becoming a flight surgeon.

Alexander: There you go--both of them together.

Rucker: Right. Well, the flight surgeon part didn't materialize, but becoming a pilot later on did.

Alexander: When you got in to Gunnison, you were going in 1940, so we are looking at basically two years before we got into the war.

Rucker: Yes. While at Gunnison, I enrolled into what

they called, at that time, Civilian Pilot Training [CPT].

Alexander: Was this sponsored by the school?

Rucker: The federal government sponsored CPT. I got my private pilot's license flying Piper Cubs at 6,000 feet above sea level--flying those around. One interesting thing about that flying is that we started in the winter. There was snow on the ground, and I learned to fly with skis on the plane.

Alexander: Oh, you did?

Rucker: We landed and took off with skis because there was snow on the runways.

Alexander: It was a tail-dragger.

Rucker: Yes, it was a tail-dragger. As we progressed we would have good days flying, and on bad days we couldn't fly. But as we progressed, it got off into the spring. It began to melt the runway off, so we could see the blacktop. So, I went out one day to the blacktop. The pilot had several students there that day. We jacked up the plane, took the skis off, and put wheels on it. I guess I must have been the first one. He grabbed me and said, "Okay, Rucker, we're

going."

Alexander: He went with you?

Rucker: I could solo. I was able to solo, but, because this was my first trip with wheels, he was going around with me to show how the plane handled on the ground.

Alexander: He didn't want anything to happen to that airplane.

Rucker: I got up there and went around, you know. Oh, I was so happy. I knew I had to come in and land. Well, when you hit the ground with the skis, you didn't bounce. You stayed. I think I bounced the whole length of that airfield when I came in (chuckle).

Alexander: You went up and down, up and down.

Rucker: I will never forget it.

Alexander: No, you don't forget that.

Rucker: It was quite an experience.

Alexander: You don't forget that. I don't care if it was your first landing or the last landing. You always remember that.

Rucker: That is right.

Alexander: That is great.

Rucker: So, I went to school there until spring of

1941.

Alexander: That is when you put the wheels on?

Rucker: Right. I came home to Lamar and got me a job. They were building a reservoir on the Arkansas River out west of Lamar. I got a job out there, making \$5.00 a day. It was 62½ cents an hour for eight hours work.

Alexander: That was not bad, though.

Rucker: It was good pay. I had registered for the draft. They hadn't called me. I was in college, and maybe that is one reason. Rather than being drafted, I said, "I'm going to enlist because I want to fly." So, I enlisted and got accepted in the Aviation Cadet Program.

Alexander: Let me ask you this. Had you received your license from the previous situation? You were a licensed pilot?

Rucker: Right, with thirty-five hours or something like that.

Alexander: That is pretty good.

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: Excuse me, go ahead.

Rucker: So, anyway, then I started writing to see how I could get to become an Aviation Cadet. I got

the papers and filled them out.

Alexander: Let me ask you this. Where did you...

Rucker: I sent them to Pueblo, Colorado.

Alexander: Where did you send them?

Rucker: I don't really remember.

Alexander: It was the Army Air Corps or whatever.

Rucker: Yes. I waited around, and finally they called me to Pueblo to take some tests. I took the tests and passed. They said, "Okay." I think this was May, 1942.

Alexander: So, we are past Pearl Harbor?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: Let's go back a second. I want to talk to you about Pearl Harbor for a moment. Where were you when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor?

Rucker: I was in college in Gunnison, Colorado, on that Sunday morning that it all took place.

Alexander: How did you hear about it?

Rucker: I heard about it on the radio.

Alexander: Did you hear about it accidentally, or did somebody say, "Hey! Come here!"

Rucker: Kind of in a way, I heard about it accidentally. My roommate and I didn't have our radio on. Somebody yelled up and down the

dorm: "Hey, fellows! Turn on your radio!" That is the way we found out.

Alexander: When you found out it was happening, what went through your mind?

Rucker: I don't think very much went through my mind. It didn't scare me at the time. I thought, "Big deal. We'll whip 'em. It's just a little skirmish. No big deal."

Alexander: We will have them in a week.

Rucker: That is exactly right.

Alexander: Did you know where Pearl Harbor was?

Rucker: No (chuckle).

Alexander: Thank you. Very few people knew that. I didn't, either.

Rucker: That is right. I thought, "Where is this place?"

Alexander: I had a vague idea of Hawaii. I had reason for that, but not a lot of people knew where Hawaii was.

Rucker: I had taken some interesting courses in college. I had taken some geology. I had taken a wonderful course from this lady professor. It was a geography course at a college level. I learned a lot about geography

from her. Of course, I had an inclination of where these places were. But as far as Pearl Harbor was concerned, I didn't know. I knew where Manila was, yes. I knew it was in the Philippines.

Alexander: But Pearl Harbor, of course, was a naval base. Not many of us ever knew that.

Rucker: True.

Alexander: This was on, of course, December 7, 1941. You are still in flight training, but you finish up there, don't you?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: You didn't rush down to the Army Air Corps and say, "Sign me up."

Rucker: No.

Alexander: No, because you said you also didn't get called up, either.

Rucker: No. I think it was...I am trying to put some dates together here. I think it was 1941, or was it 1942? Let me see. If they called me up, then, in October of 1942, so it must have been in 1942 when I enlisted. That was in May. I got sworn in in May of some date, in Pueblo.

Alexander: In 1942?

Rucker: Yes. I went back home. They said, "We'll notify you." I think it was October when I finally got an official letter from the United States Army Air Forces, telling me to report for duty.

Alexander: You have been sworn in by this time?

Rucker: Right. I think I had to get to Denver, Colorado. They sent me a ticket to get me to Denver. I met a troop train there. I went across all Kansas and into Kansas City. I joined another train. Hell, there were people coming in from all over the United States. It was a big, long Pullman train. We started out for Texas. I will tell you, that was the longest trip on a train I have ever taken. We went from Kansas City to San Antonio.

Alexander: Oh, yes, that is a long way.

Rucker: I think we awakened two mornings in a row, asking the conductor, "Where are we?" He said, "We are still in Texas." (laughter)

Alexander: Yes.

Rucker: Then in San Antonio, I went in to what they called the Classification Center, where they classified you. Either you were going to be a

pilot, a navigator, or a bombardier. I was classified to become a pilot.

Alexander: Was that because you had an experience?

Rucker: It was a help. It was an assist for me because I had the previous experience.

Alexander: I need to ask you, if you can recall, how that determination was made in terms of your going to be a navigator or whatever.

Rucker: It was just a system of mathematical tests and this-and-that.

Alexander: In other words, there were aptitude tests that had to do with math?

Rucker: Right. And some of them, because I had been a pilot, dealt with flying. So, "BANG! BANG!," I knew the answers to those questions.

Alexander: Did you ever look back on it, or think about it at all, that most of the guys that were at that stage where you were, all of them had the idea they wanted to be a pilot?

Rucker: Yes. They all thought they were going to be pilots, but through physical disability or one thing or another, and the aptitude test, they said, "No, you would be better as a navigator. You are good at mathematics and [this-and-

that]. You don't have the aptitude..."

Alexander: How about a bombardier? What was it on that one (chuckle)?

Rucker: It was about the same thing.

Alexander: We can go ahead. I just wanted to get that in there.

Rucker: Then, it was called at that time...I don't know. You know, Bill, today I cannot visualize where that Aviation Cadet Center was in San Antonio.

Alexander: Oh, I see. You mean whether it was at Kelly Field [San Antonio] or up at Hondo, Texas. It is very likely that it was the one on the east side of town-- Randolph Field.

Rucker: No, I wasn't at Randolph. Randolph was not our place of business. I knew that. It seems to me that maybe we were mixed up.

Alexander: It could have been at Hondo.

Rucker: No, we were in San Antonio.

Alexander: Okay.

Rucker: I know we could look out and see big, black smoke about two miles away. It was an airfield. We would always joke: "Well, some guy washed out the hard way." (chuckle)

Alexander: (Chuckle) Okay, right down the tube.

Rucker: Anyway, I went through what they called pre-flight school in San Antonio at the Aviation Cadet Training Center or something like that.

Alexander: I would assume that your past experience should have really come in handy at this point?

Rucker: No, this was tough stuff. They taught us physics. We had to learn code. We had to learn to take so many words a minute. It was the funniest thing.

Alexander: It was Morse Code?

Rucker: Yes. They started you out at six or seven words a minute. I had the devilest time trying to do that. I could jump up to ten to twelve, up to twenty-five words, and take it flat out. But I could not get it at six and seven.

Alexander: It was too slow.

Rucker: They would not pass me until I could do six and seven, although I could take twenty-five words a minute. They said, "No, you have got to take the six to seven before we'll let you out of here."

Alexander: It sounds like the Army, doesn't it?

Rucker: Yes. One day I was sitting there just thinking

how great it would be to be home or be in San Antonio, drinking that beer and carrying on. I looked down, and I had done it.

Alexander: You had?

Rucker: I had (laughter). I had taken the six to seven words a minute.

Alexander: Without listening to them.

Rucker: That is right.

Alexander: That is interesting.

Rucker: Of course, in the pre-flight School, it was tough. We had a lot of washouts.

Alexander: What would constitute a washout, for example?

Rucker: They couldn't pass the tests. They would flunk, just like in college.

Alexander: The test that you just talked about?

Rucker: Yes. They could have flunked me out if I hadn't finally made that six to seven words a minute. They could have said, "He can't do it." We had all kinds of stuff that they would shove at us.

Alexander: Any one of which could give you...

Rucker: A bad mark. That was a case, too, where they did pick us some extra navigators and bombardiers. When you washed out of pilot

training, then they would give you a chance at the next one down the line.

I got out of pre-flight training in San Antonio at the Aviation Cadet Center. I went then to primary flight training. This must have been around the first of the year. It was end of December or the first of the year. I ended up at what was known as Cimarron Field, which was near Oklahoma City, west of Oklahoma City. There is a federal penitentiary out there just near there. That is where I got into primary flight training.

Alexander: What were you flying?

Rucker: We are flying the PT-17A [Stearman Kaydet primary trainer]. It was a monoplane.

Alexander: It was a monoplane and a two-seater.

Rucker: The engine was upside down. The pistons, spark plugs--everything--was on the bottom. What did they call that engine? Was it a Franklin engine?

Alexander: It was a two-passenger plane, front and back.

Rucker: You sat in the back, and the instructor pilot sat in front. If you didn't mind what he said, it was awful tough. He would take that stick

and beat you between the knees.

Alexander: Oh, yes.

Rucker: After I got through that, then I went to Winfield, Kansas.

Alexander: Let's talk about what you did in primary flight training.

Rucker: There was more ground work and flying in primary flight school. It was a continuation of pretty much the ground school that we had in San Antonio, but more advanced.

Alexander: Did you feel that your ability to fly the airplane was ahead of, say, your other classmates, since you had this other experience before? It is a bigger airplane. It doesn't fly the same way.

Rucker: The only thing that I felt that I was ahead of them on is that I was familiar with being in the air flying. The airplane was different. It was something new for all of us. I had a certain advantage, but it might be that...well, I had been there before.

Alexander: It would help on an approach...

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: ...and lining up with the runway.

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: That is the kind of stuff that you just innately understand.

Rucker: Then I finished that in March, and they sent me to Winfield, Kansas.

Alexander: Now, wait a minute. March, 1943?

Rucker: Yes. So, I went to Winfield, Kansas, at what was called Strother Army Air Base. It was between Arkansas City and Winfield, Kansas.

Alexander: This is March?

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: And you say this is advanced flight training?

Rucker: No, this is basic flight training.

Alexander: Still?

Rucker: This is the middle training. There is a primary, middle, and then I am going into advanced.

Alexander: That is right.

Rucker: So, this is where we got into the BT-19A. That was some airplane. That was a big one. It had a 255-horsepower radial engine with a canopy.

Alexander: It was low-wing.

Rucker: Yes. I still wasn't flying retractable landing gear yet.

Alexander: No, that is right.

Rucker: I got through that all right. I almost washed out.

Alexander: You had an instructor behind you there, too?

Rucker: Right. I was flying in the front seat.

Alexander: By that time you were in the front seat.

Rucker: Right. I don't like flying upside down.

Alexander: I don't, either.

Rucker: I had a hell of a time with basic flight training because they tried to get me to do slow rolls and all that. I turned loose the controls, and I reached for something to hang on so I didn't fall out, you know.

Alexander: (Chuckle)

Rucker: But when it came to flying formation, straight and level, instrument work, and everything else, I was fine.

Alexander: Everything else was fine.

Rucker: Everything else was fine.

Alexander: When it came to inverted flying, you were out of there.

Rucker: I didn't want any part of it.

Alexander: Now, they knew that?

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: That is why you went to bombers.

Rucker: No, I had requested bombers from the very start.

Alexander: Because of that, I'll bet.

Rucker: I don't know. Back when I was sworn in, back in 1942, in Pueblo, Colorado, there was a question and answer: "In the event that you become a pilot, what type of plane would you want to fly?" Right then I said, "A B-17 Flying Fortress." That is what I got. Because I had done that, I was going to go on to bombers. After I finished my basic training... and that was kind of a jump up. You got into night flying then, night formation flying, daytime formation flying. That was a brand-new "ballgame."

Alexander: How many of you were there in a formation? Were there four, five, or six planes at a time?

Rucker: Well, there were three, generally. Your first trip at night...

Alexander: The night "ops" are really fun [facetious comment].

Rucker: Yes, with one of those planes, you had this fire shooting out on either side, which was the

exhaust. The first thing that you thought of was that you are on fire. I thought, "We're on fire!"

Alexander: Because you had never seen it before, in the daylight?

Rucker: No, I never saw it in the daylight. Well, I got through basic flight training all right. I went to advanced multi-engine training.

Alexander: Where was this?

Rucker: This was in Altus, Oklahoma.

Alexander: When you say twin-engine, what kind of planes were you flying?

Rucker: They were twin-engines. They were Cessna AT-7s.

Alexander: Really?

Rucker: Yes, it was a fiber plane. Also, we had a few AT-9s. Now, the AT-9 was the hot one. My instructor had five students. I was his only student that he ever checked out in the AT-9. I felt real elated about that.

Alexander: I bet. It was a hot airplane.

Rucker: At one time it was considered our combat craft.

Alexander: It was a twin-engine plane.

Rucker: It was a twin-engine combat craft. The wheels

retracted. It was not built to fly, I think (chuckle). When you cut the engine, it was over; it wanted to get down. I laugh many times and tell people that, when you come in for a landing and you put down the full flaps, I swore that I looked out the window up above my head watching the runway because we were coming down like this [gesture].

Alexander: Yes, you do.

Rucker: That plane you could anything with. We could snap-roll it; you could slow-roll it. You could do anything you wanted to with it. It was some good airplane. I felt, "My gosh! I must be doing real well that my instructor would pick me out of the whole litter and say, 'Rucker, you're going to fly the AT-9.'"

Alexander: That is a real compliment.

Rucker: Finally, on July 29, 1943, at 11:00 a.m., I believe it was, I got my wings [pilot's insignia] and my commission at Altus, Oklahoma. My mother came down and pinned my wings on me.

Alexander: That was nice, because she could get there from Lamar.

Rucker: Yes, she could get there. She even pinned my

buddy's wings on for him. I had seven days leave then. Mom and I climbed on the train, and we went back to Lamar. I spent four or five days home. Then I got on a train and headed for Sebring, Florida.

Alexander: Did you have any love life at home?

Rucker: No. I didn't have the time.

Alexander: I thought you might have somebody saying, "Bye-bye," when you first left.

Rucker: No.

Alexander: You went to Sebring?

Rucker: I went to Sebring for B-17 transition. That is where I learned to fly the B-17 Flying Fortress.

Alexander: That is in Florida?

Rucker: Yes. I was down there for little over two months. It was nine weeks, I think what it was.

Alexander: What were you doing here?

Rucker: Flying that airplane and attending some more ground school.

Alexander: There were "touch-and-go's"?

Rucker: There was a lot of formation flying, and we were always on oxygen. We were learning to use oxygen at that time.

Alexander: Did you get to high altitudes at the time?

Rucker: Yes. We flew high altitudes a lot of times. I would remark to my mother and dad. I would write them letters and say, "Man, if you get up around 25,000 feet on a clear day, you can see that this is a circular globe. You can see it arching away from you."

Alexander: (Chuckle) That is right. You sure can.

Rucker: That awed me. We used to get up...over Florida you always had these big cumulus clouds. It was a lot of fun to get up in there and fly around them, like you were in a canyon. When you were up solo, you were with another officer up there with you to get his hours. He, like you, was also learning all about the B-17, even though he was flying co-pilot for you.

Alexander: With a four-engine B-17, you are "fly dusting."

Rucker: Yes, "fly dusting." It got to be a lot of fun until one day I came around a cloud, and there was another B-17 coming right at me. That stopped that little fun (chuckle). We didn't play in the clouds anymore.

Alexander: Believe me, I understand that (chuckle).

Rucker: So, after nine weeks there, we were into 1943;

that was September or October, I guess. I finished that phase of my training. They sent me to a replacement wing. I was sent to the 19th Replacement Wing in Salt Lake City, Utah. I sat around there for six or seven days. I met a few "Jack Mormons."

Alexander: "Jack Mormons," being Mormons who don't stay on the straight and narrow path (laughter).

Rucker: That is right (chuckle). Then I was sent to Ardmore, Oklahoma, to join up with the 95th Bombardment Group, which was in training to go overseas and fight "Jerry" [the Germans].

Alexander: Let me ask you something here. At this point you had said you were in a replacement wing. I have to assume you got an awful lot of training on bomb runs and so forth prior to this time.

Rucker: No.

Alexander: None?

Rucker: None.

Alexander: So, you really were not ready to replace?

Rucker: No. They just called it that. It was just a big pool. They would go down the list. If they needed a bunch of pilots in Ardmore, Oklahoma, they would say, "One, two...we got

twenty-five pilots. How many do you want?"

Alexander: Right.

Rucker: Then I went to Ardmore. Here I was classified as a first pilot--command pilot--on a B-17. I got down there, and they made all of us guys co-pilots.

Alexander: All of you guys that came from Salt Lake City?

Rucker: Yes, those who had been at Sebring.

Alexander: They thought, "We'll show these guys."

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: Now you are co-pilots.

Rucker: Now we are co-pilots. This floated along for about six or seven weeks. We were in combat training. We flew bombing runs; we flew formation.

Alexander: You were taught how to do that.

Rucker: We flew firing range and the "whole nine yards."

Alexander: You are talking about the machine guns?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: Were you, as pilots, having to do that as well?

Rucker: No.

Alexander: There wouldn't be any reason why you would.

Rucker: As an aside, in the show a year or two ago,

"The Memphis Belle," a co-pilot went back in the tail-gunner's position because he had never fired a gun. He wanted to go back there and do it. That is nonsense. Now, if I had been the command pilot, the crew pilot, sitting there in the left seat, and my co-pilot says, "I am going back and firing a gun," I'd say, "You sit in that seat! Nobody leaves this cockpit!"

[Editor's note: The "Memphis Belle" was the first 8th Air Force bomber to complete the required twenty-five combat missions before rotation back to the States. Its final mission was dramatized in an eponymous film in 1944, which was remade in 1990.]

Alexander: Because that is regulation.

Rucker: That is right. Well, whether it is regulation or not--we could get away with it--we were in combat. Both of us needed to be up there. What if I am shot? Who is going to take over the plane?

Alexander: If I remember correctly, the story on "The Memphis Belle," the plane was not in combat, the co-pilot wanted to shoot those guns, but...

Rucker: In the show, it didn't say that. That is what

I am saying. That show showed him going back there in combat.

Alexander: That's got more juice to it.

Rucker: Well, I didn't like it from then on, after I saw that.

Alexander: Well, most of the story in "The Memphis Belle" was pretty well portrayed.

Rucker: Well, that was a great point in my life when Captain...the guy who finished his twenty-five missions, he came back and made the rounds. I met him personally at Altus, Oklahoma, when I was in cadet training.

Alexander: Oh, "The Memphis Belle" guy?

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: Okay.

Rucker: What was his name? Anyway, I met him personally. [Editor's note: The command pilot of the "Memphis Belle" was Captain Robert Morgan.]

Alexander: I can tell you one thing. When you get this transcript back, it will be in there (laughter).

Rucker: So, here we are in training in Ardmore. A week before, they were destined to head out for

Europe.

Alexander: What year was this again?

Rucker: This would be early 1944. I got relieved--all of us did, who were flying the co-pilot seat. They had a bunch of new pilots who had just gotten their wings a week before, and they came in. They got four, or five, or eight hours training in a B-17, and they were headed for combat.

Alexander: They didn't get the training you got?

Rucker: No.

Alexander: Were they command pilots?

Rucker: No, they were co-pilots.

Alexander: But they had to have them.

Rucker: They had to have somebody flying in that seat. We sat around there for a week or two, or a month. Finally, they said, "Okay."

Alexander: Excuse me. You said you did have leave, didn't you, from there?

Rucker: No. I had leave out of Sebring, Florida. On the way to Utah, I could go right through my hometown--I had some leave--and then I climbed on a train and went on to Utah.

So, anyway, we are back at Ardmore; we are

in combat training. I am flying as a co-pilot, about ready to go overseas. They relieved me and brought in a co-pilot. Then they sent me then to Dalhart, Texas, at which time...

Alexander: You were not with your group?

Rucker: No, I am by myself, still a "lone eagle."

Alexander: You are a left-seat pilot.

Rucker: I got over to Dalhart. This is when I got issued a crew.

Alexander: Oh, you did?

Rucker: I got my co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, and six gunners. We trained there for six weeks or up to nine weeks.

Alexander: As a group?

Rucker: As a group, as a crew. Again, we went through the combat flying, formation flying, landing, shooting, and the "whole nine yards."

Alexander: Incredible training, isn't it?

Rucker: Right. When we were all done, they said, "Okay, your training is over. You're headed as a replacement crew." Now, I was trained as a replacement crew. The war wasn't going too well then. They were losing a lot of crews, so they had to have some replacement crews coming

along, so mine was a replacement crew.

Alexander: I understand. I want to ask you here. That was about nine weeks into 1944, do you think?

Rucker: We are into 1944 now.

Alexander: Yes, early 1944?

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: So, what you were going to do, then, was to be transported?

Rucker: Yes. Well, we were going to fly our own planes. They put us on a train and sent us to Kearney, Nebraska. I got issued a plane and signed up for that \$750,000 "animal" (chuckle).

Alexander: Can you imagine what it would cost today?

Rucker: We packed our bags in the bomb bay. We were to leave the next morning for Gander Lake and Goose Bay [both in Newfoundland, Canada], and up through across the North Atlantic flying a plane. They told us they would awaken us at 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning, brief us, and get us out of there.

Alexander: Out of where?

Rucker: Out of Kearney, Nebraska.

Alexander: Out of Kearney, okay.

Rucker: Pretty soon the sun is up, we look out, and we

are still in bed. You look at your watch, and it is 6:00 or 7:00 a.m., and they haven't awakened you. I came to find out that all of our planes had been grounded. We could not take off with them. There had to be something done to them. The heater was not working correctly or something. So, they piled us on trains. We headed for the East Coast. We caught a boat there and went to "Merry Old England."

Alexander: This was in early 1944?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: Submarine problems were not as severe as they had been. What ship did you go over on?

Rucker: I am trying to think...I knew you were going to ask me that.

Alexander: Was it one of the old luxury liners?

Rucker: Yes, it was an English luxury liner.

Alexander: It could have been the *Queen Elizabeth*.

Rucker: No, it wasn't the *Queen Elizabeth*.

Alexander: The *Queen Mary*, I mean.

Rucker: No, it was the *Mauritania*.

Alexander: Oh, the *Mauritania*.

Rucker: I do kind of recall this. It seems that we

landed I guess in Glasgow [Scotland].

Alexander: That was very common.

Rucker: It was Easter Sunday, 1944. We were around there for a while. Then, finally, I got assigned to move out of there. I went to the 384th Bomb Group (Heavy) at Station 106, which was a little village by the name of Grafton Underwood. There was a very large town of 10,000 or more, near there, known as Kettering. That is where I was assigned a spot in the 346th Bomb Squadron as another replacement.
[Tape recorder stopped.]

Alexander: Okay, we are back on tape. We have got some information. You wanted to...

Rucker: I was trying to put my dates together, Bill. As I said, we left the United States and saw the Statue of Liberty. Everybody was on that side of the ship. The captain said, "You are going to have to move, fellas! The ship is tilting."

Alexander: (Laughter) He said that to everybody.

Rucker: So, we ended up in England, and then I got assigned to a combat group, and I flew my first mission on May 7, 1944, to Berlin.

Alexander: Your first mission was to Berlin?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: Let's just think about that a minute.

Rucker: No, I am going to explain. I flew as an observer pilot on that mission.

Alexander: I see.

Rucker: In fact, yes, I was the co-pilot. I was the observer pilot on that mission.

Alexander: That was part of your training?

Rucker: It was to get me familiarized. In the meantime, I and my crew had been flying formation, formation, formation, from the time we hit that base for about ten days. They had us in the air all of the time, getting us ready.

Alexander: Just getting into formation was a very serious problem. Tell me about when you found out you were going to Berlin. What did you think about it? Is there anything that you can remember?

Rucker: No, not really.

Alexander: You are going to go over there, and people are going to be shooting at you.

Rucker: That is exactly right. Well, it is like we talk about our young people nowadays. Peer pressure

gets you to do things.

Alexander: That is a good point.

Rucker: We had peer pressure then.

Alexander: Of course.

Rucker: It scared the "bejeebers" out of you to figure you were going out there, but this was the thing to do.

Alexander: That is what you signed up for.

Rucker: That's right.

Alexander: I know.

Rucker: So, if this was it...there isn't a fellow--even you--that, when you get into a situation of life and death, who doesn't say, "Well, it happened to ol' Joe, but it will never happen to me."

Alexander: Yes, especially when you are young.

Rucker: That is exactly right. You are going to live forever when you are young.

Alexander: That is why young people fight wars.

Rucker: That is exactly right. So, no, I don't know of any misgivings. This wasn't the first time the group had ever been to Berlin. It just happened to be scheduled to go, and it was my first mission.

Alexander: You didn't lay awake the night before?

Rucker: Well, we didn't know where we were going. You don't know...

Alexander: Oh, that is right, until you get the briefing.

Rucker: You don't know these things.

Alexander: But you knew you were going into combat.

Rucker: Oh, yes! When I went to bed that night, I had no idea that they were going to call me to go tomorrow morning.

Alexander: Oh, you didn't know that?

Rucker: You don't know these things. And, all of a sudden, about 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning, there is a guy rustling your bed. He's got a list. He knows where everybody is sleeping. He just rustled those guys out and told us: "Breakfast is at 5:30. Briefing is at 6:00," and away we went. When you get down there and you sit down in this big room, there is a great big curtain pulled across the map of Europe. Finally, when the "okay" is given, why, they pull the drapes. Here is the map. They got yarn strung across where you're going.

Alexander: From your base?

Rucker: From north England. Then all across there

would be red. They took celluloid and colored it red and made big circles. These showed the heavy flak areas. Some of it was pink, meaning it was meager. Some of it, as I recall, was deep red, meaning heavy flak. Well, it got to be kind of a joke. It didn't make a difference when we got out there in combat. We were in combat flying and in flak. We never came back after our debriefing and reported any meager flak. It was always heavy (chuckle). So, anyway, what took place is, I started my first mission on May 7, 1944, to Berlin, Germany.

Alexander: Did that count for your first mission?

Rucker: Yes. I flew thirty more after that.

Alexander: So, you flew thirty-one?

Rucker: I flew thirty-one missions. On July 6, 1944...

Alexander: Okay, we are talking about D-Day [the invasion of Normandy, France].

Rucker: June 6 was D-day.

Alexander: Oh, July. Okay.

Rucker: I made a record at the time for the 8th Air Force of flying my missions. I had flown thirty-one of them in sixty-one days.

Alexander: Thirty-one missions in sixty-one days!

Rucker: At one time...you could count here [referring to personal flight log book]. I think I have got eight days, and I flew nine missions.

Alexander: You flew two missions in one day.

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: Let's talk about that a little bit. Your first mission was when?

Rucker: May 7, 1944.

Alexander: So, you are just one month away from D-Day.

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: How did you get ready for this?

Rucker: We had no idea. We participated in it, but we were like everybody else. We didn't know when D-Day...

Alexander: But as you look back on it now, did they have you participating in what would be kind of a pre-invasion strategy, or did they just send you back over to Berlin every day?

Rucker: As we got closer to D-Day, we were bombing a lot more things in France. Of course, Germany occupied all of France. They had all of these bases and railroad yards...

Alexander: Supply depots...

Rucker: Supply depots. So, we were bombing a lot of

that stuff in that immediate area. Some of it was...

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Alexander: This is tape one, side two.

Rucker: As just a little aside, as I said, somebody would come around and awaken you at 4:30 a.m. and say, "Breakfast at 5:00, briefing at 6:00." Combat crews were the only ones that got fresh eggs. Sometimes you would sneak down when you heard them call everybody else. You would sneak, although you were not going to fly. You would sneak down to get you a fresh egg (chuckle).

Alexander: Okay, that is fair.

Rucker: Fresh eggs and strawberry preserves, and the "whole nine yards." I blame the Army Air Corps, by the way, for causing me to start drinking scotch.

Alexander: It is their fault. I like that.

Rucker: After we would come back from our missions, we had to go through a debriefing. We would sit around with my crew at a table. They would be pouring two shots of scotch. Well, three of my crew members didn't drink. They wanted the

skipper to have theirs.

Alexander: Of course, he got you home alive. And you never let them forget it.

Rucker: Oh, I couldn't even ride my bicycle when I got out (chuckle).

Alexander: You said something that I want to come back to on this. When we were talking about sitting down and having a scotch, you started to say, "No, that was something else." Can you go back?

Rucker: Oh, all right. Although we trained with a bombardier, navigator, co-pilot, myself, and then six gunners...

Alexander: We have got six officers.

Rucker: There were four officers.

Alexander: I mean four officers and six enlisted men.

Rucker: Correct.

Alexander: Were they all first sergeants?

Rucker: First sergeants or better, yes. After we got over there, because we dropped our bombs on a leader...

Alexander: What do you mean by "leader?"

Rucker: The lead bombardier. You have got twelve planes, twelve up [here], twelve [here], twelve

[here]. You have got thirty-six planes coming across [here]. Each one of these lead planes had a lead bombardier. They also had a deputy that flew off in case something that happened to him so that somebody else could take over.

Alexander: Let me explain something. What you are saying is, you have got twelve planes at one level, twelve planes in back in another level, and then a third level of planes.

Rucker: Right. So, we didn't fly with our commissioned officer bombardier. We flew then with nine men after we got in combat.

Alexander: You didn't have a bombardier?

Rucker: We had a togglier.

Alexander: A "toggler." Is that what they called him?

Rucker: One of the enlisted men was flying up in front with the navigator. He ran the chin turret.

Alexander: A chin turret. What is that?

Rucker: It was a turret that was underneath the chin on the B-17.

Alexander: Underneath the chin, under the front rudder?

Rucker: Right. "Jerry" [German pilots] had found out that coming in head-on into a B-17 was about as safe of way as you could get him. So, when

they came out with the B-17G, I guess it was, they added this chin turret. It made it kind of dangerous then for...

Alexander: Well, you have got the upper turret, and now with this other one, there is a place of no return.

Rucker: Right. Anyway, he became the togglier. What the togglier did...everybody just watched. When they saw the bomb bay doors open on the lead plane, they would open our bomb bay doors. The moment they saw just the tip of the bomb coming out of that lead plane, they would pull the toggle switch and dump everything.

Alexander: But he was not an officer?

Rucker: No.

Alexander: Now, this is the first time I have heard this, because I have always assumed, probably...was this unusual, or was this something, as far as you know, they always did this, or not? What did they do with the bombardier?

Rucker: Bless their hearts, I don't know what ever happened to them. My bombardier...

Alexander: Shot them (chuckle)?

Rucker: Once in a while, of course, the only way they

could get any combat hours, get missions, was to fly as a replacement, either as lead bombardier or a deputy bombardier.

Alexander: That is not enough.

Rucker: Hell, they could be there all of their life.

Alexander: They might still be there.

Rucker: Some of them might still be there trying to get in their missions.

Alexander: You are getting close to the end. You are midway through World War II in the ETO [European Theater of Operations]. You still have another year to go or a little over that. Do you think that changed at all later, after you left?

Rucker: No. Really, it was good to have the training of a bombardier, but you were all just dropping everything...

Alexander: Simultaneously.

Rucker: Yes. There was no need to have a commissioned officer up there to do that because he didn't have to look at the bombsight anymore. We didn't even carry that except in those two planes.

Alexander: You did not carry a Norden bombsight?

Rucker: No. There was no need.

Alexander: All right.

Rucker: It lightened the weight of the plane.

Alexander: Of course. It just became SOP [standard operating procedure].

Rucker: That is right. When I first started flying missions on May 7, 1944, twenty-five missions was considered a tour of duty.

Alexander: That changed later on, I think.

Rucker: As you got twenty-five missions in, you got to come home. Well, I had in six missions, and they jumped the ante on me to thirty. So, I said, "Okay, I have got six in. I still got some more to go now." I floated along, floated along.

Alexander: When you say "floated along," you mean on your missions?

Rucker: Floated along. I made missions. I flew every day, or every other day--did [this], did [that]. First thing I know, they jumped the ante to thirty-five missions. Well, there was quite a hue and cry throughout the Air Force because of this. I was unusual in that I did mine as rapidly. There were guys in my

barracks that had been there in six months and still hadn't got twenty-five missions in.

Alexander: I see.

Rucker: There were old-timers sitting around over there waiting to get their missions in. They kept raising the ante on them. The surgeon general heard that this was going on. He said, "Hey! Wait a minute! This is not fair to some of these guys who have been here a long while. The way they see it, they are never going to get done if you keep raising the ante." So, the Air Force, or the Army Air Corps, said, "Okay, we will do [this]." They took my percentage at that time, that I had toward thirty. I think it is 89 percent.

Alexander: That you still had to fulfill?

Rucker: At that point I had twenty-six in toward thirty.

Alexander: Oh, you had 88 percent.

Rucker: I had 88 percent toward thirty missions. So, they took that same percentage over times thirty-five. That is the reason why I did thirty-one missions.

Alexander: I see. Let me ask you this. I want to go back

to pre-D-Day itself. You flew on D-Day?

Rucker: Well, let's see. Yes, I flew on D-Day. I flew on the 6th, the 7th, the 8th, the 10th, the 12th, and the 13th, going down [referring to personal flight log]. This was on D-Day on, and up until the first few weeks of June. I think we were really pounding that area of France. We were knocking out marshalling yards, not tilting our hand to let the "Jerry" know what we were doing. We were just out bombing anything.

Alexander: This is prior to June 6?

Rucker: Yes. We were getting his "buzz-bomb" [V-1 rocket] locations, bombing railroad yards, munitions dumps...

Alexander: They knew there was an invasion...

Rucker: Oh, they knew it was coming sooner or later, yes. Probably the most awesome thing I saw on D-Day...now I could see from the altitude I was. We were flying in at about 26,000 feet. It was clear enough, so I could see the barges coming in to the land. I was so high I didn't know whether they are ants or people. I could discern that. As my eyes were looking down and

seeing all these things on the water coming in toward the coast, I couldn't help but see these great, big ships setting out there in deeper water.

Alexander: Were they battleships?

Rucker: Probably. Then, all of a sudden, I watched one. I saw the black smoke of one of them. I watched that. I saw the projectile coming out of that gun and saw it crossing under me. It was several thousand feet below us. But this was the most interesting thing that you could...well, a 15- or a 16- or an 18-inch projectile, yes, you ought to be able to see it, but it just awed me.

Alexander: But not from up there. That is an interesting thing. We could see them coming from the surface, but not from up there looking down.

Rucker: I was looking down at them. I was seeing them arcing across. Finally, I called my crew. I said, "Fellows, get over to the left side of the plane for just a few minutes. Watch out there and see those battleships. You will see a puff of smoke. Then follow that puff of smoke, and you will see a projectile in the

sky." They were all amazed that they could see that thing coming through the sky. I was amazed. I had never seen anything like this.

Alexander: No, there is no way you could have.

Rucker: I remember that one time, when I was training in Altus, Oklahoma, we were told to stay away from that Army base that is south of there [Fort Sill, the site of the U.S. Army's artillery training facility].

Alexander: Yes, it is still there.

Rucker: They were taking their artillery out and firing against those Ouachita Mountains. They told us we couldn't fly over there because we might get hit. Well, some of us daredevils went over there. We didn't see the projectiles, but we did see them landing on the side of the hills and exploding.

Watching that stuff on D-Day was just...I couldn't take my eyes of it.

Alexander: When you were on your briefing that morning, what did they tell you?

Rucker: They pulled down the map. Here was the yarn strung across. They said, "Well, you're going to Caen, France, on D-Day."

Alexander: Did they know D-Day? You were talking about D-Day?

Rucker: No, they didn't say...it just happened to be marked on here that it was D-Day. I went to Caen, France, on that day.

Alexander: Did they not say in the briefing to you and your crew and the other crews, "Gentlemen, today is the day of invasion."

Rucker: Well, we probably found that out, yes. It probably was in our briefing. This is it. I am sure it was. I don't recall.

Alexander: Specifically?

Rucker: I don't recall specifically that they told us, but I guess we did know it because, hell, we could see the stuff out in the North Sea as we flew over there. They probably did tell us.

Alexander: What did you see in the North Sea?

Rucker: Well, all of these battleships in the Bay of Biscay or whatever it is around...

Alexander: The English Channel.

Rucker: The English Channel. All right, that is it.

Alexander: Okay, thank you. You said the other day, when we were talking about this, about the North Sea, but I don't think we went over there.

Rucker: Let me see here [referring to documents]. One of my long missions, yes, this is the one. On May 13, we flew a mission to Stettin, Germany.

Alexander: Where is that?

Rucker: That is over in Poland. [Editor's note: Stettin was signed over to Poland at the Potsdam Conference toward the end of the war and renamed Szczecin.]

Alexander: Yes, okay.

Rucker: That was a ten-hour mission that day--ten hours and thirty-five minutes. That was the day I almost "bought the farm" [got killed].

Alexander: Tell us about it.

Rucker: We had taken off real early in the morning from England and had flown across Germany. Partly, I guess, to deceive the Germans thinking we were heading for Germany, we just kept on flying across Germany until we got to Stettin.

Alexander: What was at Stettin?

Rucker: It had marshalling yards, and I think...what did they have over there? I think they had oil tanks. Was there a refinery at Stettin? I don't remember.

Alexander: Could be.

Rucker: There might have been a refinery there. We ran out of fighter escort. We were on our own. All of a sudden, the fighters were all over us like ducks on a June bug. Two or three of our planes fell; they were shot down. There were about twenty-five or thirty of these German planes. Out of nowhere, about six or eight [North American] P-51 Mustangs showed up.

Alexander: I am wondering about that.

Rucker: I don't know where they came from. They must have gone back to England and refueled, took a cut across, and met us over there. They made one pass down through that bunch of planes. There were five or six Germans that fell. They climbed in the sky and made another pass. They practically wiped them out. The Germans took off running. We learned later that we had flown close to a training school for young pilots.

Alexander: Oh, all right.

Rucker: Each one of them was trying to make a name for himself, being an "ace" before he ever got out of school (chuckle).

Alexander: He got an "ace" all right.

Rucker: So, anyway, we turned after we left Stettin and went out over the Baltic Sea near Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and then Denmark. We dropped down to about 12,000 or 14,000 feet.

Alexander: You say you lost two or three of your planes before the P-51s came?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: Did you have any flak?

Rucker: No. There was no flak, seemingly, on that day. So, anyway, we let down between 12,000 and 14,000 feet. I called the crew and said, "We have dropped down to 12,000 feet. If some of you would like to get off your oxygen mask for a while..." At that time we had been on the mission about eight hours or longer. I said, "Take it off, and if you feel yourself getting sleepy or something, grab your oxygen mask and put it back on." They said, "Okay, Skipper." They thought that was a good idea. They were all in favor of it. We were lazing along. The upper turret operator right behind me...

Alexander: Above you?

Rucker: Yes, above me. He called on the intercom and said, "Skipper, I have been without my oxygen

mask here for thirty or forty minutes. I think I am all right. I would like to come out of the turret a minute and take my throat mike." We all wore a throat mike. Oh, no, he wanted to put his throat mike on and get rid of his oxygen mask because the mike was in the oxygen mask. I said, "Okay, 'Breezy.' Check that sun before you come out of there. Come down and do what you have to do." He made the pass. I remember the shadow of his guns passing over the window.

Alexander: You could see the shadow.

Rucker: Yes. He was making a pass of the sun, and his guns were following around.

Alexander: Because the turrets do a 360-degree turn, then.

Rucker: Right. To make sure there were no "Jerrys" up there in the sun. Well, he came down out of it. While we were sitting there, I happened to look down. Here is: "PUFF! PUFF! PUFF!"-- right out of the end of our wing tips. I thought, "My God! What do they got? Flak boats down there on that sea firing up at us?" Then I saw these two ME-110s [German Messerschmitt twin-engine fighters] coming at

us. At about that time, I felt the plane shudder. They passed on underneath. The guys got to fire at them, but they never hit them. I looked out at my wingtip. Out there it had a hole in the wing about this big [gesture]-- right out within three or four feet of the tip of the wing.

Alexander: So, it was beyond the engine?

Rucker: Oh yes, way out by the tip. I told the crew: "Well, we didn't get out of there without getting hurt. If you look out your left window, you can see a hole out there in the wingtip." So, everybody took a look. We kept on flying. Finally, we got to the base.

Alexander: Tell me something. In flying with that hole in the wing, did that slow you down at all?

Rucker: No. It wasn't that big. It was just a small hole. So, we landed and everything. It was discerned that there was damage to my plane. It was going to have to be taken in to be the modification center and have that wingtip replaced. Well, they got into the wingtip, and they found out that this projectile had run parallel with the wing and right on through the

main wing stub...

Alexander: The spar?

Rucker: Yes, the spar and everything. It ended up in our number two gas tank sitting right here beside me. It was an unexploded 20-millimeter shell.

Alexander: No kidding? It was on your left side?

Rucker: Correct.

Alexander: So, it was right as it went into that tank?

Rucker: One, two, three, four [gesture]. That was way the engines were numbered. Number one was up here [gesture].

Alexander: To the left.

Rucker: It had a 425-gallon gas tank out there with it. With the number three engine, because of the wheel nacelles to retract the wheels, they had to split the gas tank on the number two engine.

Alexander: I got you.

Rucker: So, what you had was 212 and 213 gallons or something in one tank, and those two were right beside me. Those two were right beside me. This 20-millimeter shell they found in the gas tank--there was about a half-tank of fuel--was unexploded. That is the reason I say, "That is

the day I could have 'bought the farm.'"

Alexander: Isn't that incredible?

Rucker: Flak is unassuming. It doesn't have your name on it. Flak is just out there. You can hear it. I have been in flak so that it exploded. Flak bursts like a clover leaf, up like this [gesture].

Alexander: Like a mushroom.

Rucker: Yes. You could be right beside it, and it could miss you as it went it off. I have heard that stuff barking--I mean, barking--at my window. It was like somebody pounding at a tub. Here I am, headphones on, cap on and everything, and I could hear that stuff exploding right at my window.

Alexander: Did you ever get any hits? I am sure you must have had some hits.

Rucker: Yes, we had several hits. Nobody on the crew was ever injured. We were all very, very lucky.

Alexander: Boy, were you ever!

Rucker: The thing that always mystified me, Bill--and you are probably more familiar with it than I am--is that we were told in our flying schools,

after we got into combat, that flak bursts come in a series of four. One, two, three, four. You would be sitting up there in your cockpit flying. Your flying maybe formation off of [this] guy, or you are flying formation off of [this] guy.

Alexander: Right and left.

Rucker: Yes. You would see a flak burst from here to the end of this room [gesture].

Alexander: About twelve feet.

Rucker: That is the first one you saw, so you knew there were three right behind it. You started gripping that wheel. You know, you can't move when you are flying in formation. You can't deter. You have to stay right in position, but you know that second one is going to be right in your belly. All of a sudden, the rear end of the plane shakes. It bursts behind you, but it never hurt a soul, not in your plane anyway. This is what would cause you at times...I know that I just wanted to give up. I would count them out there. I would count, "One, two, three," and I would think, "Oh, my God! The fourth one is right there!"

Alexander: It has "got my name on it."

Rucker: It has "got my name on it." You would feel the explosion in the rear of the plane. The air would buffle me around. I had engines shot out.

Alexander: You did?

Rucker: Oh, yes.

Alexander: Was this from air combat?

Rucker: It was from flak. I have had hydraulic systems shot out. We didn't know it until the last minute. On your final approach...

Alexander: I was going to say the gears are down, maybe, and the flaps are down...

Rucker: That was all electric. Your wheels came down by electric; your flaps were ran by electric. But you had hydraulic brakes. The SOP on the final approach just before...you are still 500 to 1,000 feet in the air, so you could go around if you had discerned trouble. You touched the top of your pedals, which is where the brakes were located, to see if you had brakes. The pump was right under your seat. You could hear it come on: "Yep. You've got brakes." Well, what it didn't tell you was

that there was a leak beyond. You had brakes when you tested it. As soon as you landed, you pumped a couple of times, and you had pumped all of the fluid out (chuckle).

Alexander: I understand.

Rucker: I have had that experience running down the runway.

Alexander: And no brakes...

Rucker: No brakes. I will never forget this one time when I landed. I held it pretty straight down the runway, but I knew I didn't have any brakes, so I did cut the engines. We started veering off. We were running across the airfield, and the runways and the taxiway would be about a foot or fifteen inches higher than the rest of the plane.

Alexander: Oh, really?

Rucker: Yes. They had a mechanic's shack mounted out there. There were six or eight mechanics watching the "happy" fliers come in from missions, saying things like: "Lucky sons-of-guns! They made it back!" They saw this plane coming at them, and they scattered like this [gesture] because there was no way... (laughter)

Alexander: You were going much too fast.

Rucker: Well, I had slowed down considerably by then. The plane rolled up this little ramp-like thing, and I said, "Oh, I can't make it." It rolled back down and stopped. This "ground-gripper" [non-aviator] captain came by. We were piling out of the plane. He said, "Lieutenant! You're going to have to get this plane out of here!" I said, "Captain, you get the son-of-a-bitch out of here! It doesn't have any brakes!"

Alexander: (Chuckle) It's all yours.

Rucker: (Chuckle)

Alexander: That is pretty terrifying.

Rucker: One time we were coming in. We had been on one of these long missions.

Alexander: Long missions being how long?

Rucker: Ten hours or more. Bill, I have got thirty-one missions. I have got a total of 208 hours worth of missions. Doing a little rough arithmetic, if I had thirty missions, that would be 210 hours. That is seven hours a mission.

Alexander: That is an average of seven hours.

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: That is a long time.

Rucker: Yes. Hell, I can't even stand to ride from here to Memphis on a damned plane anymore. My family... [Tape recorder stopped]

Alexander: We are back on the tape.

Rucker: We were on another one of those ten-hour missions. I don't know which one it was. We had been flying. We had all kinds of...I think we had some head wind going in. This always scared me. In fact, my first trip I made as an observer pilot...

Alexander: Was head wind?

Rucker: We had some head wind when we went to Berlin, but when we got turned around, we only had a third of our fuel left. I looked at the crew commander, and I said, "We've only got a third of our fuel." He said, "That's plenty." We burned it all coming in. We had head winds and our weight of bombs, so we used up all of the gas.

Well, we had been on one of these ten-hour missions. I don't know, but maybe we had head winds. I knew we didn't have above a third

load of fuel in our tanks when we turned around and headed home, but we stayed in formation. You flew and stayed with everybody. I landed and ran out of gas on the runway.

Alexander: Oh, boy! The tailwind was still working then?

Rucker: Yes. I ran out of gas on the runway after I landed. Then the engine began to spit and sputter, and then it finally it quit. Now, there was probably a little bit of gas, but as long as I was level, the gasoline was getting to the pump. But as soon as the plane got in a position like this [gesture]...

Alexander: The back on its tail-dragger, why, that was the end of the fuel.

Rucker: That is right.

Alexander: You didn't have more than about thirty seconds or forty seconds.

Rucker: No, I am glad I didn't have to go around.

Alexander: That is true. Did you have some of that every once in a while? Somebody crashing down on the runway?

Rucker: No, we didn't have anything like that. One of the funniest things that I think that ever happened...we were taking off on a mission. It

is like 5:30 or 5:45 in the morning. This crew was just ahead of me, or a couple or three planes ahead. Man, they are running down the runway, ready to take off, loaded with bombs, full load of fuel. Their right-hand tire blew out. That plane just started scooting and coming around. Again, a bunch of mechanics and people were around this bomb shelter, which was a big, round silo. They were watching everybody. They were watching the "warriors" take off. They looked up and saw this plane coming at them. They scattered like birds. The funny thing about it was--what always got me--they ran out there with two Jeeps, picked up that crew, took them back, put them in another airplane, and they still flew that mission that day. I will never forget that.

Alexander: They thought they had it...

Rucker: They thought they had it made, but they weren't going to get it made.

Alexander: Did they not damage the airplane or anything like that very much?

Rucker: They damaged that one, of course. They got them in another airplane, and away they went.

Alexander: How long did it take to form up?

Rucker: It took about an hour. When I got there, we had divisions. I think three groups or more made a division. But when they started expanding and getting ready for the big push and everything, we could fly a division off of a base. We could have fifty-four airplanes off of our base. Before, you would pick up eighteen from three bases to give you fifty-four. We at one time were putting up fifty-four planes off of our own base. We were a division in itself.

Alexander: Just that base itself was a division.

Rucker: Yes.

Alexander: What is it like to know that you are going up with that many airplanes, and then you've got an overcast that is going to be about 3,000 to 5,000 feet?

Rucker: You just keep flying ahead until you come out above it.

Alexander: What do you do when you are flying ahead? You are flying on one compass heading?

Rucker: Right. You just take off and head until you break out. You climb at 500 or 750 feet a minute until you break out. You got a gauge

that tells you, on your dashboard, that says: "750 feet a minute," or "500," or whatever they tell you to climb until you break out. When you break out, then the guy that you are supposed to team up with is circling up [here] firing red flares. He is the leader.

Alexander: You are doing a pretty good 360-degree turn out there?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: How far up above?

Rucker: We are probably 10,000 to 15,000 feet above the ground.

Alexander: No, I am talking about him. How much higher is he than you when you spot him?

Rucker: He may be 2,000 or 3,000 feet above.

Alexander: Everybody comes on to him?

Rucker: Yes, comes on to him. When he gets everybody lined up, he looks out and counts all these planes. They all check in. Then they head in a southeast direction.

Alexander: Yes, the southeast direction. What were your last three missions? Where did you go?

Rucker: Well, if you can pronounce them... [referring to personal flight log]

Alexander: I probably can't. All of them were in France.

Rucker: Oh, yes.

Alexander: Your last mission was on July 6, 1944.

Rucker: Right. I should mention that while flying my missions I was awarded the Air Medal. I was later awarded it three more times, which is signified by three oak leaf clusters. Furthermore, upon completion of my assigned missions, I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Alexander: So, we really were not even beyond the...

Rucker: We were still on the Cherbourg Peninsula, pretty much, trying to get out of there.

Alexander: We sure were. Tell me...you have something in your hand.

Rucker: Well, my brother always seems to have a lot of time. He has plotted in some of the places. He got himself a map of France.

Alexander: Oh, I see what he has done.

Rucker: He took the number...the way he figured all of this out, he looked on [here] and saw how many hours flying time. Like, for Berlin, he figured that they had nine hours time on that, so then he could do a little computation and

try to find Thionville, which was only five hours and forty-five minutes. He would come back four hours and see if he could find it in that area.

Alexander: I am looking at a map. It is a map of England and a lot of Europe. What are these red marks?

Rucker: Those were bombing points.

Alexander: Bombing points that you went to?

Rucker: Right.

Alexander: I am going to pause a second. [Tape recorder stopped] We are back on tape.

Rucker: It's 250 miles... [referring to map]

Alexander: And 500, I think.

Rucker: Yes, I think that is the way he had got it.

Alexander: That is what that looks like. We are looking at that map. I am trying to think if there is anything else in the combat period we need to talk about. We could talk about girls. Nobody ever does.

Rucker: No, I did not have a girlfriend all during the war. My only girlfriend was my mother. After I finished my missions, I was sent back to the States.

Alexander: How did you get back?

Rucker: We went by boat again. I came back on the USS America, I think it was.

Alexander: That was a good ship.

Rucker: Yes. On the ship we had a bunch of German prisoners. Oh, did they get sick.

Alexander: Yes, well, most people do.

Rucker: Anyway, I was sent to Camp Miles Standish on the East Coast. Who was the guy that wrote the poem "Trees?"

Alexander: Joyce Kilmer.

Rucker: Yes. There was a Camp Kilmer in New Jersey.

Alexander: That is it.

Rucker: I came through Camp Miles Standish at one time or another, then Kilmer one time. Anyway, they sent me to California for rest and rehabilitation. Well, I didn't get much rest. I did get a lot of rehabilitation out there (chuckle).

Alexander: No rest, just "rehab." Whereabouts in California?

Rucker: This was in Santa Monica.

Alexander: Oh, yes.

Rucker: I was out there about a week. Then they sent me to Rapid City, South Dakota. I became what

was known as a combat instructor in B-17 aircraft. That would be from September, 1944, to June, 1945, at which time I got a release from the service.

Alexander: So, you were discharged after that because you were in the Reserve? Did they have a Reserve?

Rucker: No, we didn't have a Reserve then. Anyway, I wanted to fly for commercial airlines. I had gone to all kinds of schools.

Alexander: This was after you were discharged?

Rucker: No, this was before I was discharged. I had my radio and telephone license. I went over here to...where is Texas A & M University?

Alexander: That is in College Station, Texas.

Rucker: Yes, I went to College Station. I learned to fly under instruments. I got one hundred hours of instrument flying. I got what we call a "green card." I had that, so about that time they began to talk about...if you had so many points to get discharged...I counted up and I had ninety-six points. I wanted to go fly for TWA [Trans World Airlines]. I applied and I got out.

Alexander: You applied and got out.

Rucker: I applied to get out of the service. So, I went to TWA, and I said, "Here I am. I want to fly for you folks."

Alexander: Where was this?

Rucker: This was in Kansas City, Missouri.

Alexander: That was their headquarters at that time.

Rucker: Right. They said, "Mr. Rucker, we are glad to see you." I showed him I had my "green card," and I had my radio-telephone license. Everything was right, but he said, "How tall are you?" I said, "If I stretch to beat heck, I can make 5' 6½"." He said, "That's what I thought. We only hire pilots who are 5' 8" or more."

Alexander: That is awful. I remember that. They did.

Rucker: United Airlines was the same way; Continental Airlines was the same way.

Alexander: American Airlines, also?

Rucker: Yes. I tried them all. Nobody wanted me. If you got an application, it is on there: "If you are applying for flight crew and you are not 5' 8", do not complete this."

Alexander: Isn't that awful?

Rucker: Yes, it was. Now, I picked up an article

yesterday in [that] paper, I believe it is.

Alexander: I saw that.

Rucker: They are wanting pilots to beat hell. In fact, they are taking "shorties" and "fatties" now, you know. Did you see that part of it?

Alexander: Not only that...we'll go off line here just a second. [Tape recorder stopped] So, as a result, you didn't get the opportunity to fly. What did you do?

Rucker: I drifted a little bit.

Alexander: Did you? Well, you had a right to do that, didn't you?

Rucker: About this time, I had met a girl I thought I wanted to live with the rest of my life. Her father was a very successful plumbing contractor, so I learned the plumbing business.

Alexander: Oh, is that right?

Rucker: I became a licensed plumber in the state of Colorado. I had to go to Denver and answer questions and take tests--the "whole nine yards."

Alexander: You went back to Colorado, then?

Rucker: Yes. That lasted...I am not a big man. I think plumbing takes a certain brawn to do the

work. It just wasn't for me.

Alexander: It really does.

Rucker: So, I finally quit that and went to work in the feed ingredients business, specifically in dehydrated alfalfa meal.

Alexander: Was this in Denver?

Rucker: No, this was in Lamar. It was the headquarters for this company--National Alfalfa Dehydrating and Milling Company. I worked for them. Then, finally, they sent me to Kansas City in the sales office. Then they sent me to Memphis, Tennessee, to form up a sales office. I was the only salesman.

Alexander: You were it?

Rucker: I was it. I did that for a few years. Finally, they got tired of me, and I got tired of them. I went to work in the fertilizer business. That's what I retired from in 1984--chemical fertilizers.

Alexander: Is that right?

Rucker: I enjoyed it very much. I was always in headquarters. I was in middle management. The particular area I worked in, we worked with competitors, in that we would sell our

competitors their material. If you don't think we made a lot of hits with our own salesman out in the field...we had four "marketing arms," as they called them. We had a foreign export arm; we had a retail arm. We had what we called an "executive account," and we had a chemical account. Well, chemical, national accounts. I was in national accounts. National accounts only sold to great, big companies like Chevron...

Alexander: The "biggies."

Rucker: Yes. Cargill was one of our big customers. Sherman _____ at Cargill would call me: "Dave, I got twelve barges down the Gulf. I will have them at your plant at Donaldsonville the day after tomorrow." "Okay, 'Sherm.' We will take care of them." When you start loading 1,200 tons in each one of those barges...

Alexander: You were a real door-to-door salesman.

Rucker: That is right.

Alexander: What about family? Did you marry this girl?

Rucker: Yes, I married this girl in Lamar, and she and I...

Alexander: What was her name?

Rucker: Her name was Norma Joanne Dougherty. She and I produced three children, two girls and a boy. They are all alive. One daughter lives in Nashville. She has three children--two girls and a boy. The other daughter lives in Memphis. She has two boys. My son is unmarried. He is in Memphis. He is studying. He is getting his doctorate.

Alexander: He has got a very proud papa.

Rucker: That kid has made dean's honor list. He made straight A's. He called me the other night and said, "Dad, that test I had to be back for on July 5, I 'aced' it."

Alexander: That is great.

Rucker: That is what he is doing.

Alexander: Tell me, what about your wife?

Rucker: The one in Memphis? That is the one I divorced.

Alexander: I see.

Rucker: We divorced in 1974. I was living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The company had transferred me from Memphis to Tulsa with the company. I had been to Colorado to see my dad on Father's Day. I came back to Tulsa. A lady who had lived in the apartment complex where I lived had moved

out to another apartment complex. She and I were just buddies. There was nothing between us. She called me and said, "I want you to come over and see my apartment." I said, "Okay, I'll come over." I went over there, and we got to visiting. She said, "Come on, let's go out around the pool and have our drinks." We went out and set around the pool. Up came this delightful young lady that later became my wife. That was Jean.

Alexander: Oh, is that right? [Tape recorder stops abruptly]