

Veteran: SNEAD, Bill
Service Branch: AIR FORCE
Interviewer: Ferguson, Cody
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Transcriptionist: Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: World War II; Served on airbase in England

Interviewer: My name is Cody Ferguson, and I am interviewing Bill Snead. We're at his home, and it is April 14th, 2003. Are you aware that our conversation will be recorded, and that the tape and transcription will be placed in the Lee College library? Do I have your permission to do that?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: When did you start your career in the military?

Veteran: January 11th, 1943.

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Veteran: I enlisted.

Interviewer: If you enlisted, did you have any idea that you would get into this kind of situation?

Veteran: Really, I wound up getting into a different situation than what I enlisted for. I enlisted to train to be in radio repair, and then they got to needing to make up an Air Force group in England, and so they got a lot us just from different things. We assembled down in Florida down at a little airbase and then got ready to go overseas in the first of June '43. I started out in the signal corps, but they transferred me to the Air Corps without asking me if I wanted to. {Laughter}

Interviewer: So you didn't have any idea that you were going overseas to do this kind of thing.

Veteran: No, I really didn't, but they didn't ask you. They just put you where they wanted you.

Interviewer: What part of the military were you in?

Veteran: I was in the Air Force. Do you want me to say anything about the job I did there?

Interviewer: I'll ask you that later on.

Veteran: OK.

Interviewer: When did World War II start?

Veteran: December 7th, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

Interviewer: When you first heard of the news that you were going overseas to fight, how did you feel about going?

Veteran: Well, I didn't feel as concerned as infantrymen do, because I knew I was going to an airbase in England, and that's not near as hazardous as being on the frontline in the infantry.

Interviewer: What was it like there?

Veteran: Cold! {Laughter} Damp, and cold, and foggy a lot of times. Especially in the month of October, that's the foggiest month over there, and it got so foggy sometimes that our ground transportation would be shut down for like a week at a time. We couldn't go anywhere or drive trucks. It was just like being snowed in where there's snow, you know? And it was cold in the wintertime. It's a damp climate, and it's very cold.

Interviewer: Did you ever get hurt while you were there?

Veteran: Never did get hurt.

Interviewer: Well, that's great.

Veteran: I really wasn't in combat. Our airbase was located in what they called "Buzz Bomb Alley," and these buzz bombs—which were two thousand pound bombs without a man onboard—flew over there, and I saw quite a few of them, because we were in the general area where there was a lot of airbases, so I'm sure they were trying to hit airbases for one thing.

Interviewer: How long were you there?

Veteran: Overseas about twenty-six months, is the best I can recall.

Interviewer: When did you finally get to come home?

Veteran: Well, about two days out of New York Harbor, I was coming back to train for the invasion of Japan, and so that wasn't a very interesting prospect. It was gonna be bad. So about two days out of the harbor, they came on the loud speaker on the ship and said, "Here this, here this...The war is over!" So, that was good news. When I got home, two of my brothers and I had been overseas in the service at the same time, and I beat both of them home just by luck.

Interviewer: Because you were on the way home for training?

Veteran: I was on the way to train for the invasion of Japan, but then it was all over. This was such a great experience, because not only the end of the war, but I had been seasick for seven days, and I had just gotten up that very morning, and the sea looked like a sheet of glass, and I got to feeling better, and I got me a good hot shower, and threw those dirty clothes in the sink, and about that time they said the war was over, so that was a good time.

Interviewer: Do you think World War II was necessary?

Veteran: Had to be. Hitler wasn't gonna cave in. I think he was worse than Saddam, if that was possible. He was bad.

Interviewer: Where and how did you train?

Veteran: I took my basic training up in Missouri, and it snowed about knee deep pretty soon after I got up there, and I wasn't used to that snow, and I was out in it all day, and it was kinda bad. But about the time I finished that training up there, they let us know that we were gonna form this air group, and so I went from there to Florida. I left Missouri and had an overcoat and long handles on, and cold, and got down to Tampa, Florida, and it was about as warm as today. It was the biggest switch in weather I ever was in.

Interviewer: What was your primary job in the military?

Veteran: Interesting work, and I think good work. I was glad to do it, because I felt like I was doing a good thing. In England, of course there was a lot of fog, and they couldn't tell as much about the weather as they can now, so sometimes they'd get off on a mission and while they were gone, the fog would come in. They would have trouble finding that runway, so there was three little crews of us—two-man crews that worked around the clock—and we pulled a little travel trailer up near the end of the runway where they were landing, and we set up a red flashing beacon light on one side of the runway, and across the runway we set up some sodium flares lined up with the runway. This showed them where they were to land in between that flashing red light and those sodium flares, and it showed them which direction because we had them lined up with the runway, so they could see that, and they were able to land in the fog.

Interviewer: What were the living conditions like over there?

Veteran: No so good. The barrack I lived in for all the time I was there had one little coal stove right in the middle. It as about as cold inside as it was outside, and the shower room had windows broken out of it. I mean, it was like out of doors. It was so miserable taking baths. We had one old boy from New York, and he didn't like to bathe anyhow, and he wouldn't take a bath, and about every six weeks, there would be three or four of them wrestle him down and scrub him.
{Laughter}

Interviewer: Oh, my, because he wouldn't bathe?

Veteran: Oh, yeah. I've seen them give him baths with a scrub brush and lye soap, and he didn't like it. {Laughter} He didn't get by with it though. They'd bathe him. He got to smelling pretty bad, and they'd give him a bath.

Interviewer: Actually today in history class we just learned about how the atomic bomb was introduced, and it was called the Manhattan Project. When they were doing the top-secret stuff and they tested the atomic bomb in New Mexico, did ya'll know anything about what was going on?

Veteran: No hint of it. It was a well-kept secret, because there was no hint of it. In fact, we didn't even get any news of the bombing. See, I was on that ship for eight days coming from Antwerp, Belgium, coming back to New York, and in the meantime they were bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and we didn't even get that news. We had no hint that the war was about to be over until they said, "Here this, here this...The war is over! Japan surrenders!" Isn't that amazing? No news. Didn't even know it until they announced it on the ship.

Interviewer: So after you got back to New York, do you think they should have dropped the atomic bomb on Japan?

Veteran: I really do. War is bad. They estimated we would have a million casualties invading Japan. That doesn't mean all dead. That means wounded and prisoners and killed, but that's a lot of people. So it was either a couple hundred thousand of them or a million of us.

Interviewer: And that's what we learned today. My teacher said he has interviewed several people that were in World War II, and he asked them if they thought we should have, and every one of them said that we should have. He said today that there would have been a million casualties if ya'll had tried to invade them.

Veteran: War is a bad thing, but sometimes it's necessary. You look all through the Old Testament in the Bible, and they had lots of wars. There will always be wars, because God said so. Bad though.

Interviewer: Well, I thank you very much, Mr. Snead for helping me write this paper.

Veteran: OK.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}