

**Veteran:** MAY, E. C.  
**Service Branch:** AIR CORPS  
**Interviewer:** Coates, Evan  
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Terry Moore  
  
**Highlights of Service:** **World War II; Bombardier/Navigator; Participated in invasion of Southern France and Anzio; Served in Casablanca**

{Tape begins with Interviewer in mid-sentence }

Interviewer: ...a veteran of World War II, on August 16, 2002. Where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Veteran: I was at home here in Baytown. In fact, I was in the back yard when I first heard about it. A neighbor came over and told me. Of course, I went inside, and it was on the radio.

Interviewer: Did you know what Pearl Harbor was?

Veteran: Sure.

Interviewer: When you entered the war, did you enlist or were you drafted?

Veteran: After Pearl Harbor, I decided what branch of the service I wanted to be in, and that was the Air Corps, so I applied for aviation cadet training. I took all my examinations—physical and mental—and passed them, and was waiting for the word about whether I'd been accepted or not, and about that time I got my notice from the Draft Board. I told them of my circumstance, but they wouldn't defer me, so I was drafted and went into Fort Hood for a while. Later on I turned in all my papers and talked to the company commander, and after a good while and a long story that I won't go into the details, I finally got transferred to the Air Corps. I took my basic training at Santa Anna, California. My class was the first one where they started giving you a series of tests. They claimed they could tell which crew member you'd be best suited for—either pilot, co-pilot, or bombardier/navigator. As a result of my tests, they classified me as a bombardier, so I went to Advanced Bombardier School at Albuquerque, New

Mexico, and upon graduating, I was commissioned a second lieutenant. In medium bombardment, the bombardier acts as navigator, also, so then they sent me to navigation school. After finishing that, I continued my training at Barksdale Field in Shreveport, Louisiana. From there I went to Huntersfield, Georgia, and from there I went overseas to our destination, which was Casablanca. We landed in Casablanca and spent a short while in North Africa, and then we moved over to the island of Sardinia. About two-thirds of my missions was flown from Sardinia. Our targets were primarily on the mainland of Italy. The only time I flew two missions in one day was when our troops landed on Anzio Beachhead. The Germans had our troops pinned down on the beach, so they called on us for a bomb strike, and we flew two missions that day and bombed troop concentrations and gun emplacements up on the higher elevations looking down on Anzio. Later on, we moved up to the island of Corsica, and some of my missions there was in France. I was in on the invasion of Southern France. We liked to say that we came in through the back door, because we came up through Africa, Italy, and Southern France. I flew 70 missions in all, and some of them we encountered intense flak and quite a bit of fighter plane opposition. I came through without a scratch, but had several narrow escapes. I was in one plane that did a dead-stick landing; that is, both engines were out as we were coming in. One was already out, and the used all the gas in the other one, and it quit just as we were coming in. We hit the runway at about 150 miles an hour, and our left main gear was the only one down. The hydraulic system had been shot out. It collapsed, and the right wing was torn out of the cell, and cart wheeled off to the right. We went down the runway at a 45 degree angle and came to a stop at the end of the runway in a ditch. Of course, the plane was all torn up, but none of us were hurt. The pilot received a cut on the forehead, but the rest of us didn't receive a scratch. I had several other narrow escapes. In fact, some of the guys in the squadron started calling me "Lucky." (Laughter) One time, I was up in the Plexiglas nose of a B-26. It could cruise at a speed of 210 or 220, and had two-2,000 horsepower Pratt and Whitney engines. Had a cigar-shaped fuselage, and a high vertical tail fin and narrow wings, and tricycle type landing gear. It was a real hot plane, and it was called a Martin Marauder. It had a lot of other names that I won't mention, but one of them was the "Widow

Maker.” (Laughter) It was a real safe plane, but you had to know it’s limitations. The whole time I was overseas I received twelve air medals and a President Unit citation. The French Croix de Guerre was awarded by General De Gaulle. I had four unit citations for fields of combat.

Interviewer: When you went it, did you go in with anybody you knew?

Veteran: No. I met my crew when we went to Louisiana, but they were all from different states.

Interviewer: When you were on base overseas, what were you treated like?

Veteran: We lived in tents on the island of Sardinia and North Africa, too. There were five us in a tent, but it was alright. We built a little heater in the middle and slept on cots. We didn’t see very many natives there unless we went into town. We were sort of out in the edge of the hills.

Interviewer: Tell me about when you went into town. What did ya’ll do on leave?

Veteran: Usually we just walked down the streets and observed all the sights and everything. Of course, Italy was a different thing. I was on leave several times there and had a chance to go to St. Peters Cathedral. I was also on the Isle of Capri, and Mt. Vesuvius erupted while we were there in 1944. A dark brown, fine sand just settled all over the island. The Air Force had a rest camp on the Isle of Capri, and everyone during their term of duty got a chance to go to that so-called rest camp for seven days, and that’s the reason I was there. Of course, I took in all the sights I could in Rome and Naples while I was there. I guess that’s about all I have unless you have some questions.

Interviewer: What about your commanding officers? What were they like? How did they treat you?

Veteran: They were all real good. Everything was spick and span here in the states, of course, and everyone observed all the military regulations. We got over in North Africa and the island of Sardinia, and everyone just went around in just any state of dress they might want to, and no one paid much attention to rank or anything else. But this was probably more-so in the Air Force than any of the other

branches. We didn't tend to go in for that military discipline as much as some of the other branches. I know one time when I was in North Africa, Jimmy Doolittle was there, and he came out to the plane where we were. He had on a t-shirt, and no one recognized him. That's just how things were in combat compared to back in the states. Very little formality.

Interviewer: What did you hear about from home and about the war in the Pacific?

Veteran: My brother was over in the Pacific in the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Force, and I heard a little through letters that my mother wrote to me fairly often. You know Darrell Lemmon? His brother Robert Lemmon was killed during the war, and he was a good friend of mine, and he was a bombardier/navigator, also. Had the same rank that I had. This is a curious incident that I thought I'd bring up. While I was in North Africa, I received a letter from him, and he wanted me to meet him at a particular place at Piccadilly Square in London. At the time I received the letter, that time had already passed. He evidently thought I had been sent to England. I wrote him a letter, and I got it back a month or two after that and it was stamped "Missing in Action." He had been shot down over France, and was flying in the same type of plane that I was flying in—a B-26.

Interviewer: What was life like in the camps? What did ya'll do to relax and get your mind off of the war?

Veteran: We'd read some, and just relax on our bunks or take a walk out in the hills. We all had .45 automatics, and we'd go out in the hills, set up a can, and practice shooting. It got to where I was real good with a .45 automatic. (Laughter) We carried it in a shoulder holster on missions in case we were shot down. The bombardier was supposed to fire a shot through the optics. An important part of it was the gear ratio, and we didn't want the enemy to have that knowledge, so we were supposed to destroy that bombsite if we had an opportunity. An ordnance bombsite was a very precise instrument. There was a saying that you could put a bomb in a pickle barrel if you were good enough, and it was real accurate, but you had to put the right information into the bombsite. Part of the information we put in before we took off on a mission, and part of it when you were on a bomb run you had to synchronize the cross-hairs through a telescopic site, and you had

knobs on each end of the bombsite which did various things. You had to synchronize on what you were doing and turn those knobs. You couldn't be paying attention to what was going on around you—flak bursting all around and what-not. You had to keep your mind on what you were doing. When you'd synchronize those cross-hairs on the target and they didn't move one way or another—they were perfectly synchronized—if one line started moving off, you'd make a correction and bring it back on the target. If it was perfectly synchronized, and those cross-hairs stayed right on the target, you hit the target right in the center. We carried 250 lb bombs, 500 lb bombs, and 1000 lb bombs. The maximum load on a B-26 was 4000 lbs. B-17s and B-24s could carry more than that. Our range was limited compared to the larger bombers. Each mission was about six hours—three hours going and three hours back. That was about as far as we could go out without running out of fuel. We always had a fighter escort, and most of the time it was P-51s, or we also had an English Spitfire escort.

Interviewer: While you were in the Air Force, did you feel like after the war you had any perks, any things you maybe didn't have before you went in.

Veteran: Not really. Of course, being an officer in the Air Force you had some privileges. I had gone to Lee College before I went in the service, and I had intended to go back to college after I got out, but I decided I'd go to work for Humble Oil and Refining Company and quit after a short while and go back and get my degree, but I never did quit. I just kept working. I had a good job working in the Research and Development Department, and so I never did quit and go back to school. There wasn't any disadvantage into going back into civilian life or vice-versa.

Interviewer: When you finally got back home, how were you treated by the general public?

Veteran: Everyone greeted me and was glad to see me. Everyone was real nice about it. It was a different feeling all together than what the veterans of Vietnam experienced when they came back. After World War II, the public was all together, and they honored all the servicemen, but after Vietnam, it turned out that so many were

against that war, that when some of the soldiers returned they weren't treated too well.

Interviewer: What were your feelings towards the Germans and the Axis?

Veteran: That's odd. I was around a lot of prisoners of war, especially in North Africa. They had a lot of Italian prisoners of war captured there in North Africa. They had a big detention center for captured Italian soldiers, and also German soldiers. Believe it not, I had more respect for the German soldiers than I had for any of the others. They were more disciplined, and were actually more like what I considered "Texans." There are so many people in Texas of German descent, and a lot of them I became pretty good friends with, just talking to them a short while. Of course, I wasn't around them all that long, but I had more respect for them as a person and a soldier even though I was fighting against them.

Interviewer: What were you told about the Germans by your officers? Did they bad-mouth them, or did they tell you about the enemy?

Veteran: They didn't bad-mouth the enemy. They just said, "We are in this situation, and we've got to make the best of it. It's either them or us, so we're going in there, and we're going to win this thing, and there's no question about that." And that's what we did.

Interviewer: Where were you at the time of the D-Day invasion? What was your role in that?

Veteran: I was in on the invasion of Southern France, but I wasn't available for the invasion of Normandy. At that time we were stationed on the island of Sardinia. We heard about it, but that's about all. During the invasion of Southern France, we happened to be in Naples on leave, and one of the officers I was with recognized a naval officer as we were walking along the street in Naples, and he was on a ship docked on the harbor that was going to be involved in the invasion of Southern France. He invited us aboard the ship, and we had a meal, and it was quite different than what we had been used to. We had been used to eating field rations on the island of Sardinia, and here we were on this ship in a dining room, and had these guys waiting on us and filling up our plates. The food was great—a lot better than what we'd been getting. (Laughter) And just several days after

that, that ship was in the invasion of Southern France. D-Day morning in Southern France, we bombed gun emplacements near Toulon Harbor in Southern France. There were so many planes in sky that day that we had a definite point to hit the coast and a definite way to turn and come out, because there were so many planes in the sky that there was a chance of collision. The sky was just full of so many planes and the sea was full of ships coming to shore. We dropped our bombs and made a circle around and saw all of these troops parachute out into Southern France.

Interviewer: Where were you when you heard about the atomic bomb at Hiroshima?

Veteran: I was back in the states. I was an instructor at the bombardier and navigator school at Childress, Texas. I was also there when the Japs surrendered, and we went and celebrated at the officers' club. Someone was going around and cutting everyone's tie off. We'd take a drink and toast each other, and throw our glasses in the fireplace there. We had a big celebration.

Interviewer: At the end of the war, how did you feel?

Veteran: I was wanting to stay in. I had an opportunity that I could have stayed in and retired if I'd wanted to. I was a first lieutenant when I got out, and was to have gotten my captaincy when I came back from overseas, but it didn't come through. I flew 38 missions as lead bombardier in the number one plane on the missions. That particular job called for a captaincy, and I was supposed to get it before I left from overseas, but I never did. I was wondering whether to stay in or not, and they told me I could get out if I wanted to—it was just up to me. I finally decided I'd get out, so I came back to Baytown and loafed around for a week or two and was pretty nervous, because I didn't have anything to do, so I decided the best thing I needed to do was go to work, so I went up and got a job with Humble Oil and Refining Company, which later became Exxon. I worked there for 37 years before I retired.

Interviewer: How many total missions did you fly?

Veteran: 70.

Interviewer: Wasn't it 35 that you were supposed to do before your tour was over?

Veteran: When I first went over, 35 missions was the limit. If you completed 35 missions, they let you come home, but we weren't getting any replacements, so they kept increasing it. Before it was over I got 70 missions before I was allowed to come home.

Interviewer: How did you feel about them bumping it up and you couldn't go home?

Veteran: Well, I didn't particularly like it, but there wasn't much I could do about it. When you first go overseas, you're all gung-ho, and you're ready to get into combat, but when you go on your first or second missions and see these planes shot down around you flying off your right wing, you begin to think, "Boy, this is for real," but after awhile you just dismiss it from your mind and don't dwell on it, don't think about, and you come to the conclusion I'll either get it or I won't, and just try to make the best of it. That's what everyone did. That's what I did. When they kept increasing the missions, I said, "Well, so be it. I'll get through it or I won't." One reason I chose the Air Force is you usually didn't have to trudge through the mud and the trenches, and if you got it, you got it all at once, and that was it.

Interviewer: While you were over there, what did you miss most about being at home?

Veteran: Most of all I guess I missed the food. I would even dream about chocolate malts and things like that. I guess that's what I missed most. Also the fellowship, and being around your parents and friends. I think practically everyone that was overseas thought more of food than anything else.

Interviewer: What was the first thing you ate after you got back?

Veteran: We landed up in Boston, Massachusetts, and we went out to Camp Miles Standish. We went in the mess hall, and they had these crates of quarts of milk, and said we could drink as many as we wanted. We hadn't had any fresh milk in a long time, because we'd been drinking powdered milk, so everyone just helped themselves and started drinking that milk. I don't remember exactly how many I drank. Several days after that, people began showing up in the infirmary, and their urine was discolored. They came to find out that we were drinking so much



milk and hadn't had any fresh milk in such a long time, that all of a sudden part of that milk was going through our system.

Interviewer: What was the worst day you had while you were in Europe?

Veteran: I guess the worst day was on this mission I was talking about when we were in the northern part of Italy. As we started on the bomb run, it was heavy and intense flak, and we got hit. I was in the navigator's department and looked out the window on the side, and we were spraying gas out of that right wing all over the sky. A big stream of gas. The gas fumes inside the plane were real bad. You could hardly breathe because the fumes were so bad. I immediately started pumping as much gas out of that right wing tank as I could over into the left wing tank. I wanted to save as much gas from that right wing as I could. We got hit just before we dropped our bombs. We were flying on the right wing of the lead plane, and that lead plane had the group commander. That plane starting going down; it was on fire. We followed them down a short ways, and we never did see any chutes, but we found out later they did parachute out, but most of them died of their injuries. Anyhow, we found out that our hydraulic system was shot out, and when all of that gas went out of the right wing tank, we had to feather one engine, so we just had one engine left. I managed to open to bomb bay doors and to drop the bombs manually. The hydraulic system was shot out, and the electrical system on that end was shot out. We headed towards the coast, and the pilot asked me where was the nearest base we could land. The nearest base was an English fighter base on the northeastern tip of Corsica, so I gave him a heading to that base. Our plane held altitude, and a lot of times it won't do it on one engine, but after we dropped our bombs, we were able to hold our altitude. After we cleared the mountains there in Northern Italy, we headed out over the Tyranian Sea. We sighted the airfield, and started in the approach, and the other engine went out. I was standing between the pilot and co-pilot, and I don't know exactly how high we were, but usually a B-26 is like a ton of bricks when you don't have any engines, but we managed to glide in. Another thing that happened was the hydraulic system was shot out, and the left main gear was the only gear that came down. The right wing gear and the nose gear didn't come down—only the left main gear—and we tried to crank it back up manually, but we couldn't do

it. We hit the runway on that left main gear doing about 150 miles an hour, and we were about half way down the runway. That right prop hit the ground and tore the right engine out of the mount, and it just cart wheeled off to the right and almost run into one of the emergency vehicles that they had put out there for us. We came to a stop in a ditch at the end of the runway, and of course the plane was all rumped and torn up, but there wasn't any chance of fire, because we didn't have any gas on the plane. (Laughter) We were lucky in that respect. Another thing, while we were on the bomb run, a piece of flak came up through the bottom of the plane and stuck in the bottom of my shoe, and it felt like somebody had given me the hot-foot. It's a small piece of molten metal. When a 88mm or 105mm antiaircraft shell explodes, these fragments go out in all directions, and it's called flak. I was on a bomb run, so I didn't have any time to worry about that. It soon cooled off, so I forgot about it because we were having all of that other trouble about that time. When we crashed landed on the island of Sardinia and got out of the plane, I started walking towards the runway and something hurt the bottom of my foot. I took off my flying boot and poured out a chunk of metal. It had stuck in the bottom of my shoe. I kept that as a souvenir for a long time, but I finally lost it. I didn't get home with it.

Interviewer: What was the best day over there like?

Veteran: I guess when I got my orders to come home. Being in combat is not all that bad, like I say. It's an experience you probably wouldn't want to go through again, and probably wouldn't elect to go through it again, but it wasn't all that bad. Like I say, you'd get to the point where you'd just dismiss it from your mind and come to the conclusion that I'll either get it or I won't—there's no use in worrying about it. So, you'd make the best of it and live from day to day. Try to go about as much of a normal life under the circumstances as you can. I wouldn't necessarily want to go through it again—at least I wouldn't volunteer—because I consider myself real lucky.

Interviewer: What were your impressions of the English and French troops?

Veteran: We encountered English troops there in North Africa, and they were real friendly. There's a lot of difference between the English officers and recruits—more-so

than it is in the U.S. Army. A group of officers advised us they had gotten some beer from England in kegs, and invited us to help them drink their beer. It was hot beer right out of the keg, and that's the way they drank it though—they don't ice their beer. They drink it hot—right out of the tap or can. They were real friendly, and we drank beer and got in a dice game with them. I encountered some French troops in North Africa in Casablanca, and this French submarine had docked there, and all these French troops came into town. We happened to be going into town that evening, and we all went in the bar and started buying each other drinks, and they were real friendly. They started singing some of their French songs and tried to teach us the words. The Italian troops were a little bit different, though. They seemed to be more inclined to quarrel with each other. I remember one incident where two Italian officers were disagreeing over something, and they started gesturing toward each other, and they didn't hit each other with their fists but were like two women fighting, more or less. Just gesturing and spitting at each other, and things like that. Anyway, I had more respect for the German soldiers and the French than I did for the Italians.

Interviewer: When you were over there on your better days, what did you think about doing first when you got back home?

Veteran: I don't recall that I even thought about what I might do the first thing.

Interviewer: Did you have any plans to go see a movie, or try to make it as normal as it was before you left?

Veteran: No, not really. I don't recall giving any thought along that line. Of course, I looked forward to coming back doing the things I'd done previously, like going to the movies. I was single the whole time I was in the service, and didn't meet anyone that I wanted to marry while I was in, so I was still single when I got out. I met my wife, Louise, after I got out of the service. She was working in the hydrocarbon lab at Humble Oil and Refining Company, and I met her out on the job one night. She is a graduate of Mississippi State for Women, and she was from Mississippi.

Interviewer: What was the significance of when ya'll would write little messages on the bombs and the sides of the airplanes like I saw in this picture? He wrote a little note at the bottom. What was that?

Veteran: A lot of the ground personnel would write things on the bombs. Just a message to the enemy or something.

Interviewer: Did they ever have any personal experiences to include on the messages, or did they just come up with them?

Veteran: No, they just came up with them on the spur of the moment out of their heads. When I was on the island of Sardinia, they erected a big sign that said ninety-five percent of the toluene that was used to make these bombs came from Baytown, Texas. Boy, I was glad to see that!

{TAPE STOPPED—INTERVIEW CONCLUDED}