Veteran:	**WILLIAMS, Jess**
Service Branch:	**AIR FORCE**
Interviewer:	Williams, Debra
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Transcriptionist:	Terry Moore
Highlights of Service:	**World War II; European Theatre; 8th Air Force; B-17 waist gunner; Excellent description of air combat missions**

Interviewer: This is March 16, 2001. This is Debra Williams interviewing Jess Frank Williams for Lee College's oral history project. Jess, are you aware that our conversation will be recorded and that the tape and transcription will be placed in the Lee College library?

Veteran: Yes, I am.

Interviewer: Do I have permission to do that?

Veteran: Yes, you do.

Interviewer: Your name is Jess Frank Williams—correct?

Veteran: Correct.

Interviewer: Your name is spelled J-E-S-S, and that is not short for Jesse?

Veteran: That's correct.

Interviewer: What is your date of birth?

Veteran: March 19, 1924.

Interviewer: Were you born in Ada, Oklahoma?

Veteran: That's correct.

Interviewer: Did you grow up in Ada, Oklahoma?

Veteran: Not 100%. I lived there until I was about six years old and then moved to Kiowa, Oklahoma, and we lived there for about four years and then went back to Ada again. I lived in Ada about three different times. Another town I lived in was Hilton, Oklahoma, and stayed there until I was in my seventeenth year.

Interviewer: Now, your family had a candy shop in one of those towns, didn't they?

Veteran: Actually in two of them. My father and my uncle (my mother's brother) started a candy factory partnership in Ada, Oklahoma, and my father sold out to my uncle, and we moved to Wewoka, Oklahoma. My dad started a candy factory there, and we stayed there for about a year and a half/two years, and the business failed, and again we were back in Ada for a short time, and then we moved to Hilton, and I stayed there until I went into the service. That was January 3, 1942, when I enlisted.

Interviewer: What town did you stay in for the longest time when you grew up? I know you've told me stories of being a boy, and you'd go off, and your dad would whistle and call you back. And you were working at the candy factory quite a bit at that time when you were about thirteen. Where was that?

Veteran: This was in Ada, at my dad and uncle's partnership candy shop. I spent most of my seventeen years in Ada, and the other towns took up the other few years. I would say all together like six or eight years in Ada and then the other half spent in the other three towns. Moved around quite a little bit.

Interviewer: Was Ada a small town?

Veteran: At the time it was about 15,000 people, so it was a nice sized town. It's about 25,000 or 30,000 now. The other towns were much smaller.

Interviewer: Were you delivered in a hospital?

Veteran: At home in Ada.

Interviewer: Did your mom have a midwife, or did she just say, "This is natural, and we're just gonna get by like we are"?

Veteran: No, it was a natural birth, but we did have a doctor in attendance. At that time, you know, they made house calls.

Interviewer: And I know you have two sisters—one older and one younger—and were they born at home, also?
Veteran: All of us were born at the same house.

Interviewer: And that house is still there by a church?
Veteran: By a church there on Oak Avenue in Ada.

Interviewer: I know your dad worked at a candy factory. What about Mom?
Veteran: She also worked at the candy factory. She was involved in the packaging and wrapping and boxing. The men of the family made the candy, and the women packaged it. It was a pretty nice little shop. We had eighteen people, and all of them were relatives.

Interviewer: That could be good, and that could be bad.
Veteran: That's true.

Interviewer: So, obvously you were a young boy during the Depression years, but your family had employment.
Veteran: We never went without a place to live or ever went hungry. We did wear homemade clothes, but we always had something to eat and somewhere to stay. My father was a candy maker. Part of my life he worked for Oklahoma Portland Cement Company and part of the time in candy factories, and we always had enough to get by on. We didn't really hurt during those times like some of the people had to do.

Interviewer: So you think you fared better than many other people in your community?
Veteran: I kind of think we were kind of in the middle. We didn't have anything, but we were not suffering. Kind of middle class.

Interviewer: What kind of childhood would you say you had? You had everything you needed, so you didn't really struggle. As a boy, did you feel that it was a good time, or was it a really tough time? Did you have to work excessively hard, or how was your childhood?

Veteran: Well, in my very youngest days I didn't have it hard. I had a good life. Like I said, we had plenty to eat and a place to stay, and we did things together. My father was very good about taking me about anywhere he ever went. He was a fisherman and loved to fish, and he started taking me on fishing trips. We didn't have a vehicle to go in, so we walked maybe a mile or two to the nearest stream or pond or lake or whatever. He'd carry me on his back along with his fishing tackle. He just flat refused to go anywhere with other men unless he took me with them. If they weren't taking any children, he just wouldn't go. So, I had a good relationship with him and enjoyed being with him. The girls stayed with mother and did little girl things. They didn't care anything about the fishing part of it. I think I had a good life. My parents were very good people. The only thing was my father had an occasional bout with alcohol. He could go for months and not touch it, and then finally I guess he'd just get fed up with his job or something, he'd go on a pretty nice binge, and then when that was over with he'd go on for several months again. That caused a little problem at the time, but it passed, and everything went normally after that. While we were not church-going people, we kind of followed the Golden Rule. We didn't do anything we shouldn't have done. We children never gave them any problems like today that we hear about all the time.

Interviewer: What if somebody had given problems like kids do today? Would you have gotten a spanking, a grounding?

Veteran: My mother was the one that dished out the punishment most of the time, and if I didn't do right or didn't do what I was told, she would take a switch to me when I was real little. Generally, that's all I got was a switch, as far as that goes. My dad whipped me twice in my lifetime with a belt.

Interviewer: Did you think that was abuse when you got switched or spanked?

Veteran: No, I sort of asked for it. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Some people call that abuse today.

Veteran: Well, they would, but to give you an example of it, I was playing with my little dog in the floor, and my dad walked by and accidentally stepped on the dog's tail, and the dog let out a yip, and my dad kicked the dog. Not hard, but he kicked him, and I asked him, "Did that do you any good?" And he popped that belt off from around his waist, and he gave me how ever many licks he gave me, and when he got through, he said, "did that do you any good?" (Laughter) And it did, because he didn't have to do it again.

Interviewer: So, you said you were in Ada when you signed into the military?

Veteran: No, in Hilton. That's where I reached my seventeenth birthday, and before I got to be eighteen is when I enlisted. I enlisted January 3, 1942, and I would have been eighteen on March 19th of '42. I left Hilton to enlist at Wichita Falls, Texas.

Interviewer: I know that a lot of people today can enlist in the Marines or the Army or the Navy. What was available to you? The Air Force was the Army when you enlisted, so there were Marines at the time, weren't there? But you wanted to fly?

Veteran: Oh, yes. Air Force was the way to go. Most all of us in that town, and I imagine other towns, too, the Air Force was fairly new in a sense. I had visions of being a pilot, but was too young, and I also found that it required a college education to fly those planes, because after all, those airplanes were real expensive, and they didn't just turn it over to a seventeen year old boy. But the Air Force sounded good to me, even though it was the Army Air Force at the time. We had to go through some of the regular Army training, but for the most part it was training you towards flying.

Interviewer: Let me back up a little bit. What prompted you to sign up? You weren't drafted, and I know at some point there was a draft and all men were required to register or something.

Veteran: We had to register, but I volunteered to go, and the reason for volunteering is to pick which branch you wanted, and I wanted to pick. If I waited until I was drafted, I just had to go wherever I was sent. It could have been the infantry or artillery, or whatever, but I wanted in the Air Force. Pearl Harbor had just happened about three and a half weeks before I enlisted.

Interviewer: Did that affect your decision at all to go in?

Veteran: That affected my decision. I knew I was going even if I had to wait until I was drafted, but I wanted to go ahead and get into the branch of the service that I wanted, so I went ahead and jumped the gun. That's how I got into the Air Force was by volunteering. Of course, Pearl Harbor was the cause of me going in at all. After what happened there, we all got pretty patriotic then.

Interviewer: You mean other peers of yours were talking about going?

Veteran: Oh, yes. In fact, one of the fellas that I had gone to school with for some time came by and visited me in his uniform, and that looked good to me (Laughter), and he told me he had gone through basic training, and had been in there long enough to get a few days off, so he came to visit us at the house in Hilton. He wasn't the reason I went in though. Pearl Harbor was the real reason, and the Air Force was the reason I volunteered. I would have been drafted eight months after my eighteenth birthday, because when I was overseas I received my draft notice. I had already been in for ten or eleven months by then.

Interviewer: Do you know where you would have ended up? Did it tell you in the draft notice who you were going to be with?

Veteran: I don't think it did, but I don't remember. I just know that I got my draft notice.

Interviewer: Did you have other family members in the military at that time or even before you were called? Was your father in the military?

Veteran: My father was in Sharpan(?) in World War 1, and he's the only one that I know of, and it was a very short time that he was in there. He went through his basic training and was sent over to England, and went across on the USS *Great Northern* as I recall, and he never got off the boat. The war ended, and I later heard that there was some kind of disease of some sort onboard and they quarantined them. They held them there, and the war ended, so they turned the ship around and just brought them back. They never disembarked. They came back to Camp Miles Standish, I think, and that's where I came back, too.

Interviewer: So at the time of Pearl Harbor you didn't have any family members that enlisted, also?

Veteran: No.

Interviewer: Did you have any family members that was drafted in?

Veteran: I had some that went in the service after I did, but I don't know if they were drafted or volunteered. I had two or three cousins that went into the service, but I lost all contact with them, and I don't know whether they were drafted or not.

Interviewer: You weren't married at the time you enlisted?

Veteran: No.

Interviewer: How did your family feel about you going in?

Veteran: Kind of odd in a way. I told them I was going, and they didn't object to it, although it made them sad.

Interviewer: Your mom didn't try to talk you out of it?

Veteran: No, they did not try to talk me out of it in anyway. I guess they thought I was my own man at the time and that I'd do what I wanted to do and make my own decisions. They accepted it, and they signed for me. Since I was seventeen, I had to have a letter stating that I was eighteen in order to get in. Didn't have to have a birth certificate, but I had to have them sign that I was eighteen, so they signed it. I was accepted all the way through, and there never was a question about it. Yes, they were sad, but by the same token, I wasn't too far from eighteen, and at eighteen I'd have either been working on a job and have my own place or I'd have been in college. The man I worked for before I went in the service had told me when I graduated that he would help me either go to Abilene Christian College or, since I worked in a candy factory and bakery business and all for him, that he would send me to a baker's college in Chicago, Illinois, and he would help finance me through that, but of course the war stopped that. If I could have made it through and gone to college, I probably would have gone to Abilene Christian College.

Interviewer: What about high school? Weren't you in high school when you enlisted?

Veteran: Yeah, but Pearl Harbor was December 7, 1941. Around the first of December, this fella had a candy shop that my dad worked in, and all the time we lived at Hilton that's where he worked. He also hired me part-time. At Christmastime, they had what they called a Christmas rush, and they wanted a lot of Christmas and specialty candy made up, like the ribbon candy and flowers and fruits, so I dropped out of school around the first of December '41, and another helper and I made candy from six in the evening until six in the morning. My father would leave me as he was finishing up his shift—we were working two twelve hour shifts—six days a week. I was on salary at that time, as he was. You didn't make overtime or anything like that—it was straight salary. So, I was in the process of making all the Christmas candy at night when Pearl Harbor was bombed. After that I worked until Christmas, and then a few days after Christmas I went to Wichita Falls to sign up, and they had to have a letter from my folks, so I came back to Hilton, spent a day or two there, got my letter and went back down to Wichita Falls and turned in my letter. Then I went to Dallas and got sworn in, then went to the induction center in Mineral Wells at Camp Walters. I spent one week at the induction center, and I spent three weeks basic training at Shepherd Field in Wichita Falls, Texas, and then I was transferred to Savannah, Georgia. I didn't know it at the time, but I transferred into what was really the beginnings of the Air Force.

Interviewer: Before you give me that, was it the U.S. Army Air Force?

Veteran: United States Army Air Force.

Interviewer: Didn't you tell me you enlisted with a friend, and you were gonna stay together?

Veteran: Yeah, that was the whole idea. We went to school together. He left school after Pearl Harbor, and we decided we wanted to go into the service, so we both volunteered. He was my best friend, and just lived down the street a little ways.

Interviewer: What was his name?

Veteran: Lloyd Hayer (spelled by veteran). They told us that if we volunteered together they'd let us stay together. We stayed together about four weeks. We had taken it to mean we were gonna stay buddies for a long time. We both tried for airplane mechanics school at Chanute Field, Illinois, and we took tests for it. I thought I did good on the test, but apparently I didn't because he got to go there and I was sent to Savannah, Georgia.

Interviewer: You never saw your test results did you?

Veteran: Never saw the results.

Interviewer: They tell you where you're going, it probably doesn't matter whether you are the best?

Veteran: I was learning quick about the service

Interviewer: So you were sent to Savannah. How long was it from January 3rd before you were in Savannah?

Veteran: About a month.

Interviewer: And did you tell me you were staying in a tent city there?

Veteran: When I first arrived there I was in a barracks, and I was put on guard duty. I guarded an airplane and a transformer station out in the middle of an airfield. The airplane was called an A-20. It was right by the substation there. I kind of made a figure eight. I'd go around the airplane and walk around the station, then go back around. I had one little incident there that was kind of funny in a way. The transformer on the power pole there caught on fire and exploded and started burning. Of course the fire trucks came out, and the corporal of the guards came out and questioned me and wanted to know what happened there. I told him, "The transformer blew." He said, "Did you shoot that transformer?" I said, "No, I didn't shoot that transformer." He said, "Do you have a weapon?" I said, "Yes, I have a weapon," and he said, "I want to see it." So I handed him a billy club, which was all I had. (Laughter) It was hanging on my belt under my overcoat, so

I fished it out. There was snow on the ground, and it was cold, cold, cold. He was gonna hang me with shooting that thing, and I finally convinced him I didn't have a gun. I'm sure glad I didn't have anybody trying to take over that airplane. I'd have had fun trying to beat 'em off with a billy club. But that was my job. I did that four hours on, eight hours off, day after day after day.

Interviewer: You really didn't have any idea where you were going to spend your time in the military at that point?

Veteran: At that point, I thought if I was going to have to stay there I'd go crazy just walking around that airplane and that power station.

Interviewer: Did you enlist for a certain period of time as they do now?

Veteran: The enlistment was for the duration of the war.

Interviewer: So it could have been ten years or it could have been one.

Veteran: Just as long as that war lasted—no end in sight when I first started. I stayed at that place as a guard and I didn't even get any passes into town.

Interviewer: And you did this up until you were moved to the tent city?

Veteran: They set up this tent city in a residential area of Savannah. It was on East Henry Street, I think, and it covered about two city blocks. We needed some roads down between the tents, so the vehicles could get down in there, and so we could practice our drills, so we had to go out to the beach in a 6x6 Army truck, shovel oyster shell into it, then come back and shovel it out and build roads in between the tents. We were road building until I heard about the aerial gunnery school.

Interviewer: And how did you find out about the aerial gunnery school?

Veteran: I was in the latrine, and I heard two guys from the orderly room talking, and I heard one of them tell the other one, "They're going to post a notice on the bulletin board that there will be a request for volunteers to go to aerial gunnery school," and of course that was more Air Force to me than anything else. An aerial gunner had to fly, and I wanted to fly.

Interviewer: So what did you think that was going to entail?

Veteran: I knew that I would be in an airplane. It could be a two-seater with a 30-caliber machine gun up to a bomber like the Fortress or the B-24.

Interviewer: It didn't matter.

Veteran: It didn't matter, just as long as I was in that airplane. So, I went to the orderly room, and I told the sergeant there that I wanted to volunteer to go to gunnery school. He asked me how I knew about it, and I told him I heard somebody talking about. He said, "Where'd you hear this," and I said, "In the latrine." (Laughter) He said, "It hasn't yet been released, and you're not supposed to know about that, but since you're here just go ahead and sign up," so I was the first one on the list. Me and eight others were sent to Harlingen. If any others went later, I don't know about it.

Interviewer: How long were you in Harlingen training?

Veteran: About six weeks. Most of it started off with classroom studies learning all the different exterior ballistics of bullets, how to tear down 50-caliber machine guns and put them back together, know all the names of every part, be able to disassemble them and assemble them blindfolded, studying the trajectories of projectiles, how it travels and all the different courses as it goes through the air, learning aircraft recognition of the Germans and Japanese, because we didn't know where we might go, and how to do it instantly, so we didn't shoot at any of our own planes.

Interviewer: And you were tested on that?

Veteran: Tested on that and on everything. We also did skeet shooting, trap shooting, to learn how to lead your targets, and so on. We shot 50-caliber machines guns, high five mounted on the ground and shooting at a moving target five hundred yards out that traveled on a track. We had to shoot at it moving across there. Your projectiles were painted so that you had a particular color, that way when they'd go to check the target they could tell what color hit the target—who hit and who didn't hit. A 50-caliber machine gun is a very big weapon and powerful. We didn't know to use hearing protection, and after being on the range shooting those things, we'd go for several days and couldn't hardly hear at all. I'm sure that was the start of my bad hearing.

Interviewer: Did they ever tell you that you should wear protection?

Veteran: Never—never even talked about it. I don't suppose they knew back then. Actually shooting the machine gun and all was OK, but what it did to us wasn't so good.

Interviewer: You did do some firing in a plane, right?

Veteran: After we got through with our training and classroom work, then it came time to do the flying. We were assigned to a pilot with an AT-6 training plane, which is a plane normally used for training pilots. It's a two-seater, and in the backseat was a 30-caliber machine gun mounted on a half-track in the cockpit. To do the firing, the gunner had to fire at a tow target which was pulled about six hundred feet behind the AT-6. The pilot with the gunners made passes at the tow target from every direction—forward, backwards, over, under—and the gunner had to shoot at it using the colored projectiles so they could count the hits. You had to make 25% of your shots to pass. The gunner in this pocket had what's called a gunner's belt, and it was strapped to a harness and anchored to the floor of the plane. When this pilot would turn the plane, the gunner had to shoot out one side of the plane, and he had to use a "shoot-chute." It was a mounted harness, and you actually could sit on it, but to shoot you had to put the parachute outside the plane and hang it over the outside. You're sitting on the rim of this cockpit, and your feet are in the seat, so when you make your pass to left, your gun on the track is pointing to the left, and your parachute's hanging out on the right side, and your feet are in the seat. Then when you'd pass the target and it would bring it up to where the right wing would be pointing down, and then the gunner had to release that machine gun and swing it around on that track and put it the right side, then put his parachute back on the left side, and then be ready to shoot when we'd come back the other way. It was quite an experience.

Interviewer: And was that really preparing you for a realistic situation? Were there gunners that ever had to operate that way?

Veteran: Never. (Laughter)

Interviewer: So you were being trained for something you were never going to really have to do.

Veteran: I was trained to shoot the machine gun at a moving target from a moving plane, to learn how to lead it, and shoot in front of it and not behind it, and all of that, and hit it, was the main thing.

Interviewer: So you did get some good training out of it.

Veteran: In that respect, besides having a heck of a good time.

Interviewer: Because all the shooting and everything did not upset you.

Veteran: Oh, no. From the time I was a little kid, I was a hunter, and I like to shoot guns. Anyway, I was one happy seventeen year old boy.

Interviewer: When you were finished with your training there, what happened to you?

Veteran: By the way, I did pass. I got a diploma showing I graduated from Aerial Gunnery School, and it had a list of all the things I did. Some of the things that I didn’t mention that I should have, because I got involved in gun turrets, like on a Flying Fortress and the B-24. I learned about turrets—ball turrets and top turrets; flexible guns—single flexible and the like, and all of them 50-caliber. I still have some of the information and books on turrets. So, we left there and went back to Savannah, Georgia. When we got there we found that our group that had been moved to that tent city in Savannah had been moved out of town to the countryside somewhere—into some piney woods. They had moved them in preparation to go overseas, and we didn’t know that until we got there. We were there for about a week before we found out that we were going to be transferred again, but we didn’t know where.

Interviewer: And how were they transporting you back and forth?

Veteran: By train, and it took forever to get from Harlingen, Texas, to Savannah, Georgia. Those old trains would stop for hours on end. Slow, slow, slow.

Interviewer: So you found out they were obviously trying to make some kind of movement.

Veteran: Yes, they were. They were getting rid of some people that were undesirable to go overseas—such people as alcoholics, and that sort of thing. About a week after that, we were told to get our gear ready, and they loaded us on trucks, and carried us into town. They put us on a train, and said we were headed for Ft. Dix, New Jersey. When they said Ft. Dix, I knew we were headed overseas, because that's the jumping off place.

Interviewer: But did you have any idea where?

Veteran: No idea at all, except if you're going to the Pacific, you wouldn't go to Ft. Dix. You'd go west. If you were going on the Atlantic Ocean, which would be east towards Europe, you'd go on that way and take the northern route. I knew of Ft. Dix from World War I, because my dad went to Ft. Dix, and that's where he embarked from. We weren't there anytime at all before we were transported to Hoboken, on the Hudson River, and we were loaded onto the *Queen Elizabeth*, which was a British liner that had been converted to a troop ship. In fact, it was the biggest one in the world at that time. We set sail right away. I think there was somewhere in the neighborhood of 18,000 troops on that boat at one time.

Interviewer: And you still didn't know where you were going when you set sail.

Veteran: We did not know where we were going until we were out on the Atlantic Ocean—maybe a day or so out. It took four days to make the trip, so I'll say a day or so out we found out we were headed for England. It was just a matter of waiting then, but it was interesting because we took the northern route up to Iceland and Greenland. Saw icebergs and all, and it was very cold.

Interviewer: Had you had any hopes prior to that about where you were wanting to go?

Veteran: I was ready to go wherever they sent me. I didn't have any particular preference, as long as it was to go fly in an airplane and be the aerial gunner that I had just completed the course for.

Interviewer: But you didn't know where on the plane you would be?

Veteran: Not even what kind of plane. At that time, I didn't even know I was in the 8th Air Force.

Interviewer: Where were you stationed England?

Veteran: I was stationed at four different places. We landed at Lennox Commons, and they transported us from the boat by ferry, because the water was too shallow for the boat to come in very far. We were loaded on a train at Lennox Commons and transported down to the Midlands in England, which is now called Chelsea. We stayed there for awhile, and then were transferred to a place called King's Canadian School at Teddington, England {END OF SIDE A}

Interviewer: This is Tape 1, Side B. I am interviewing Jess Williams. Jess, you were saying that you had landed where?

Veteran: At Lennon Commons, and were transferred to Chelsea, and from Chelsea to Teddington. Teddington was where we were billeted in a place called King's Canadian School. It had at one time been a school, and it was converted into a military installation. I was assigned to an office at the 8th Air Force headquarters, which was at Tripingham. I worked in the G2 map section for a few months there. The next time I transferred, it was to a combat group, which was the 306th, and that gets back to where I ended up, and that was at Thurligh (spelled by veteran), not far from Bedford, also in the Midlands. I was transferred to the 306th heavy bomb group, and was assigned to the 369th Squadron. Within a day or two of arriving there I went on my first mission, which was January 3, 1943, which was one year to the day after I enlisted.

Interviewer: I understand that you tried a few different positions on the plane.

Veteran: There were times that the plane and crew I was assigned to did not fly, because either the plane was being worked on or someone was killed, or whatever. So I volunteered to go and fill vacancies in order for them to get a full crew, because they wanted to get as many in the air as they could. By the way, the ball turret planes I was talking about were the B-17 Flying Fortresses. I volunteered to go in the ball turret, because I had been in the ball turret, had been checked out on it and knew how to operate it, so I went on a mission in that. I had always been big for my age, and I was so big that I couldn't use the heavy fleece-lined suit that went over our electric suits and I wouldn't fit in there, so I had to take my fleece-lined suit off, and the electric suit wasn't sufficient to keep you warm.

Interviewer: You told me yesterday that the electric suit had wires running through it and worked similar to an electric blanket.

Veteran: Yes. We had electric boots that were wired, little thin gloves that were wired. As long as all that worked, it heated up pretty good.

Interviewer: They were plugged into the plane?

Veteran: They were plugged into a receptacle on the plane. Had an adjustment so you could change the heat, but when it didn't work you were in trouble. Even the fleece-lined suit wasn't enough, because you're talking twenty below zero at say 22 to 25,000 feet with an open window.

Interviewer: So you found out you weren't made for some of these positions.

Veteran: I was not made for the ball turret, so I didn't try that any more, because I had to have that fleece-line suit. Then I tried the tail position, which is an awkward position. You'd sit on a little seat that was built like an enlarged bicycle seat. Your knees are on the floor with your feet out behind you. You're leaning against a square piece of armor plating and you reach around that to hold two 50-caliber machine guns that are all hand operated, and you stay in that position watching for enemy fighters for so long that it's almost impossible to get out of it, because your knees are just about locked in place. Especially for a large guy like I was. I tried that one time and I said I couldn't survive that again, so I never went in a tail position. I could only go in a waist position, which was a standing position, so I was a right waist gunner.

Interviewer: You had to fly twenty-five missions, right?

Veteran: Ended up being twenty-five.

Interviewer: Nineteen of those you said were with the same crew?

Veteran: Basically the same crew with just a few changes in personnel. Changed the bombardier and the navigator, but that was the only changes I can think of during those nineteen missions, but the rest of the time—same crew, same pilot, same everything. At the same time we had no set number—I repeat, no set number—of missions to go on. You just seemingly could go forever until you got shot down or killed, but that changed later and it ended up being twenty-five. Didn't seem like anyone could get to thirty-five, so they lowered it twenty-five, and I had twenty-two missions made when they lowered it, so I needed three more to get through with it.

Interviewer: I guess you were happy.

Veteran: And scared—absolutely scared to death. I was so close to getting through, and yet also I had been through so much that figured the Law of Averages would catch up with me, and I wouldn't get through even three more. I can't say I was excited, because I think I was more afraid than I was excited—afraid I wouldn't make it.

Interviewer: You were obviously really excited about going up in the plane, and you were going to be a gunner and it was going to be great, and how long did it take you to decide that that wasn't going to be great.

Veteran: After January 3rd, my first mission was to go into St. Lazaire(?), France, a submarine pen. We took off, and I was very excited about it. I had no fear, wasn't worried about anything, because I'd finally got to where I was supposed to be in that airplane. We joined up with four other groups from other places in England, and we all set out one group at a time, one behind another, in formation.

Interviewer: About how many planes are we talking about when you say "a group"?

Veteran: A group consists of four squadrons, and each squadron, if we had seven planes, we had a full compliment of planes, but for the most part, we didn't have seven. There was a lot of times they went over there with a squadron of four planes. There was four squadrons to a group, and so there should have been twenty-eight planes, but most of the time we didn't get over about eighteen, nineteen, or twenty all together.

Interviewer: And you'd fly in a formation. How would that be?

Veteran: We'll use the number seven. The squadron would fly with three planes at one elevation, three planes at another elevation, and they're not even but they're alternating. They'd stagger in elevation and all different positions. The reason to have them like that was almost any way that a fighter plane could come in on you, you could get say forty guns on them.

Interviewer: Would these all be bomber planes?

Veteran: All B-17 bombers. The squadrons were staggered, the group was staggered, the airplanes within the squadron were staggered so that if a plane came in, we'll say, from the right, almost anywhere he came in, you could put forty machines guns on him from all those planes. I've seen so many tracers going out toward the fighter planes coming in, you couldn't even see the fighter planes through the tracers.

Interviewer: And what's a tracer?

Veteran: A tracer is a bullet that leaves a ball of fire as it goes through the air. Every fifth round you fired was a tracer. This was a psychological thing, because you know that bullet's coming. You had four bullets that were armor piercing, but your couldn't see them, and then comes a tracer out that you can see. You can't use your tracers to sight off of because a tracer bullet doesn't go the same place as an armor piercing bullet, so you tend to want to use the tracer, but if your tracer is going there, your others are just going to waste. So, you use your sights always. The psychological effect it has on the person you're shooting at—that's what the tracer is for. Nothing to help you out in sighting, even though a lot of people think that it is.

Interviewer: So now you're in this formation, and you're going where?

Veteran: The first mission was St. Lazaire(?), France.

Interviewer: And that's a submarine pen—is that what you called it?

Veteran: A submarine pen. They have a submarine repair place there, and they call them pens because they put concrete bumpers that were fifteen to thirty feet thick.

Interviewer: And these were German subs?

Veteran: Yes. We carried what we called blockbusters. On missions to plants and so on we carried the 500 pound bombs. A lot of them carried about ten or twelve of those, but we could only carry two blockbusters because they weighed 2,000 pounds apiece. We were trying to hit the submarines in there and tear up the structures there so they couldn't repair so many, so that's why we tried to bust up that concrete. I don't know how good we did on that, but we went there several times. The antiaircraft fire was very heavy there. We called it Flack City, because they put up such a barrage that a lot of people were killed over there.

Interviewer: You were telling me that when you got there there were bright lights in the clouds.

Veteran: Yes, as we were going over the groups—there were about five groups—and the first two or three groups were ahead of us, and going towards the target. We were all in a straight line, but when you get ready to make a bomb run they have to make a turn to go over where they're gonna drop their bombs. I saw a few bursts of antiaircraft fire out from the plane a long ways, and I thought, "Boy, they're not even close. They can't hit anything," and then I looked out the window to observe all of this, and I saw the groups up ahead that had already turned to make their bomb run, and there was a black cloud up there—the only one in the sky. It was coal black all over, and it was just winking in there with orange flashes just like Christmas tree lights, and these planes were flying right into that cloud. That was antiaircraft fire of all these cannons shooting and converging right where we had to cross to go through to get to the target. They concentrated it in there, and made this thing just gleam, and you had to fly through it. Man—I looked up there, and I saw B-17s going down in flames, I even saw parachutes that burned in the air—I don't know why. I heard a lot of stories, and I'm not sure any of them were true. I realized then that I was in a heck of a lot more than I had bargained for. It was just awful to see those guys going down in their parachutes. I don't know if they were just dropping a long distance before opening their parachutes, but seemingly they just fell until they were out of sight. I hope a lot of them did finally open their chutes, but then those that burned had no back-up chutes, and they fell to their deaths.

Interviewer: Was that typical of a mission, seeing that sort of thing?

Veteran: That was typical. Just about every mission you went on, you had to go through that. Then we got in there, and didn't have any fighter problems until after we made our bomb run and went through that antiaircraft fire, came out of it, and then the fighters started coming in on the stragglers. People that had engines shot out by the antiaircraft fire, damage to their planes where they couldn't keep up, having a hard time staying in formation because their flaps wouldn't stay up or their stabilizers were shot up. Dropping out of formation, they would converge on them, so staying in formation was the safest place to be if you could make it. The fighters then took their toll on the stragglers and those that were out of formation.

Interviewer: When you went on these twenty-five missions, did you see these B-17s going down mostly every mission?

Veteran: We went on some, but very few, missions when there were no losses, and they were what we called "milk runs," which were short missions over France to maybe some marshalling yards.

Interviewer: What's a marshalling yard?

Veteran: This is railway yards where they do a lot of transferring of freight trains and so on. There's just tracks after tracks after tracks, and it's where they transfer supplies.

Interviewer: And did you know what your mission was going to be, like a submarine pen or a German occupied area, or what was going on militarily all around?

Veteran: We knew where we were going, and we knew what the target was after we were on our way, but we only found out just before we took off to go there. They would come in at two o'clock in the morning and wake us up, we'd get breakfast at three and briefing at four. That was the song every time, and we knew we were going on a mission that day. The provost marshal of the squadron would come down through there waking us up. The briefing was with all of the group, all of the crews—officers and enlisted men—everybody that was going to fly went to this big building, and up on a platform in front they had a map, and this map had a curtain over the front of it. When everybody got in and everybody was satisfied that there wasn't anybody there that shouldn't be there, they said, "Alright," and pulled back the curtain, or dropped it, and there's a red line or string that marked the route that we're going to take to go where we were going, what we could expect in the way of antiaircraft fire going that route, what we should expect to see in the way of fighter planes coming in. Just whatever they had found out through intelligence about this route is what they told us. What the target will be—it could be a plant in Paris, a submarine pen, a marshalling yard.

Interviewer: Were all of your targets German?

Veteran: No, they were in German-occupied France, but not in Germany. Everywhere we had targets, the Germans had occupied or it was in Germany itself. But France was all occupied by Germans, Holland, Belgium, and Germany—in all of those, people were making equipment for the Germans, gasoline in the refineries. It might have been in France, but nevertheless it all German.

Interviewer: Were all of your targets factories, and places repairing subs, and making tanks? Was that pretty much it?

Veteran: Factories, marshalling yards, and we bombed some airfields.

Interviewer: Were you prepared at that time to be assigned elsewhere?

Veteran: That's a hard question. I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be on guard duty.

Interviewer: Would that have been worse than being up there in that plane?

Veteran: Oh, no. You take guard duty—most of the time it's punishment for not doing your other job right or as right as you can, so if you wind up on guard duty it's because you're not good enough for anything else. Very few of the people who went on those missions that finally did go on guard duty, it was because of going on sick call so they wouldn't have to go a mission, that sort of thing. The majority of the people were proud and very patriotic. It was our job, and there was no way under the sun that I was going to quit.

Interviewer: Backing up to your motivation. Before you went into the Army and before you heard about Pearl Harbor, obviously all of these things were developing over a decade of time, and obviously you wouldn't have been following all the actions in the war very closely, but do you remember hearing your family or hearing news of war around the war prior to Pearl Harbor?

Veteran: I remember hearing about some of what Hitler was doing, and reading a little bit about it in the newspaper, and hearing it on the radio, but for the most part I was either working in this bakery or candy factory I mentioned earlier and going to school. I went to school in the daytime, and played football with after school practice, and then the games and all, so school and the part-time job took about all my time up, so I didn't spend a great deal of time on world events. It wasn't bothering us here in the United States and that was in Europe and England, and it didn't register how bad it really was. I wasn't old enough to realize just how serious it was, so I don't remember a lot of that.

Interviewer: Did your family listen to programs on the radio at that time?

Veteran: Not being there most of the time and there mostly just for sleeping, I can't really say. I think they mostly listened to the entertainment type shows rather than the news, like "Fibber Magee and Molly" and other comedies. I listened to it more when I was very young than I did when I was in high school.

Interviewer: Getting back to your plane. You wore those electric suits, and they would keep you comfortable on the inside as long as they worked. What was the temperature normally on the plane?

Veteran: Sixty below zero in the fuselage back at the waist position at the open window with a machine gun sticking out in the air, and you're standing right in front of it. At 22,000 to 25,000 feet, the wintertime especially, the temperature could run sixty below zero—even a little better at times—but it could run sixty below easy.

Interviewer: Where were you stationed at that time?

Veteran: Thurligh, and that's just a few miles out of Bedford, which is in the English Midlands.

Interviewer: When you were bombing, if you had to bomb a factory was it a misconception to the people at that time that weren't involved that it wasn't as precise as maybe some people thought? If you had to bomb a factory and there was a hospital next door, was it feasible that you could hit just the factory and not hit the hospital? Was it that precise?

Veteran: It was not that precise. There were many times, and I mean many, that the target was not even destroyed to knock a factory or a refinery out of business for more than two or three days, because the bombs did not fall where they were supposed to. A lot of times they fell, and I have pictures that show those bombs are just tearing up peach or apple orchards. But I saw bomb after bomb hitting the wrong places, and they hit places where there were a lot of civilians, and a lot of civilians were killed. If they had been as precise as they thought they were, there wouldn't have been near as many civilians killed. We only bombed military targets, but that's not where the bombs always fell.

Interviewer: When did you learn that there were civilians also killed? Was that something you learned later, or would you know that immediately after your mission?

Veteran: You wouldn't have any way of knowing how many civilians were killed after a mission—you could only guess. For instance, you're gonna bomb a factory out at the edge of town—let's use the Renault plant in Paris, and it's in the northeast part of Paris as I recall, because I saw the Eiffel Tower and the Arch of Triumph and all that as we went by and came in from the south. We hit the Renault plant, but let's just suppose we were headed for that and we hit downtown Paris. You're gonna know for sure that there was more civilians killed and buildings torn down than there was military installations or factories or refineries that you missed, and there's gonna be a lot more civilians killed than there will be in that factory alone. There'd be enough there, but they are usually alerted and they go to shelters. Of course, the people in town are alerted, but they don't think we're gonna bomb downtown, so they don't take near the precautions. I did the same thing in England when I thought the Germans weren’t coming there. So, you knew there were being people killed even if you hit the target.

Interviewer: How did you feel about it?

Veteran: We just made it our business not to think about it.

Interviewer: Just so you could do your job.

Veteran: We did what we had to do. We actually had no control over it. It was kind of like seeing it in a movie, and it didn’t seem real. I don’t know the words to use to describe how you feel when you’re in the antiaircraft fire and you’re looking to see where the bombs hit and all that, and it’s like you’re sitting in a movie theater, except you’re the one doing it.

Interviewer: Were you shot at by fighter planes?

Veteran: Oh, certainly. My first mission, we didn’t even make it back to our base, because we had an engine shot out and antiaircraft holes all in our ship where the flack had come through the fuselage. When those fighter planes came in, they had about a half a dozen machine guns and a couple of 20-millimeter cannons, all cross-mounted in the wings, and when they came out you you’d see a line of fire across there. These 20-millimeter shells from the Germans were set to go off at a distance—600 yards I’ll say—and they go off irregardless of whether they’re hitting anything or not. The American 20-millimeter only goes off when it hits something, otherwise they don’t explode. So you’d see a wave of these white puffs of smoke coming, because it’s a machine gun-type cannon, and it’s “woop-woop-woop-woop,” just like that—just jumpy, and you see the other fire across there, and you’ve got eight guns shooting at you. Your job is to try to stop him before he gets to you.

Interviewer: Would that be nearly every mission that you were shot at?

Veteran: We were shot at as a group every mission, but not every plane in the group was shot at individually. The idea was to try to come in and make a dive down there, and try to put one of their engines out of commission so it couldn’t keep up with the group, and it falls out and falls behind. It becomes a sitting duck, and then they hone in on it, but you can't do anything about it because it's too far away. Again it's just like a movie. They knew that if they came into this group and it's a good formation and everything's flying good that they could have as many as forty guns shooting at them, and they've got like eight shooting at us.

Interviewer: What kind of planes were those that were shooting at you?

Veteran: There were different kinds. The ones that gave us the most trouble was the Messerschmitt 109 and the Focke-Wulf 190s. They also at times put up Henschel dive bombers, Ju88s. They were the best fighter planes Germany had at the time, but they put up everything they could, although some of them weren't considered as fighter planes. They were shooting at bombers that traveled at a cruising speed of 170 mph, which isn't very fast, so even those dive bombers and those twin engine bombers could attack just as good as fighter planes.

Interviewer: You said you were in a formation, so every mission your group was shot at, but your plane didn't get shot at every time?

Veteran: That's true.

Interviewer: So out of your twenty-five missions, about how many do you think your plane was under fire?

Veteran: It's really hard to say. My position was the right waist gunner, and I couldn't see what was going on from the tail position or any other direction, except by looking out his window with the other waist gunner. If he's shooting, I know something's coming, but there's nothing I can do because he's on the gun. The only thing I have to worry about is what's coming in on the right side of that plane that that flexible gun, which is hand held, can get a shot at.

Interviewer: How often did you have to fire?

Veteran: I fired at planes that were shooting at other planes.

Interviewer: Would that be every mission?

Veteran: Every mission I shot nearly all my ammunition. I never did run out of ammunition, because that's one thing you don't want to do. Remember sometimes there were so many guns from all these other planes shooting at a fighter plane coming in, every fifth bullet was a tracer and they'd converge on that into a ball of fire like a funnel, to the point that there were so many tracers out there that you couldn't even see the airplane, and yet we were all shooting at each other, and those planes went down. But who's to say who got the plane, because forty guns were shooting?

Interviewer: Is that what they called a "kill"?

Veteran: Yeah. As I see it, and this doesn't hold true for everybody, to claim a kill you've got to have that thing confirmed by somebody that really knows. You've got to be in an airplane where there's nobody else shooting at him but you—nobody—just one gun, and when you get that confirmed, you can claim that as a kill and get credit for that aircraft. So many were claimed because they were shooting at the same plane a lot of other guys were and would say they killed that bird. Let's say that five guys out of the group claimed that same plane, so they all get credit for it but who confirms it? I never could figure that out, because how could you confirm something when you can't even see the plane for the tracers going out?

Interviewer: And that was the big thing to come back and say, "I made these kills"?

Veteran: We'd come back and say we destroyed fifty German planes, and then if you read the German report on that same mission that the Americans made, they only lost five. I shot at planes that went down, and I assisted in getting that plane is all I could say I did. I don't know if everything I shot hit or if two of them hit, or who hit what.

Interviewer: Were you ever sure of one that you hit exclusively?

Veteran: There was a lot of superstition going on at that time. We were put way out on the right wing, and we were the only aircraft that had nose guns. We had mounted twin 50s, the same as in the tail position right out on the Plexiglas nose, and we were put out there to draw fire, because one of the things the Germans could do was come head on, and the top turret gun couldn't get on it, and the ball turret couldn't get to it, and the navigator gun couldn't get to it, and the bombardier gun couldn't get to it. They had found that if they came in level and just perfectly straight, they could get in and just shoot the devil out of them, so we mounted twin 50s right in the center of that dome, and we set out there to draw fire. Our plane was specifically sent out to be a sitting duck. Our group is over here, and we're over here—just a little bit out of formation to the right. I didn't like that mission too much. Anyway, on that particular mission FW-190 fighters came about a thousand yards out, turned and headed straight into us into our right side, and he came in just straight and level with all guns blazing. There was nobody else shooting, because we were out there in the way of the other people shooting at him. He knew where to come, and he knew just where to get to where these other guns would be afraid to shoot through us, because they would knock us down. The last of his 20-millimeter cannon shells hit our wingtip. {END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B}

{BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE A}

Interviewer: Jess, if you'll just continue your story where the plane was coming right at you.

Veteran: As I was saying, probably one of the last rounds of 20-millimeter cannon shells that the fighter fired at us hit our outer wingtip, put a hole in it probably somewhere between two and three feet wide, and was the only round that he shot that hit us. All the time he was coming in, I was shooting at him, and was the only gun shooting at him. Nobody else in the group shot because they were afraid of hitting our plane that was out there in the sitting duck position. Just before that last projectile hit the wingtip, he came in and turned belly up into a roll, and there was smoke coming out of him. He went out of sight below the plane, and he turned and dived down. As he went down there was smoke coming out. That happened in just seconds. Didn't have time to be afraid. It would have been very easy to drop down behind the armor plating that was waist-high down, but had I done that, then we could have lost that plane and that whole crew. So in my mind, and I'll feel like it I guess until the day I die, that I saved that airplane and that crew. Later, the copilot came back and shook my hand and congratulated me, and said, "I'm confirming that kill for you." I'm gonna get to the superstitious part of this now. We had all kinds of superstitions back then.

We thought if we'd do everything the same on each mission that we did on the one before, we had a better chance of survival, which is wrong, of course, but that's what we thought. We'd wear the same clothes, we did the same things—almost exactly. One of the superstitions that I had was that it seemed to me that every time somebody claimed an airplane, they were about the next ones to get shot down. So, when the copilot said he was going to confirm the kill for me, I said, "No, I'm not sure I got him." He said, "But he was smoking when he went down," and I said, "Well, he might have just throttled back on his engine, and it was out of the exhaust or something," although at the time I believed I stopped him, and I still believe it. When we went to debriefing, they asked if anybody had any claim, and I kept my mouth shut and didn't have a claim. I didn't think it was really something to brag all that much about anyway. Also, for that I would have gotten an air medal, but I wasn't interested in an air medal. I left there with four air medals as it was, and one more didn't make that much difference. I wasn't frightened during that time. I was doing what I had to do, and it was just kind of like in a dream, although it was a scary situation.

Interviewer: What was your most frightening situation?

Veteran: We went to Vermen, Germany, and that's a long way from the Midlands of England. We were on a bomb run, and there was a lot of antiaircraft fire. Even the German fighters were coming through their own antiaircraft fire, and there was a lot of planes that went down. It finally totaled out that we lost ten airplanes, and that makes 100 men—ten men on each plane.

Interviewer: Were there always ten?

Veteran: Not always, but always ten on my crew. The fighters were coming in and the antiaircraft was going full swing, and then there was the awfullest explosion from outside my right waist window. It looked like an airplane had exploded, or something large anyway. It had an orange flame working in it after the blast, and I felt the concussion of it. When I saw that, I couldn't imagine a gun on the ground big enough to shoot a projectile 25,000 feet up in the air and leave an explosion like that. When I thought they had created an antiaircraft gun like that, I said, "Well, that's the end of the world for us, because they'll blast us out of the sky with it. They'll kill us all." I saw another one of those at a longer distance away from me, and I saw a lot of planes going down—parachutes and all of that. I didn't know what in the heck had happened until I got back to base and found out that what they had done was to take 100 pound bombs and put them on these fighter planes, and they set the fuse on them to go off at 2,000 feet, so they would come up to our altitude, find that altitude, and then go up 2,000 feet above that, get out of range for us to shoot at them, and they would come over the bomb group and drop these 100 pound bombs from above, and they were timed to go off when they got to our level. So it wasn't antiaircraft fire that was causing it, it was bombs being dropped on us by these fighters. As time went on, they quit doing that. I had thought if they kept doing that they would finally just wipe us out, but it turned out to be inaccurate. They didn't do hardly do any good dropping those bombs, so they quit doing it. I sure was glad, too, because I didn't have to see anymore bombs going off up there with us.

Interviewer: That was the only time that happened to you?
Veteran: The only time I saw one explode that close to my plane. The others I saw off at a further distance.

Interviewer: How long were you in England all together?
Veteran: Fourteen months.

Interviewer: Did you develop personal friendships when you were there?
Veteran: The friends that I did develop were back before I went into combat, and we did things with guys there. We'd go into London on a pass, and go to a movie, and see some of the sights of London, such as Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum, and Big Ben, and all the different squares that are so famous like Trafalgar Square, and of course the USO clubs. Anyway, it was interesting to do that.

Interviewer: When did you get the opportunity to do that sort of thing?
Veteran: We were allowed to have a three-day pass if we wanted to go to London, but we could only get those every so often, maybe once a month. Sometimes we'd go into town at night to a pub that local people went to. They always had a piano in

there, and they liked to sing. The British people really like to sing, and they'd gang up around the piano, have a few beers, and sing away. The drinking over there in the pubs is not like a lot of them in the states where they go to get drunk. They could order one beer, and it would last them for hours just sipping on it and talking. It was a nice place to go. The one we went to the most was called The King's Head, and it was about a twenty block walk to it from the school where I was. Those guys that I worked with in the office were friendly with one another, and we played cards together, and that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Did you not have to be back on the base or post by a certain time at night? Do you remember what time you had to be back?

Veteran: We had to be back at midnight.

Interviewer: But then sometimes you got woke up at two in the morning.

Veteran: The two o'clock in the morning thing came after I got into the combat unit.

Interviewer: So in combat, did you have to be back on post at a certain time?

Veteran: Midnight. And then the provost marshal of our squadron would come in, and I don't know if he just liked the personnel that were flying on his planes or what, but he seemed to get a kick out of coming in and waking them up, and telling them that breakfast was gonna be in an hour, and the way he'd wake 'em up was to turn their bunks over and dump them on the floor. He dumped me out a time or two. He didn't do everybody that way, but he did a lot of us that way. I always thought as he was dumping some of those guys out, it could possibly be the last day they would be alive. Anyway, this guy had a problem, and I'll just get him out of the way real quick-like. He got a Dear John letter and shot himself, and it killed him. So that was the end of him and the dumping of the beds.

Interviewer: And so you if you stayed out late, it was at your own risk, because you might be very tired the next day.

Veteran: If you go stay out until midnight and they call you at two, you just make the best of whatever rest you got. You wanted to be prepared for that event. You didn't want to come back drunk or something like that. By the way, this whole time, I never saw anybody on drugs. I did see one guy that drank way too much—he was an older guy and one of our leaders. But you didn't want to go out tonight and get drunk, come back at midnight, and then get woke up to go on a mission when you're hung over bad. A lot of times, we were dumped out and the mission would be scrubbed because of bad weather. That kind of brings us to this friendship thing again. Once I got into the combat group and onto a crew, I never went anywhere with anybody on the crew. Occasionally, I would go with another guy in another squadron. We were the same age and went through gunnery school together. For the most part, though, if I wanted to go to London I went by myself. I went to a British hospital to visit a friend that got wounded way up in England towards Scotland, and I had some time so I took a couple of days to go see him. I stayed in some nice hotels in London and saw the sites again. Went to Edinburgh and Nottingham, and also got to take some R&R once for a week or two, and that was on the south coast of England. I stayed in a castle there—a big outfit on the water. They had horseback riding and entertainment stuff there. I think the name of the town was either Southport or South Hampton. I never really felt like I had to have this R&R, but I took advantage of it. I liked riding horses on the beach best of all.

Interviewer: I want to clarify, Jess. What I have here that you are a wing gunner, but it's really called a waist gunner. Is that right? A right waist gunner.

Veteran: Right waist gunner, which was the waist of the middle of the fuselage.

Interviewer: You also said that once you knew how many missions you were going to have go and once you reached your minimum, which was twenty-five for you at the time, what happens as soon as someone has finished their missions? Were you off to the states automatically, or maybe you were going to stay in England and do some work on the ground to fulfill your time in the military?

Veteran: I had to do whatever they told me to do.

Interviewer: So it didn't automatically mean that when these guys finished their missions they were going home. You're still in the military. Like the guys on the *Memphis*

Belle, as soon as they finished their missions, they were done, and they only wanted them to go off on a PR thing. But that's not realistic, because sometimes you stayed around and worked?

Veteran: Not in every case. Some of us were to go home; some of us were to stay there, depending on what their qualifications were. I read recently about a fellow that was retained there because of some job he had. They were short people by then, and it was hard to get replacements for gunners and so on, and even gunnery officers. The gunners all had an officer in charge of all the gunners of that squadron—all crews. His job was to replace gunners that had been killed, wounded, etc. If the plane with the crew was there, he had to fill in with somebody else. He had to also take care of the gunners' problems, and that's who they'd report to. Other than the squadron commander on the ground, you went to this guy. So, I finished my mission and was called into his office. He said, "Jess, we have two options here. One—you can stay here, and we will put you in for a field commission as a second lieutenant to be a gunnery officer…not necessarily here, but some other group. We can put you in for a field commission, or you can go home." I said, "Well, I've been gone for almost two years. I've been through this, and while I'd like to be a second lieutenant, I want to go home." And so they said, "OK, that's the way it'll be."

Interviewer: But you weren't out of the military.

Veteran: Oh, no—far from it. Then I went on leave, and I let the squadron know where I was gonna be, which was back in the 8th Air Force headquarters in Teddington, about twenty-five or thirty miles outside of London, back to where I had done the office work, so I went there to visit my friends at headquarters. I had given the guys in my squadron the phone number there in Teddington, and while I was there, the orderly came down and said he had a phone call hanging on for me in the orderly room. I went to the phone, and it was the base calling me saying, "If you can get here quick enough, we'll have your papers, because the *Queen Elizabeth* is waiting up in Scotland, and if you can get there quick enough, you're on your way home. Get here as quick as you can. I'll have your papers all ready, and you can grab them and catch the train to Scotland." So, it was kind of lucky that the colonel I had worked for in the office was still there. He was a lieutenant colonel when I was there and had made a full colonel, so I went to him. He had liked to talk to me about combat missions and so on, and so I went to his office and told him I needed to get to Thurligh just as quick as I could get there. I asked him if he could help me, and he said he believed he could. He picked up the phone and called his driver to his command car. I loaded into that command car and we headed out from Teddington to Twikingham(sic?). We went in a hurry, and that driver got me there in record time. Sure enough, my papers were ready. Got them and got my belongings out of the barracks, headed for the train station, caught a train from there to Scotland, and the *Queen Elizabeth* was still there when I got there, and I boarded that thing to head back home. I spent four days on the water going back. That's the time that they made us man the guns on the *Queen Elizabeth*. There were, I believe, 3,000 men going back over there. The put us on four hours and eight hours off around the clock. That's a British ship, and it the normal gun crew on it was American soldiers—infantry-type soldiers, and while some of them stayed on the big guns, we mounted the smaller guns like the 40-millimeter cannons, and had to watch out for submarines all the way back, and it was freezing cold on that thing. Looking for icebergs as well as submarines was what our job was.

Interviewer: And when you did arrive back in the states, you went to Houston, and that's ultimately how we ended up connecting because you met your future wife there.

Veteran: Yeah, we landed at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and caught a train to Camp Miles Standish in New Jersey and stayed there for a little while getting my papers, and got me a delay in route for one month. I never had had a furlough and I still didn't, because it was better to take a delay in route. I came to Houston to see my folks, who had moved to Houston from Hulon(sic?), Oklahoma, and my dad was working in the shipyard while my mother was a housewife. That's where I met my wife, because they lived real close to my wife's sister and her husband. She was visiting them, and we dated for a couple of weeks. She went to Mississippi, where she was from, and I went to Walla Walla, Washington, to become a flying instructor gunner on an airbase up there.

Interviewer: And you there how long?

Veteran: Didn't stay there but a month or two, and then I was sent to Florida to go to an instructor's school down there. Then I went back to Walla Walla, and my group had moved to A-1 Park, Florida, only seventy-five miles from Ft. Myers, where I had just left, so I have made a 7,000 mile trip on the trip to get seventy-five miles. Anyhow, I went back then and became a flying instructor gunner at A-1 Park at the base there where we took the bomber crews that had their planes assigned and were taking what they called a third base training. This was the last training before going overseas. They fired guns from the air to ground.

Interviewer: About what time was this?

Veteran: I came back from England in July, so that was around January or February of '44—somewhere in the first part of '44.

Interviewer: When did you hop the *Queen Elizabeth* to return?

Veteran: That was probably around the first of July of '43.

Interviewer: So you did your instructing there in Florida.

Veteran: Until the order came through that they wanted 10,000 people at Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls to take basic training again. The orders read 'for people that had been overseas' to take their basic training again, and it was a big mistake because the order was supposed to read 'for those people that had NOT been overseas.' Well, these 10,000 people that had been accumulating back from overseas by that time, were all in a gang at Sheppard Field, Texas, to take basic training from drill sergeants that we outranked. We had been through war, we had been through battles and everything, and here they are gonna get us out there like we were rookies.

Interviewer: So you went there, but ultimately because of that mistake you were offered a chance to go anywhere you wanted to go.

Veteran: That's right. Some things happened that when the civilian population in Wichita Falls saw us coming, they'd step out in the gutter, because they thought as ex-combat people we were likely to do anything, and that was not the truth in any way. Now, true, there were some incidents where some people got pretty bad.

When the word finally got back to Washington about what had happened, there was a major general (I saw his plane when he came in—that's how I knew what he was because I saw his stars on the plane—it was a C-47) that issued orders to get all these ex-combat people out of there as fast as they possibly could, and he wanted them out of there day and night—non-stop until they're all gone. And he issued orders that we should be given the first choice of where we wanted to go irregardless of our MOS number—that's our job number in the Air Force. I was a 611. Even if I had been a gunner and I wanted to go where they were training pilots, I'd go there, and I could stay there, could not be transferred, and nothing could be done against my wishes for a period of six months. Kind of a reward for what we'd been through and what they had done to us. If it wasn't possible to give them their first choice, they had to give them their second choice, without a doubt.

Interviewer: And why did you choose Harlingen?

Veteran: I chose Harlingen Aerial Gunnery School first because it fit in with what I'd been into for a long time, and my parents in the meantime had moved to McAllen, which is about forty miles from Harlingen. I think the shipyards closed down or something, so I thought I'd go on down there and be where they were. Also the aerial gunnery school fit in with my MOS, so I got my first choice. On the way there, I came through Houston and visited relatives, and my wife came to visit her sister again. This was something like a year later, and we had written to each other.

Interviewer: She wasn't your wife then?

Veteran: No, but we met again. She was gonna have to go back to Mississippi the next day, and I was headed for Harlingen, and instead of her going on, we went down to the courthouse and got married.

Interviewer: But you'd only been around each other one time before.

Veteran: We had dated for a couple of weeks, and this time for another week.

Interviewer: And ya'll have been together for how long now?

Veteran:	Fifty-six years we've been married now.

Interviewer:	So you had good instincts.

Veteran:	Well, I guess we did. (Laughter)

Interviewer:	When did you finally leave Harlingen and get out of the military?

Veteran:	I left Harlingen around the first of September and was sent to Ft. Sam Houston in San Antonio, the mustering out center, and stayed there for a few days, got my discharge, got my 'ruptured duck," which is a lapel pin for a civilian suit that shows you're honorably discharged. I still have it, too. That was effective on September 9, 1945.

Interviewer:	And so you were in from January 1942 to September 1945.

Veteran:	That's three years and I think eight months.

Interviewer:	Well, I'm going to ask you some questions that may seem a little out of order. Did you know anyone personally that was ever shot down? I know there were large numbers of people there, so you saw a lot of planes go down. You said you were kind of a loner, so obviously you didn't lose a best friend that way, but did you actually know some of the people personally, or were you friends with people that were shot down?

Veteran:	The one that sticks in my mind right now, the first one, was the tailgunner on our crew that I flew with on nineteen missions. When I left my missions, he had two more to go, and he went on one of them. On his last mission, a fighter plane came in on the tail position, one projectile hit that plane in the tail position and hit him right in the heart, and that was the only mark on that plane—that one bullet. He was the closest of those that I knew, and it was his twenty-fifth mission. I was lucky enough to in the 369th Squadron, and it went on forty-two consecutive missions and never had a loss. The other squadrons in this group that we flew in formation with, one of them was wiped out twice that I know of and lost other planes repeatedly. The other two squadrons lost planes right and left, and here we sat without planes and did not have a loss of men, planes, anything. Forty-two consecutive missions back when it was almost impossible to even make twenty-five.

Interviewer: But the people you knew that were in this squadron, how did you guys react, or did anyone talk about when news of another plane or that sort of thing happened?

Veteran: This fella that was my bunk mate, I talked to him the night before my first mission, and he kind of briefed me on what the missions were like. He talked about his home, and he talked about his family, and we just sat there and got to know each other, because I had just transferred in there. This guy was one of the bravest guys I knew, and he stands out in my mind a lot, because the next day I went on my first mission, and on the way back the plane he was in (and he was a top turret gunner in the engineer position) was knocked out of formation. It finally was shot so bad that it couldn't fly and couldn't get back across the English Channel and had to ditch. While they were flying down to ditch, there was a fighter plane that kept coming in and shooting at them, and it would come around again and shoot at them from the back. Then they ditched the plane in the water, and it skipped a little bit across the water and then stopped. The plane was there just a very few seconds when the nose of it started going down, and the top turret guns were still firing when that plane went under the water. He was still trying to shoot that plane that had just strafed them while they were laying the water. He wasn't satisfied with shooting them down; he wanted to kill them in the water.

Interviewer: So he didn't try to get out of the plane. He was just trying to take out the other plane.

Veteran: He made no effort to get out of that plane. He went down fighting, and he was awarded a high medal for it—the Distinguished Service Cross.

Interviewer: You talked about superstitions in your crew. Did ya'll ever share a prayer together or anything like that before you took off?

Veteran: We had one prayer on one mission, and this was given by the archbishop, and he later became a cardinal, and his name was Francis Spellman. My folks got a letter from him that he had come out to the plane and blessed the crew.

Interviewer: So you guys didn’t do anything?

Veteran: We never had a prayer, and we never did anything like that.

Interviewer: At that time, obviously you weren’t fighting the Japanese at that point. You were dealing with the German situation, but because of Pearl Harbor you probably felt like the Japanese were your enemy as well, but you were mostly concerned with the Germans where you were. How did the guys feel at that time? Did they just absolutely hate the Germans, or did they feel like it was just a job? What was the atmosphere like then?

Veteran: Well, not in the sense there was for the Japanese. Over there, the ones that I really detested—I just thought they were the awfullest people in the world—was the Japanese. But it didn’t take long for us to find that some of our guys that were shot down by the Germans, were captured, and made prisoners of war. They were put into special concentration camps for the fliers, and we got letters from them. They got Red Cross packages and they were treated good. They didn’t get to skin and bones like they did in Japan.

Interviewer: So you were hearing that the prisoners in Japan were being treated differently than the prisoners of war in Germany.

Veteran: Oh, much different, but there were some prisoners of war in Germany that were found to be skin and bones. For some reason the fliers seemed to have a special place in the German’s mind or something, because our people were treated better, on the whole, than anybody else was.

Interviewer: What were you hearing that the Japanese were doing to POWs?

Veteran: Like the death march, and starvation of prisoners, and diseases, and killing them at the drop of a hat for nothing. We heard of torture, and that’s the big fear I had with the Germans when I first started. Not being killed, but being a prisoner of war.

Interviewer: Was that a common feeling at that time about the Japanese? Were the guys in your barracks mostly talking about the Japanese more than the Germans?

Veteran: Once we found out it wasn't the worst thing in the world to be a German prisoner, then that fear wasn't so great. But listening to what we did hear about the South Pacific, then the Japanese were a lot worse to me than the Germans. And another thing, on several occasions when these fortresses were shot down and the guys were able to get out, there were Germans that would salute these guys in their parachutes while they were floating down. There were some Germans that would really surprise you, and these are the ones that you don't hate. They'd come in and shoot down a plane, and the guys are going down, they'd come down and lower their flaps on their little fighter plane so they'd fly slow, and they'd come by and salute and take off.

Interviewer: So in general, you'd say that the people you were around didn't really hate the Germans?

Veteran: We hated them. We shot at them, and we wanted to get them. We wanted them out of there and end the war, but I lost the first fear I had of being a POW. I had some fear, but it wasn't near as great later on as it was when I first started. Later, instead of being afraid of being a prisoner of war, I was afraid of being shot and wounded. {END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A}

{BEGINNING OF SIDE B}

Interviewer: You were concluding with your fear of being a prisoner of war, but you really got past that.

Veteran: I was afraid of being wounded and maybe losing a leg or an arm or be paralyzed. I was more afraid of that on the last part of the missions than at the first. I even had nightmares that I'd become a prisoner of war, because I had heard that they were being tortured, but it wasn't necessarily all truth.

Interviewer: Do you feel that young men of eighteen years old are really ready for the challenges of war, because you were a teenager at that time. Do you really feel that a teenager is mentally ready for the challenges of war, or do you think that it's better that they're young like that? How do you feel about that?

Veteran: I really think myself and some others like me that went in when we were seventeen, it's a little bit young, but in eight months I'd have been in the service anyway.

Interviewer: Do you have an ideal age that you think would be better for a young man to enter the military, especially a war?

Veteran: Somewhere around twenty would be better than seventeen for sure. I had completed half of my tour of missions along about my nineteenth birthday, and I was eighteen when I started. There was so many things we didn't even know about life, much less Army life and war. We're talking about a kid that lived in Oklahoma for seventeen years, and didn't know anything about anything. Hadn't been anywhere or done anything, and then had to get into that. But by the same token, at eighteen I did my job.

Interviewer: Were you very homesick?

Veteran: In the beginning I was, but by the time I got to England and so many new things were taking place that I kind of lost my homesickness.

Interviewer: Did you receive many letters from home?

Veteran: I didn't receive a lot of letters but they were regular. My mother wrote regularly, and so did my sister.

Interviewer: Were they hearing things at home about what was going on with the war that you didn't know?

Veteran: They mostly talked about what was going on at home.

Interviewer: Did you talk about what was going on where you were?

Veteran: No. I'd tell them I'd been to London for two or three days, and went to see Madam Tussaud's and Big Ben, and I rode the undergrounds, as subways are called over there, and I went up and down the Thames River, and so on. But I didn’t go into detail, but they knew by my address that I was in a heavy bombardment group and that I was a gunner.

Interviewer: Because the war created a lot of jobs, did it affect their lifestyle at all?

Veteran: Oh, yeah. My father was a candy maker in Oklahoma when the war started, and they started these shipyards in the Houston and Galveston areas, and jobs came up for all types of people at much higher pay than what they were getting up in Oklahoma. So, the people went where the money was in shipbuilding and factories and refineries. The government was building refineries as well as building tanks and airplanes all over the country. My folks just happened to go to the shipyards.

Interviewer: So they benefited from the war.

Veteran: Yes. They had a better life, a better place to live, more money. It was a whole lot better for them.

Interviewer: Speaking of money, when you first were in the military you said you earned about $21 a month. Do you remember what you were making before you went into the military?

Veteran: When I left that place working six days a week, twelve hours a night, I was making $12.50 a week.

Interviewer: You took a cut in pay, except you didn’t have any living expenses unless you left base, but you really didn’t when you lived at home either, did you?

Veteran: What I did do with my little $12.50 was I used it for my clothes and anything I wanted to do. I bought my own school books and any other expenses, but not for room and board.

Interviewer: You mentioned you were sending money home. You made significantly more money after you transferred into a combat unit.

Veteran: Yes. Within two or three days after going into a combat unit, I was made a buck sergeant, so I got sergeant’s pay, and then I was given overseas pay—seems like it was a 20% raise over that. Then I was on flying status, and that gives you 50%

of your base pay extra, so within a six months period I went from buck sergeant to a staff sergeant to a technical sergeant, which is a five-striper. With tech sergeant's pay and overseas pay and then flight pay, I had a pretty darned good salary, and I was able to send quite a bit home.

Interviewer: Why were you sending the money home? Was it to help them or to save for you?

Veteran: I sent it to my folks and wrote them a letter telling them, "This is your money to do as you please. If you don't want to do it, you don't have to, so I want you to put it up and save it for me. If you need it, use it."

Interviewer: And did they need to use it?

Veteran: They never touched it.

Interviewer: Do you recall what you had when you got out?

Veteran: I don't recall how much it was, but for a little old $12.50-a-week-guy, I had quite a bit.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the war and the United States' involvement in it? Do you have any regrets about joining the military and flying those missions? Do you think that everything that went down was the way that it should have, as far as our part and your part?

Veteran: I don't have any regrets along the line you're thinking about. I might would have made a few changes, but they would just be for my benefit. For instance, I wouldn't change anything that's happened since, but when they offered me to be a commissioned officer, that was an opportunity for more money, to advance to a better job, have more pride in yourself by moving up, a chance of maybe going up even to a higher rank after that, a chance of more travel to more places because I'd be going to some other place as a gunnery officer, but by the same token if I had taken that, I wouldn't be where I am now. It would have changed my whole life. I really did want to advance in rank in the service, but I also wanted to come home. In a sense, that was a mistake, because some of the guys that stayed and took it did pretty darned good.

Interviewer: Speaking of coming home, how was it to come home? Here you are, and you had this lifestyle over here and you really came home and right away have a wife, and pretty soon you have a pregnant wife, and you have to go into the private industry. Do you feel like you made the transition well from military life to civilian life?

Veteran: I got a job right away, even though it was a menial job. It was the True Haul Trailer Company, and that's those big eighteen wheel trailers. One of the companies that builds these trailers was True Haul, and I got a job repairing trailers. My job required welding and different things. I did pretty well, and even got a raise there within a couple of months after I got there, but it wasn't good enough. I knew that sugar was rationed, and it was rationed for a long time after the war, so I applied for a sugar allotment to go up to Oklahoma and take the equipment that I had used before I went into the service with this fellow that owned a bakery. There was no candy maker up there anymore, so they stored all this equipment in another building, and all that candy making equipment was just put into storage. So, this guy is the one that was going to help me out to go to college, and he said, "You ought to come down here, and I'll let you use this building and this equipment. You won't have enough sugar to work a full day every day, so you'll need something else to make it up, but they won't give you enough for that," and sure enough, they didn't. He said, "I will charge you $1.00 a day for the use of the equipment and the building. You'll pay your own utility bills." So Loraine and I packed up our bags and went down there. She stayed over in Ada with my folks while I went over and got the shop started and got the equipment lined up, and we started a little candy factory there on our sugar allotment. Then I had a sideline job for the same bakery that I had worked for, but under different management. So the morning hours, I'd get up at four o'clock and make a bread route with all the cakes, and pies, and bread. Also, they had some notions on there, too—cigarettes and things of that nature. I finished that up by noon, Loraine and I would go to the shop in the evening to make candy, or wrap it, or box it to get it ready for delivery, and we'd do that every day. We had enough sugar that we could last about a month just working in the evenings. If we wanted to sometimes, I'd get a lot when I'd make deliveries, and rather than try to sell it out into stores or to a jobber, I just took the candy over to them and jobbed it out to them, and their sales people took it out and sold it, and so that made it a lot easier for me, and they took all the candy I could make, but they could sell all the candy I could make because of the sugar being rationed. Just about anything you put out there was sold.

Anyhow, I did not go through any major change. It was almost as if I'd never been overseas. I didn't have any problems from the combat. I just got right back into my old candy making—just like I hadn't been gone six months. We had a child when we got down there that was eighteen months old, and we were raising him. Had a little house there and a little car, had a job and a candy shop.

Interviewer: Obviously it wasn't too long before you did end up in Houston.

Veteran: The big candy factories all over the country had been working all this time building up their factories getting them ready for the sugar to be released, and when it was released they flooded the market with candy, and here I am sitting up there with a few hundred pounds of sugar a week to make candy with, and they've got jillions of pounds, and all the newest equipment, and I'm doing this all by hand. For instance, the Williams Candy Company in Oklahoma City had built an eleven story candy factory—a city block, and it was about ninety miles from where I was. They could take the same amount of candy that I could make and blow it with air up twice the size and sell it for more money, and I couldn't put that air in it. I didn't have the equipment or the money to buy the equipment to do it, so they put me out of business.

Interviewer: So you ultimately ended up settling in Houston.

Veteran: Went back to Houston and went to work at the candy factory there with my dad.

Interviewer: And then you had another son and raised your family.

Veteran: We started another candy factory in Mississippi—a little one. I got a place that was at least a hundred miles in any direction from any other candy factories of any size and started getting orders, and my mother had a stroke. Nobody would take care of her, so Loraine and I shut down the candy shop, sold out, and came back to Houston.

Interviewer: And you raised your family in Galena Park?
Veteran: Partly in Galena Park, and partly in southeast Houston.

Interviewer: Let me just ask you a few follow-up questions, and hopefully we'll get them all in. The guys in your crew—do you recall any of their names?
Veteran: Oh, yeah.

{Tape stopped and restarted}
Interviewer: This is Debra Williams again continuing my interview with Jess Williams. I'm just going to list his crew members of the plane *The Geeza*: {All names "phonetically" spelled by Transcriptionist.}

Pilot: Edward P. Malosouski
Co-Pilot: Emanuel Cluddy
Engineer: Wally W. Holloway
Navigator: Albert C. Shulstad
Cavalier: William J. McDonald
Right Waist: Jess Williams
Left Waist: Harold K. Fowler
Radio Operator: Harold C. Green
Ball Turret: Durbin H. Ray
Tail Gunner: Richard J. Daley

Did you stay in touch after the war with any of the guys that you met while you were in the military?
Veteran: The only one that I contacted was the pilot, and that was in recent years. Through joining the 8th Air Force organization, I got his address and phone number. I gave him a call and also wrote him a letter, and I have his response to that letter.

Interviewer: And where is he now?

Veteran: He lived then and lives now in Grosspoint(?), Michigan. His father was in the furniture and carpet business, and when he came back from the war he went to work for his father, which he had been before he went in, and it was a pretty good sized operation. His father retired, and he took over the business. This is interesting and explains why I'm going into this. He got the contract from General Motors and Ford to make the carpet for all their cars and trucks and whatever had carpet in it. He was awarded the contract for both General Motors and Ford, which is one heck of a contract, and it made him wealthy. Then he retired, and he and his wife took a tour on a ship around the world. He came back and still lives in Grosspoint, and his son, at last account, ran the business. Grosspoint is a place where the elite live in that area up close to Detroit.

Interviewer: Speaking of the elite, what about you, because this is what this is about? We're sitting here in the Hill Country of Texas, in Blanco, on a nice little spread of seven acres, I believe. You said you've been married now fifty-six years, raised two sons, and have six grandchildren. And you ultimately worked for Crown in Houston, and through your hard work and savings and retirement, that's how you can come out here into the country and live in the lap of luxury.

Veteran: I wouldn't hardly call it that, but it's pretty nice.

Interviewer: You are in a new home in the Hill County, and I am your daughter-in-law, so it's no coincidence that we have the same last name. Now not only is there a Jess Williams, my son is Jess Williams the third.

Veteran: Yeah, it wasn't all bad. {Laughter} I worked for the Crown Central Petroleum for thirty-seven years.

Interviewer: And maybe someday, someway you'll go to Savannah, Georgia, where it all started, because your son, Jess, and myself purchased a plaque on the wall out there that has your name on it, so someday if somebody in your unit wants to visit there, they can see it. It has your bomb group and squadron number on it, and the airplane name. You were awarded, what, four air medals, which would have been five if you had actually not been superstitious and been confirmed by the co-pilot. You got your Distinguished Flying Cross, and your squadron got numerous commendations. As you were telling me, and I don't want to run out of tape here, but when you were in Florida, you guys had this wonderful idea to develop a crew, and you hadn't had enough, so you're going to go off to the South Pacific.

Veteran: That's what we decided to do, but we were turned down. We had a crew all ready to go, and all we wanted them to do was give us one of those Fortresses that were going to leave shortly for the South Pacific, and we were ready to go and would have gone.

Interviewer: But you were told, "You survived over there, now I'm not going to let you go to the South Pacific and get killed."

Veteran: That's what he said. He was commanding officer of the base, and he said, "No way am I gonna have that on my shoulders that I let you, after you've already been through the war, to go over there and get killed and it be my fault. You're not going."

Interviewer: Do you have any comments to make about the way the military was then and the way it is now. For example, your hearing problem. Probably they wouldn't put these young guys out there shooting these big guns without ear protection, so there's probably some safety improvements there, but do have any idea of the changes from the way the military was then and the way it is now—for the better/for the worse?

Veteran: I think they have gained a lot of knowledge over the years, because of how many wars have been going on since World War II. We've had Korea and Vietnam and the war in the Middle East, and all that. And technology has advanced so much—they can take that Stealth bomber, and they can pinpoint almost anything they want to, and I'm talking about precision bombing. What we did was called precision, but it wasn't necessarily precision—there was a lot of misses. So, I think that probably now people going into the service have a lot more to work with than we did. We had no knowledge. We didn't have good equipment. The oxygen system on the plane was one of the things that was so bad. They had those old bladder-type oxygen masks. It just covered your nose and eyes. It would freeze up or ice up, and if it did that enough, you'd pass out from lack of oxygen. Then they developed the demand system, which was so much better. It was the difference between daylight and dark. We didn't have ice freezing up and didn't have to worry about squeezing the bag, breaking the ice up so we could breathe. I only had to do that on one mission, but believe me, that was more than enough. It was just almost impossible to do that. That evidently was a fairly new airplane.

Interviewer: That was January 28 of 1943?

Veteran: 1942 was when the 8th Air Force was started, and I enlisted in January 3rd, 1942, and this was just weeks after that.

Interviewer: When did they put that plane in service? Was it '43?

Veteran: Yes, February 25, 1943, and I had started my mission January 3, so I wasn't in that plane on my first mission, but that's where the bad oxygen was—in that older plane. When I was on *Geeza,* it had the demand system.

Interviewer: According to a book in the museum in Savannah that I took the photograph of, that plane was lost in October of what year? Do you recall?

Veteran: 1943. But I have other literature on it, and I thought it came from your visit to the museum in Savannah that *Geeza* was lost over England. It wasn't in combat. It left the 306th Group and went to the 8th Air Force headquarters as a transport plane. It was later sent to the 91st Bomb Group, and went on missions again. Then, at some point in time after that it was on a routine flight over England and it crashed, so it was lost in England.

Interviewer: Can you briefly comment on the B-17, which was called the Flying Fortress. Obviously it was a powerful, reliable plane.

Veteran: It was a very reliable plane.

Interviewer: How did it compare to the B-24 or the other planes that were around?

Veteran: Well, to me there just wasn't any other heavy bomber for me. The B-24 had a name for the least little thing that would go wrong with the hydraulics, it just wouldn't fly. The Fortress took a beating. I have pictures of where a German fighter attacked the B-17, it had it's wing cut halfway through the fuselage back at the waist position—halfway through—and the airplane came back home. All the lines cut on that side, and it still came back. They took a beating and kept right on flying. Of course of them were lost, and a lot of them didn't make it, but it was so much so that when I got to Harlingen to the gunnery school, I decided that I would not fly on a B-24. If I couldn't fly on a B-17, I wouldn't fly anymore. I took myself off of flying status and never got back into a military plane after that.

Interviewer: Jess, do you have any comments about something I haven't asked you about that you would think maybe somebody that's interested in learning about your experience as a gunner would want to know?

Veteran: Right now, I can't come up with anything we haven't touched on. I know there are some things that we have skipped, but we can't possibly cover it all.

Interviewer: Hopefully this is an overview of what life was like and what it took to do what you were doing.

Veteran: Gosh, it's been so many years ago, and things have changed so much now that my advice or even observations would really be worthless in this day and time, because it's so outdated. There's just nothing like that anymore.

Interviewer: But I think that's the whole point of doing this, and that's to help people understand that have no idea and can't imagine exactly what things were like so that they will understand what it was like to be in that position.

Veteran: One of the things that kind of struck me and impressed me a little bit, is the Air Force, and that includes me, had it easy compared to the infantry, the Marines, the Navy, and some of the others—especially the ground fighters. We did. We had it easy, and when we made a mission and came back, we were given a good meal. We had a bed to sleep in.

Interviewer: They fed you good meals?

Veteran: Oh, yeah. Stuff that we normally couldn't get in the mess hall—fresh eggs, fresh fruit—we didn't ever see that. We were given a celebration meal. We had completed a mission and lived through it. They debriefed us and fed us and gave us a double-shot of whiskey. But there's one thing you could think about, and that's while these guys on the ground that I feel so sorry for what they had to go through, and I know it was terrible, and I'm so glad I didn't have to do it. But one thing that stands out in my mind is that every time I was in combat, I was behind enemy lines. I was over enemy territory. I wasn't on the American side shooting into enemy territory, I was over behind those lines, and the things that can happen to you—such as maybe having to bail out from a damaged ship, and hit the ground and find you're in Germany, and find out that the civilian population there is going to hang you, and want to know why you're bombing Germany—which they did. Some of the guys were saved from being killed by the civilian population by German soldiers abiding by the Geneva Convention. They said, "It's verboten—you can't do that!" So, they'd take them and put them in a concentration camp, and they survived the war and came back to tell these stories. If the soldiers didn't get there first, the civilians would take them out and string them up on a tree limb or either beat them to death. Some bodies were never found, even though they bailed out over land.

Interviewer: That's a lot for a young person, and doing what you were doing, you were certainly not dealing with "young man" issues, because life or death was the big thing. Do you think it affected you as to the kind of person you became? Do you think it made you a better person because of it, or did you appreciate things in a different way?

Veteran: I'm sure it did. I really haven't given it a lot of thought along that line, but I know it did have a bearing on it.

Interviewer: You weren't an irresponsible or troubled child before you went into the military, so it's not like it straightened you out.

Veteran: No, I didn't have that problem.

Interviewer: No, obviously you were working hard and being very responsible.

Veteran: I did the normal things plus my job.

Interviewer: Do you think that mentally maybe you were better prepared for the responsibilities of a family?

Veteran: Yes, I did. I was just a little kid that had never been anywhere. I got to go to different places all over England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and of course we went over France, Germany, Belgium, and Holland, but even though I only got to go over them by air, I got to see landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Notre Dame, different things that I had read and heard about, but I didn't get to see quite a bit when I had time to travel around in England and the other countries. It taught me a lot about the rest of the world and how they lived, especially in England. I got to know quite a few people there. I didn't chum around with them, but I made their acquaintance, so I think it helped a lot. I think it made me more independent, because I did things on my own without having to ask anybody. I learned I could do these things. I could get around wherever I wanted to go. I was scared to death to ride a bus before that in Oklahoma. I also learned about leadership, and what you had to do sometimes that you wouldn't normally do, like telling a commander of an airbase that I'm not going to fly anymore, and I wasn't going to be an instructor.

Interviewer: Well, Jess, I think that concludes our interview, and on behalf of Lee College I would like to thank you for participating in our oral history project, and I would also like to thank you for your service to our country.

Veteran: Well, thank you very much.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}