

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Nimitz Education and Research Center  
Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

Thomas A. Fitzgerald

Alexandria, VA

February 19, 2015

447<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group

708<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron

8<sup>th</sup> Air Force

Bombardier B-17

Mr. Misenhimer:

My name is Richard Misenhimer, today is February 19, 2015. I am interviewing Mr. Thomas A. Fitzgerald by telephone. His phone number is 703-548-8376. His address is 311 Pitt Street South, Alexandria, Virginia, 22314. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Nimitz Education and Research Center, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Tom I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today.

Mr. Fitzgerald:

I'm anxious to get it done.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Yes, I did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the first thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the museum to make sure this is okay with you.

*"Agreement Read"*

Is that okay with you?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Yes, I thought you might just want to get my background to get started with and then we could talk about the war.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, I've got a few other things to do if you don't mind here.

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Whatever you want, I mean it's your job, not mine.

Mr. Misenhimer:

The next thing I'd like to do is get an alternative contact. We find out several years down the road we try to get back in contact with a veteran he's moved or something. Do you have a son or daughter or someone we could contact, if we needed to, to find you?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Well yes I've got quite a few contacts. Actually right now I'm in a place where I'm not, I'm not going to move unless I go to a hospital or something because I'm 91 years old and I have two caregivers that are with me 24/7. And whether or not I need both of them, then one is for three days and one of them is for five days or six to four days I mean -- seven days.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941 do you recall .....

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Of course that was, that was after the World War II, my World War II is over in Europe.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now tell me about your World War II, what all did you do in World War II?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Well I volunteered, I was not drafted. I was just a couple of years out of high school and I applied for what do you call it, pilot, anyway, flying school. Anyway, so I passed the test at the place there in California, the Torrance area. I was one of the first ones that was not college boys, however an awful lot of college boys didn't pass. And then I was a given position as a Private in the Army waiting to report to Santa Anna, California Army Air Force Base for preflight school. And the Air Corp had been changed, by that time the Air Corp had been changed to Air Force during that waiting period. Preflight was tough, more testing took place, more testing took place, more rigorous academic and physical tests, spent three hours on two separate occasions—it'd be screening by a psychologist for a battery of tests. And that's where the combination of Army basic training and of course we got three hours a day for classes. Preflight lasted ninety days and those of us who remained anxiously awaited our next assignment. Turned out though

that there's an awful lot of them didn't remain. So anyway the next assignment I had was going ahead and starting in the school, the bombardier school. It was the Norden Bomb Sight. I was there in bombardier school for all of the time from then on. And I really wanted to be a pilot so I was a little bit disappointed but I found out later that we were chosen ahead of time (laughter) by other things that they saw on our record. And that the bombardiers were actually..., everybody was high class as a pilot or navigator. So then after that I went from the Santa Ana training to Kirtland Field in Albuquerque, New Mexico and spent that rest of the time in bombing practice. And we had a black powder charge in the nose of the bomb and so you could see where the bombs fell. We always had a target of ..., a target day or night. And we used the combat instructors and bombardier cadets. Each cadet when not bombing would be taking pictures through the hole in the floor where the aircraft could see the other's results. And our course was to drop 200 bombs with an average circular area of less than 220 feet from a center called the shack. My CE was 189 feet, about the middle of the class. Some 20% washed out at Kirtland. Wash out wasn't so bad anymore because most got an opportunity to be an Air Force ground officer. Wash out at Santa Ana would put you back in the enlisted pool. We dropped our practice bombs at 500, 1000, 5000 feet and 10,000 foot elevations. Since ground level at Kirtland was 5300 feet most of our practice was with oxygen masks. This makes it a little harder to use the bombsight but we were better trained and readier for the real world than those who had lower elevation bombardier schools. On July 10<sup>th</sup> I received my wings and a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant's commission, so this July 10<sup>th</sup> of 1942 I think it was. I don't have a date right here, cause it was 1943 when I reported to Europe in action. And I get a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant's commission. Reported to Moses Lake Air Force Base in Washington for ten days. Oh just incidentally, while I was at Kirtland I met my wife-to-be Mary Helen Hein, the daughter of an Oklahoma wheat farmer, who was employed as a secretary at the Albuquerque National Bank. At Moses Lake we were assigned to a B-17 crew in process of formation. The pilot, whose name I didn't recall, was relieved of duty because of serious spells of hiccups and sneezing. And in one case almost crashed the plane. The co-pilot, Charles Hopla, was elevated to the pilot seat and remained our

pilot throughout the war. As a bombardier I had little responsibility at Moses Lake except to act as the navigator who was on several longer missions and did not join us until a few months later. All the bombardiers were trained and given dead-reckoning certifications at bombardier school. I used this capability many times in the future. Just after, I'm reading this now, just after the Labor Day 1943 our crew, having been fully assembled, was sent with our own group to Harvard, Nebraska for our group training. We now flew as a team for another two months. And then we were moved off to, well we went to England. Now I went a different way I would..., most of the pilots would go by airplane and some of the other people too, but key ground officers had to go along with them. And a good number of us went by train to New York and spent a couple of days there trying to get on the first voyage of the Queen Elizabeth I across the Atlantic Ocean and then over to Iceland. And we get over to Scotland at the..., let's see what's that place, well anyway it doesn't matter, anyway in the Scotland area and caught a train and went down to a place in the southeast, now let's see there was a place called Rattlesden. It was a new base, just newly formed. Fact it was not even more than three-quarters finished when we got there, so we had to help them. And the, this is out of line here, you know this is out of line, way out of line. But anyway that time we were first there we had some crack ups of course and then the first mission was late in 1943. We left the uh, a day before Christmas in 1943 and that was an easy mission. And then we flew a few no-ball flights, I don't know if you remember or if you're familiar with no-ball, but no-ball was a flight with those Germans along the coast of France and they were rocket planes or rocket flights—launch sites for the V-1's and V-2's. And they shot these rockets up over the channel and into the British territory. And you..., we were doing one-on-one and one of the first ones we went on was at 12,000 feet and I was the lead bombardier and we had a hard time because we got smashed with a few anti-aircraft shots at that altitude. And we had the group in a row, anyway the first eight, then the second eight, the third eight. The third eight got into heavy flak, they lost about oh three or four people and had lots of damage, in other words, had damage to the planes. We only had a couple of flak shots into the Groundpounder, it didn't bother anything. And the next time we went on anything

consequential was the—"baby it's cold outside" is what I call it. We went on a mission, that was sort of a diversion mission, the main mission of the Air Force at that time was—so groups would go do salvo to the north central part of the enemy area. And then we went up to do the mission in, where the hell is that damn thing there, you take this roughly we gotta get it straight with the airplane then. Anyway we went, the first mission, that was a no-ball mission, then we went to the one was "baby it's cold outside" where's that at? (paper shuffling). Okay. Anyway we were pretty green and we went to bomb the Kiel Canal. The altitude was 24,000 feet, the temperature was -72 degrees Fahrenheit and B-17s are unheated. So this is our second mission and our first deep penetration. And we were so green that some of us decided to leave the electric slippers and then wear our fleece lined boots outside and then put on our GI shoes. So we did this so we could have our shoes on in case we had to bail out. Now this was the wrong mission you know to test this theory since most of the flight was never over the North Sea, it was not never, so it was over the North Sea. So the sea was rough and I don't think the temperatures were addressed at the briefing. But we paid for it and stayed busy for about four and a half hours breaking the ice in our oxygen masks, stamping our feet and playing patty-cake. The downside to this story, our ball turret gunner came back with severe frostbitten feet. So it wasn't a good mission. But that wasn't meant we didn't have any problems from airplanes or fighters. And then the..., oh the no-ball, I mentioned that mission, that no-ball mission was raised at 18,000 feet up and we were bombing previously at 12,000 feet. And anyway we flew missions that were conducted during the winter time and this is the early part of the war, the early war in Europe. And our commander was a pretty good guy because he only let us fly on days on which we could see the ground. They were bad flights trying to fly through clouds and almost got shot. But we never did do that, up to that time. But then about a month or two later Jimmy Doolittle or General James Doolittle of the China or Japan fame where he finally got out his, about 29 others got out of ..., and came back and I heard he was then trying to come to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. And his taking over was just completely different, I mean he was out there shooting the place up, but he didn't care how many planes were lost. Anyway Doolittle said that

the bombers were the bait and fighters were to do the job and he didn't care how many bombers were shot down or fighters either one. And we're gonna go out there and blow the German Air Force out of the air.

March 31, 1944, I would say that it was a pretty serious one for us because we knew we were in trouble because Rattlesden was socked in – ceiling about ten feet. Eight planes got off, including ours. And so we flew up there because by the time we got up to 6,000 feet or so why the flight was cancelled. But for those of us who'd already gone in the air we were told to keep on flying, well we're going get you another target. And so we did that, we got to 29,000 feet and they told us which target we're supposed to get and then it was about 3,000 feet higher than the B-17s could fly. But we just tried to bust through and try to—we couldn't keep up with people or they couldn't keep up with us or we couldn't go in any direction because it was \_\_\_\_\_ us. And we couldn't look at a \_\_\_\_\_ so that makes sense, so okay we'll have to call this off. Go out to the North Sea and drop your bombs and try to find, you know a way back. So we went out far enough to make sure we went past the coastline and dropped our bombs and we turned around and came back towards England. And we were pretty north now, we were incredibly north now. It turned out a little later we got a call that said there's a RAF base 125 miles or so north of us. What we had to do, we were looking for landings. So we headed towards that base and well we found it and we got there and then of course we had instructions from the base that we were supposed to go around the frontline a certain direction. And then when we came to land on the runway why there would be a big light which would direct us down the runway. Well we got to the frontline and we got to the light and just after we got to the light the lights went out. Now the base was closed and we should turn around and go the opposite direction. And find our own way out towards our own bases to the south and the east. So we did. But on the way out we were hit by, not hit by but we were \_\_\_\_\_, I mean our distance was not more than a hundred feet and we finally saw another B-17 in the other direction coming in to the place, not knowing that it had been coming in and we missed its tail by anywhere from, well it was hard to say but by my opinion it was about 100 feet and we went

right over it. And that's when I got on the phone to the pilot, I said, "Pull up, pull up, pull up, pull up!" Well he pulled up a little bit, but not very much. But we actually made it by I'd say oh twenty or thirty feet above the tail, we missed him. If we'd had hit him of course we'd knock them one way and we'd gone the other way and nobody would have been saved. So then after that we went on our own again in a general direction of Rattlesden. We got hold of Rattlesden, and Rattlesden said there was a thin break in the clouds, 8000 feet if you get in there. And we headed towards Rattlesden and they said we'll try to talk you in from there. So we did.

And we got back to Rattlesden and felt—well we did pretty good, we got a couple of hours, nine hours or so on our instruments. Then we turned and landed in Rattlesden. Whoop-to-do. We were in real good shape. Well we did find out something that kind of surprised us, the ground crew came along a little later in a truck and they stayed there long enough for the you know, the crew chief in charge of the airplane on the ground had checked out the tanks. And we had four engines and we had fifteen gallons, well that wouldn't have carried us very far, at least 75, 80 feet, 100 feet I don't know but we'd still be on the ground.

Meantime we did a lot of other things and we were pretty lucky because the people got shot down, our bombers got shot down in Germany; at that time they were always from the lower part of the mission, the lower group. And they would come in up underneath and shoot, and before the tail gunner or the ball turret gunner could even see them. So they would come right up there underneath them and shoot them and then they would bring a lot of them down. But anyway we never got too many of those missions and if they were, they were what we called "milk runs".

So we had good luck.

Then of course a few weeks later why we were sent on a flight to Berlin on March the 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

We flew all the way from our base at home across the..., parts of the flak area with a lot of anti-aircraft. The flak in the area of Berlin and guess what? The Germans had a pretty fast fighter plane and it was very close to home and it didn't need a whole lot of you know, replenishing of fuel like our fighter planes did and had to come over there. I mean we have P-47's and the older ones and the ones that had less distance, about a third of the way of the

P-38's. A P-51 which was a fast one was in the area of the German fighters as well. Anyway the German fighters came down from the top. They came from above us instead of below us and they came down and they were back and forth, back and forth, up and down just shooting all the way and the only chance we had of shooting them was by accident. Of course they didn't get too many of our planes, but they got down to where the lead group was. They crashed it, but they took out the wing leader and his high squadron leader and five or six other airplanes in the lead group. They were right below us because we were in the high group, in the front, in the front of the whole flight. I was the high group bombardier. So I now was in charge of bombing Berlin. Well I got to Berlin and we could see it, the town and what not, and we're flying along pretty good and probably about six or eight miles out of downtown. And then the pilot came on and said, "Drop your bombs, drop your bombs." I said, "Sir we're not there yet." And he said, "Drop them anyway, we're leaving." (laughter) So we took a big diving circle around and went around and then we were separated and finally we got ourselves back together. And we were now at a lower elevation than the other airplanes and pretty soon another group came, General Timberlake. And General Timberlake told us he would take over the air flight and bring us back to England. General Timberlake's navigator found most of the big target areas of flak; flak targets right across the rear area which was very heavily guarded because all the German's stuff was made there, most of it at least. And this was the area of high activity of industry in the area. And however, such as it was, we moved over. I don't remember being pleased with Timberlake and the people behind us, in front of us I mean, you know the flak. But they asked what was the reason there was not too many..., but we didn't lose anybody. Well we did have some pretty good flak inside the airplane, but we got home alright. And we had all kinds of chances to be shot down on that trip. We were recognized again, and being second was better than being first, that was preferred. So we got on back and we were in our revetment and had a lot of work to do on the airplane it was shot up, the real harm that we had. And anyway the funny part was that Timberlake got a Silver Star for his bravery and skill leading the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force back from Berlin. And my answer was, "Who said the Army was fair?" So anyway it's my personal

opinion, that's not meaning anything major.

But then we had some friendly fire that could be deadly too. This one time we were just leaving the coast out on a mission, we had some new pilots with us. We headed towards Munster and while performing test firing of guns on B-17's in our group, at least one guy peeled out of formation on fire. Some of our people, not our plane, but a group of planes and I'm not implying anybody. These guys that got shot, they all bailed out safely. But the RAF Air-Sea Rescue only saved the last two, which was the pilot and co-pilot which had been given a better spotting because they were the last out of the plane. The other guys had already drifted north on the North Sea, they were ten, fifteen miles away and separated into several groups and not found. We were on standby crew one time. A standby crew was a crew that is there to replace another crew who might have to abort the mission for one reason or another. It'd be sometimes power failure. And so we were there and the other guys were just taking off. And of course then we had extra time to get our plane ready for them to take over if they needed too. And we redo the bombs and all that kind of stuff and it was dark, it was earlier in the morning. And so we, so they got back just in time. With these guys the pilot was a Lieutenant Hudson. And he was very good about this whole thing because a lot of pilots would have taken a little time to fool around a little bit and get back after we've got to take off as their replacement. Well anyway, they got back and they got there and got out and we got out of the plane, we were checking it all through and what not. They were back and the bomb loaders were newcomers. They came after the airplane took off and it was dark and then it was kind of all mixed up they weren't a regular bunch anyway. And turned out that there was a German spy in there who didn't have a bomb he had another explosive that he stored way up, jammed up in the wheel well. Plane took off the ground and the wheels folded in underneath the plane. And so we didn't know that was there, we didn't look at it, we couldn't see anything in that area, it wasn't a bomb like other bombs were anyway. So that was, it was just taking off and we went back to change our clothes and all of sudden we heard a terrific explosion. Our crew was still around watching for a truck and saw it all. We just heard it all. The replacement plane blew up in mid-air about 100

feet above, a third of a mile beyond the take-off runway. Of course I say, "There but for the Grace of God go I." There are several concerns about this and we never got blamed for it though because we didn't have a chance, we had to work real fast and what not. But they had spotted a German saboteur who they apprehended at the bomb storage area depot who had a smaller bomb, one that they could put in that kind of a place instead of the bomb bay. And we preflighted the airplane and checked the engine and all that sort of stuff. But we didn't do any good for the Hudson crew. So that was where we were lucky, again.

Then on Easter Sunday, we said, "what do you mean this one doesn't count?" We were surprised and shocked that they were considering a mission today. Rattlesden was socked in. The ceiling was about ten feet and a mission to Ludwigshafen was scheduled. We did not even take it seriously. Surely the mission would be cancelled. And sure enough it was after eight planes including ours had taken off. Our orders were to follow the mission and form up above the clouds, oh that's alright I've already talked about that one. I'll let that go, that was the same one that we missed the B-17's tail.

On April 13<sup>th</sup> the mission to Augsburg was the hairiest of all for the Groundpounder and its crew. I did not make this one since it was a severe case of bronchitis. I will still relate the day as it was told to me since it's kind of interesting. Just a few seconds after bombs away, the Groundpounder took flak which knocked out two engines on the left side. They could not keep up with the formation, they had to come back home alone as a cripple. As mentioned this is not a good situation. They were very soon joined by two FW-190's. Instead of dispatching the Groundpounder in short order, the Germans decided to toy with it. They flew back and forth a little out of range, feinted passes and then came swooping down the left side of the engines, the engine's feathered side for a full deflection pass. The 20mm shells were popping like Chinese New Year and while scoring some hits no serious damage was done and the crew was left unscathed. They repeated this twice more with the same lack of success. The third pass they broke away immediately aft, giving Tail Gunner Fant a straight shot and he downed one of them, the only confirmed kill by the Groundpounder crew. The other FW-190 left. About ten minutes

of respite and some more German fighters were spotted. But before they could engage the Groundpounder two P-38's swooped in. One flew under each wing and escorted the Groundpounder to the North Sea. They flew back with their wheels down and flaps up for about forty minutes, angels of mercy. I have mixed feelings about missing that one.

Anyway, April 24. Oh this is the one that we..., this is my mission. We went to that, April 24, 1944 was a beautiful spring day, we were headed for Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance about ten miles from Switzerland to bomb a Messerschmitt factory which was a main maker of the jet planes. Jet planes had kind of been in Germany for a few months before and they had moderate success. Because they had problems getting off the ground, once they got off the ground they could get up to altitude, but they had to dip down, they had to make a dip in the runway to get it launched to get up off the ground and get it air borne. And of course they had American fighters not having any jet, would still be down there at the low altitude and then shoot these guys down before they got up reasonably high in the air. So that stopped that, but these were much better, these were—never worry about getting off the ground. Of course we didn't know all of this ahead of time. But we found out about it. For the factory was, well actually we were headed for Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance about ten miles from Switzerland to bomb Messerschmitt plane factory. Well okay. Factory was on an airfield just east of town. It consisted of a main factory east which was where the runway and the hangars and the outfitting shops, and the outfitting shops were on the west side. The outfitting shops of course was where the more recent planes go and where they show up and can be flying above ground. But anyway we flew to the target with the wing, but separated prior to the IP with each of the three groups. Now this was a very—group that never got reported in any paper that I know of; had its own target. The lead group was to hit the hangar sounds like, which is the most important one on the west side or near side. The following high and low group was to go over that to hit the main factory. I should think that this is a very high priority target since it was believed that the threatening ME-262 jets were being assembled in the factory, outfitted in the hangar complex. Assembled in the factory and outfitted in the hangar complex. The lead

group was led by a Wing Commander, Brigadier General. Nobody knows his name. The following groups were led by their respective group commanders, ours Colonel Harris. And we were flying the lead group with the high squadron 708<sup>th</sup> which was supposed to be the target of the factory. And I was the back-up bombardier of our group. And we watched amazed that the lead group missed the target by a good mile, confused by smoke screen generating boats in the lake, and dropped their bombs in the lake, water. So the hangar complex got off scot-free or so they thought. I was ready to take over if need be because I was flying the high group bombardier and I was ready to take over in my turn to come. And I was there and I had the bomb site zeroed in and we had pictures that showed the air bombs dropping in the water. So the hangar complex got off scot-free or so they thought. And I was ready to take over if need be, the bombsight was zeroed in on the factory target. My bombsight was zeroed in on the factory target. Our track however took us directly towards the hangar complex. And about five seconds before bombs away I got off my sight and took hold of the manual salvo lever. Flak was heavy but no fighters appeared. We did have a good fighter cover of our own. After about three seconds before the bombs away a large chunk of flak hit our Plexiglas nose making a hole the size of a coffee cup and of course I was hit with shards of the Plexiglas. And about 2/3 of the group dropped on me, cause I was already in the back there from the front of the plane. So the other third dropped on the leader, leader of the front or the rear. As luck would have it my bombs and those of my cohorts hit the hangar complex as good or better than if we were aiming at it. The leader's bombs hit the factory squarely as did the following group below us. So now we had destroyed a very important thing and it has never been reported in anything I've ever seen. And for good reason. Anyway I was pretty proud of what happened, I don't know, I didn't do that on purpose, I mean I just did it because of my reaction. And I just had my hand up there and on some button and I just pushed it, the thing backwards and dropped the bombs. And about fifteen or so airplanes did the same thing and we smashed it to pieces. So we destroyed the target that we needed to destroy. But it turned out that the..., when we went back to the..., and we found out when we got back there at Rattlesden, at the base, that the General was now

claiming that he hit our target, the one that hit the water. I mean it hit the water, the crew hit the water, he didn't hit it himself. And this was going on, so Colonel Harris says, "We can't let this go we're going to go...."

(End of side 1 of tape.)

(Begin side 2 of tape.)

Mr. Fitzgerald:

We got hold of General LeMay and you know they said, "Well the General says he already bombed it, you say you did too?" And he said, "Well there's something wrong here, we've got pictures and they apparently don't or don't want to show them." He says, "Well you better come up and see me, I'll call the General and some of his crew and you, your crew and we'll take a look at things." Well what happened then was..., actually I was in the Officer's Club sort of celebrating with a few drinks and my Colonel came in and said, "Son we're going to go to General LeMay of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in the morning and you and I are going to go and tell him our story." So we went and incidentally when we went the General was just about to leave, but we heard somebody or someone says, "General where are your pictures?" He said, "The people behind you that came to talk about their side of the story—they have pictures." "Oh," he says, he forgot them. Anyway, so okay dismissed. Very quick. So the General walked out a little bit later without being under control and I don't know what his name was, nobody knows now. And he left and they called us in and he says, "Well tell us your story." And we told him our story and he says, "Are you supposed to have pictures, do you have pictures?" "Yes, we have pictures." We leave the pictures out there and there was plain as day the General pictured off to our right was in the water, where the Germans had the boats. Happened that way I'm sure the fact that the Germans had their little boats that came by making smoke screens, and the General's crew, he and some of the others had decided that that must be the target because they knew which one was the most important target and that was gonna be it because they wouldn't have smoke screens above other targets, necessarily. Well anyway it was right at the lake edge and it wasn't where the buildings were on the inside, about oh six or seven hundred feet and this

is all pretty close together, and we could see the bombs and of course we could also see our own bombs and where they hit by my reaction. And so when General LeMay said, "Well listen I hear that you boys are right, first of all this is an extremely important target, extremely important." He emphasized that several times. "And I'm so glad that somebody hit it." And he said, "Obviously the General's people would like to take credit, but they don't deserve it." And he said, "And of course you probably think you'd like to take credit, but you did it all by accident. So therefore I just have to say that we're glad it happened, but if you want to make anything in this man's war you gotta stop flinching, I don't know this reacting business, you flinched. Dismissed." Okay, that was that. But that..., also if one stops to think about it, was only in the four or five months, six months before the D-day and the..., both planes were super jets, better than anything they had so far. And if they had gone down flying across the channel on D-day they could have massacred..., I mean D-day was bad enough as it was. And it was gonna be a complete disaster, there was no going in to France with that airplane, with two or three hundred of these planes, of the new jets, would go to low level and just strafing the heck out of them. So there's no question in my mind that my action handle drop actually saved D-day. But that's my opinion and nobody can prove it, one way or the other. But anyway the thing of it is, is that mission has never been reported. And I..., oh fifteen or so years back put it in the Library of Congress for discussion of this, just like I'm doing to you now. And so there was never anything ever reported, nobody ever commented on it. So it was never commented on cause I was watching for them. And so that was an accidental experience, but it was one that was extremely important and I don't know how you rate those in..., just one of those war things that happen. A lot of things happened in the war were by accident or by some strange thing going on. And after that why I had only one more mission to go and so I did; and it was a small mission to go to a place in Belgium. And it was an easy mission, it was like a "milk run" except for one thing, another group flew right around us, just above us and we had to turn around and re-start the bomb run. And from oh, three or five miles further back we see the anti-aircraft at the target. And while the first group, I don't know what happened to them, but they were out of the way

when we got on our bomb run, and so here I was the bombardier thing and I was flying straight on to where we're supposed to go and the first thing you know we lost two planes. And uh oh, here's our last mission. How terrible can that be? Anyway it turned out that even though we lost a couple of planes why we..., I did make it out and we're thankful we got back on the base at Rattlesden. We drank beer and what not to celebrate.

And then, another one or two stories and then I'll quit. The next story was the fact that I was..., well everybody was going back, I could have gone home after thirty missions. And I decided..., my Colonel was my friend, the guy that we did all this stuff with, and he decided well why don't we just put in for a while on the ground crew—be a non-flying officer. So I said, "Well, that sounds pretty good." I didn't want go to Japan anyway and that would have been in the books if I had gone home at that time. So I spent another oh six, seven weeks, I can't remember exactly how long, working with them and getting the flights going. In other words we had flights that were coming up and we had to make sure the planes were ready and make sure the troops were ready and get them up out of bed at a certain time of the day, and get them to the place where the airplanes flew from, out to the place where the hardstands, where the planes were. So you know there's two of us each with a squadron. So they have 90 planes in a squadron, (that's) why there were two of us for 90, they all knew where the flight—of course where they were going, some of the group was going. And we got that done, and what not and from..., every week though we got a..., somebody, one person had to take care of the whole thing. So I was on duty that night and I stayed up all night, 6:00 in the morning finally got everybody settled and where they're supposed to be and got in the bed and took a nap. I'd been up all night. And all of a sudden a couple of hours later, about 8:00, why I heard an awful lot of commotion outside the Quonset hut. And I saw the corporal out on duty, he was on duty actually, but he didn't have to work much, and I said, "What in the world goes on out there?" He said, "Oh sir, we were bombed last night, didn't you know?" "We were bombed last night?" But somehow this wasn't an ordinary bomb, this was a bomb that the Germans had and they called it "butterfly bomb."

Which was about 25 feet from my bed. More like a large three and a half, four-foot grenade with

markings in it that's scored to provide shrapnel. And it had a..., there was about a three or four-foot high, about one and a half, two-foot diameter at the middle, rounded up at both ends where it came to a point. What happened was it had a little, a propeller on top of it so it was kind of on a stick too, it was a propeller stick coming down through the bottom and into a place where the bomb stuck with of course a knife edge into the ground. And so then it was about thirteen of those that dropped that day and all twelve other ones exploded with very little damage to anybody. I think one or two guys got small..., fingers, hands, or toes, whatever it is they might have gotten stuck with. But anyway when it landed, the firing pin wasn't down all the way, hit the firing pin and nothing happened. And another lucky break. Nobody was really touching anything, they were just looking at it, trying to see how this happened. So then later on I went to the place where the munitions were taken care of and what not and the guy said, "Oh yeah, let me show you this." And he showed it. "What happened?" "Well this thing it came down, hit the firing pin, but the firing pin didn't go down because somebody had stuffed it full of material that kept it from hitting it." And so they say well this is from a place in occupied Czechoslovakia by the Germans. The thing actually was not detonated and so somebody stuffed it full of material and this was one of the major plants in Czechoslovakia which was a place where lots of munitions were made. And it was under German control at that time. So I was really saved by some Czech who was working for the Germans in the..., that's where these bombs were made. Saved my fanny from at least if not death at least bad serious wounds.

So and that was almost my last one. There was another one somewhere along the line. That will be in the paper I write you, but anyway. Then after that, why I did return to the United States and went to Santa Monica, California to get re-briefed and what not. Decided to..., well I got married at the time, just after it. And then we had a little honeymoon and then we went to see my parents. And her relatives. And then I was transferred to San Angelo, Texas with the idea that I was gonna go to a sort of a bombardier training school. I got there and I was there about three weeks, but I was smart enough that when I was in Santa Monica, I asked to see if I could go into pilot training. Then after three weeks I was taken in to pilot training. And I went to first

Lackland, then to SAAC in San Antonio and here I was an officer going to pilot school. There were about twenty of us and there were about three times that many, sixty or so in the cadets. So we didn't have anything to do, except go there and play cards and what not. And then report every day at the least there. I was clear across town from Brooks, the big airfield in San Antonio which was military. Right after that I went to Chickasha, Oklahoma there, but I was always serious being an officer. So we went to Texarkana but initially went to a place called Chickasha, Oklahoma. At Chickasha I learned to fly an airplane, a Stearman. And did all kinds of standard rolls and rolled turns and all that kind of stuff. And actually was pretty, pretty good. And I go from there and went to a place in Perrin, Texas the very north where Texas and Arkansas and everything else come together. And the training and the next stage, the next three months stage was called the middle stage anyway. Learned how to do..., well learned how to fly an airplane by ourselves and also fly in formations, and fly at night with our instruments, and all kinds of things. There were other guys who spun around and landed and what not in the dirt. But I had no problems, I mean I was pretty good with it. I really do think I should be a fighter pilot, but no I would regret it, had been with bombers for a long time so I thought well I better just stay in. That's my first background. So I did that and I went to Enid, Oklahoma then for that. And I went through the first three months and I went the next three months and I got my set of wings. They weren't pilot's wings, they were just wings so that I could fly an airplane without having have anybody over my shoulder. So about that time there I got, I can't remember what it was, I thought it was pneumonia but it might have been something else. And I was sick for about ten days or more. And so then I was set back again, I had to go and repeat the three months that I was already in, to get to the end. And after that time I was, first thing you know I was..., I got into it and was about half way into the final to get my pilot's wings and all that kind of stuff and that's when the atomic bomb got dropped on Japan and pretty soon our General, forgot his name now, but anyway, I know it very well but I'm forgetful now at my age. And the war was over. We just stop right then and there. And of course everything was shut down. No more school, no more this, no more that, we just all shut down and waited for what to do next. And so I decided

I'd go ahead and serve as a pilot and so I had to go through a whole bunch, about six or seven different consultations with different people to prove to them that I was really a good pilot and I would like to stay a pilot, even after they decided how many more pilots they needed. Okay. And they said okay. Well sign me up. Well we'll get that done in about six or seven days. But one day for ten weeks, interviewed me and then I was told, "Okay well sir we got you on board and all you got to do is come down here once every Wednesday at about 10:00 and look at the bulletin board. If your name is on it you're in, if your name is not on it, then come back next Wednesday." So I came back about ten Wednesdays and I decided finally this is not getting me anywhere at all. So I decided to go back and then after that I opted back out. Another bunch of same going through the same routine except for getting out or getting in. And it was that time that I started wanting to go to college and so I did. I went to Albuquerque cause that was where I started out in bombardier school and I knew the area, New Mexico pretty well. And my wife-to-be at the time actually worked at the Albuquerque National Bank. So I went to the registrar, said oh yeah we can take you. The University of New Mexico at that time was very good in some subjects, one of which was geology. And I was interested in geology and that kind of operation. And so I checked that and they had a seven person all..., well \_\_\_\_\_ partial or anything like that, but seven people, faculty of the department. We all flew with the \_\_\_\_\_, he went to Yale, and the second one, this other one went to Harvard, and then there was one went to Columbia, I think it was, and then finally we got another one went to Cal-Tech and I liked him very much because he was kind of my kind of guy, California. And so I said, "Well that sounds pretty good, I have two places else I want to look at, but if I don't find it I'll surely be happy to come back with you." So then I went out to California. I went to Cal-Tech and they gave me a test and what not. And said well we'll accept you except for one thing you didn't finish—well anyway triangulation, what not, it was in high school. So you go back and take one semester of high school and then we'll put you on. So that was just..., as far as I was concerned that was just the sorriest thing because I'd already done all the triangulations anybody wanted in the bombardier period. And so we were all sore, it was a little \_\_\_\_\_ just \_\_\_\_\_ any reason

to tell anybody you couldn't, you'd have to wait or something like that was \_\_\_\_\_.

So then I went to UCLA and they said oh yeah we'll take you too, but you better check out one thing. So I went to UCLA and I found out that the UCLA campus which was at that time was composed a large part with about three big buildings, 600 feet long, 250 feet wide, all for school work. The other buildings were smaller and were for sororities and fraternities and smaller little things. So I went there and they said well let me show you what it's like. And so we went there and we got there a little bit early and pretty soon we found out that -- the halls were full of people. They were about..., the halls themselves were probably about 150 feet wide and it had people on both sides and of course we went and saw what the classroom was like, forty or fifty people. And when the bell rang the first guys got out into the halls and they had to take down the things that the professor was using, the solar charts and their explanations and what not. And then the..., well the one \_\_\_\_\_ this little thing that you put your light on and had to put all those things back against the wall and when he was through, which was about five minutes or so, why another bell rang and out come the people from the classrooms. And the classrooms there were 300 feet long or more, maybe 600 feet long, anyway they were half the hallway would go out one side and the other half go out the other side. And then the same thing was happening when the classroom emptied. And then of course the next thing I knew, was watch one more time and they all came in. The classrooms all came in and so then they got all the seats, they had to be \_\_\_\_\_ order, you couldn't just take one \_\_\_\_\_ wait and I said, "Oh \_\_\_\_\_ in the classroom?" "Oh you gotta be there -- Johnny-on-the-spot." And then the next thing that happened was, well then people coming in \_\_\_\_\_ in the hall and would get there and they'd pull their chairs out and they would get the helper, the leader, the professor get his set up and they would start their classes again. Now I think, "This is a heck of a way to go to school. I don't want to go to school this way." It's back to New Mexico for me. So then I went back and I got a degree for geology at the University of New Mexico. And was immediately, and this was not the best of times, immediately picked up by the Humble Refining Company, which is now called the Exxon-Mobile Company. And I spent about thirty

years with them and then I retired here lately, no think it was 1979 or something like that and went to work for World Bank. Worked there for..., they had a retirement age, 65 or something like that, yeah 65. And so at age 65 I had to retire again and then I still had some jobs with the World Bank but I often worked for myself. And I did work for myself and then decided in about 1979 when I just retired from everything and got my pensions. Now I'm a..., I've taken some falls, tumbled and did some bad things to my face and nose and other places, and hands. And so finally I got up and now I'll just have my family come and help out but they didn't..., they could but they weren't really prepared to take care of somebody. So then that happened and now I'm in what they call full-time nursing care; so I have ladies who assure that I don't fall down or anything like that. But I can't even get out of the house without getting permission. Unless they're with me and they can walk with me to or someplace with them, hold hands and keep a good tight hold on me. And so I'm not in a very good position to be any..., with anybody but myself any further.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Hey Tom that's an interesting story, you've told me a good story there.

Mr. Fitzgerald:

But anyway that's the end of it. Now I'm feeling pretty good, I'm getting around alright, I hurt myself and I'm still a little bit..., I'm not free to just do whatever the heck I want to do, that's why—but that doesn't bother me anymore, I'm used to this. This has been going on now for two years.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How many total missions did you fly over there?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

About thirty missions.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Thirty, okay. And what bomb squadron were you in?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

447. I was in 447<sup>th</sup> , 708<sup>th</sup> squadron, it was the Groundpounder and I named it.

Yes, that's the first one, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now did your squadron lose many planes?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Well we were very lucky at the time. Now of course as the war went on why we lost less and less planes. About the time the war was actually changing. Why we had 20% that made it through the war, about 20% nobody was in prison, nobody was harmed by..., anyway harmed by the things that happened to them. And 20% of 100% that went over there. We went over there as a single group and so, and then some of them finished faster than I did because I had a late mission that I had to finish up on which was the one I mentioned about it. So things get in our way and making it a little bit nasty for a guy who was anxious to get his last mission over with. We had quite a few close calls and what not, but none of us in..., you know 20% of us, 1/5 of us at least finished with flying colors and that was—some of them were in German prison camps, some of them had suffered injuries and others were killed in action.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What would you consider your most frightening time?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Oh gosh. They're all about the same. I think one of the most frightening time was the time that the..., these guys, actually I was so worried about the guys that did get killed that we were the plane that was supposed to substitute for them if they didn't get off on time. And we would have been blown to smithereens with that, if they hadn't got off on time and we had to take their place. And then of course the one where we almost missed the..., had the 29,000 feet thing and all the time wondering when Doolittle decided he wanted to up the war. And so you know there were a lot of close calls and that was about it, but any one of those close calls, I don't know how many were close calls we didn't recognize. There could be some close calls that we didn't even know were happening to us.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever hear Axis Sally on the radio?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Oh, no I guess I've heard of her but I'm not quite sure what I know about her. You know my memory is going downhill, not fast, I don't have Alzheimer's whether or not. But I can think of many things, but often times when I want to tell somebody about them—they leave me.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What date were you discharged?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

I don't know exactly, I actually was in college when I went on the G.I. Bill. That was not considered to be on the service, but afterwards I was still for some reason served in the inactive Reserves. And the first thing they did, well about a year after that, why they moved me from being a bombardier to an intelligence officer. And then it went on for another four or five years and I was with Exxon those times and they wanted to bring me back, I can't remember which war it was, it was probably the war, well it was right after the..., it was probably somewhere in, maybe in Vietnam. I asked Exxon if I just needed to quit. Said no he's more important here, we want you to release him immediately. And I got released two years early and my General was kind, I had two more years to go in the service, so I had early release.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How many reunions have you had?

Mr. Fitzgerald:

I used to go to a lot of reunions, but oh the last seven, eight years I haven't been to very many. I do go to some 447<sup>th</sup> reunions, I may even go to one this year and take one of my caretakers along and that's going to be in October and it's going to be nearby, near Dulles Airport, about sixty miles west of us. And it'll be just a few days and it will be, probably not expensive.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Alright, that's all the questions I have unless you have anything else.

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Well did I talk your ears off? I mean how long have I been talking?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well thanks again for your time today and thank you for your service to our country.

Mr. Fitzgerald:

I'm proud of my service to country, I'm not ashamed of it at all. Oh I could tell you a few other things, I mean I've been to ninety countries, all the way from Antarctica to Arctic Ocean there's only a few more, about fifty or sixty more countries I haven't been to, but anyway I traveled the world and it was quite a bit of it on my own and with Exxon and other employees.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Alright.

Mr. Fitzgerald:

That's the end of my story.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Alright thank you, we'll keep in touch and I'll be back in touch with you when I get this transcribed.

Mr. Fitzgerald:

Okay.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Alright, have a good day, bye now.

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