

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Albert Pfleger

Conducted by Deb Barrett

September 22, 2007

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
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(Note: Corrections made to original transcript by interviewee are noted in parentheses.)

This interview is being conducted on September 22, 2007 with Mr. Albert Pfleger at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Pfleger was born on December 3, 1915, in Chicago, Illinois. He retired as director of plant operations at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, and he learned of the Veterans History Project through the library staff. Also with us today, we have Mr. Pfleger's daughter Vicky Santee. Mr. Pfleger has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Military Service

Albert, when you entered the service, what was your life like just before that time?

Basically I think all of us at that time, it was sort of hectic.

Can you explain?

We knew a war was coming. The inner feeling was there that something was going to happen. And it did.

Where were you living in Chicago at that time?

Living in the near north side.

What were you doing? Were you a student? Were you working?

I was working.

What kind of work were you doing?

Operating Engineer.

Were you living at home? Were you living on your own?

I was married and living with my wife.

Did you enlist or were you drafted?

I'm thinking. I think I enlisted.

Mr. Pfleger's Daughter: Well didn't you tell me that you were going to be enlisted, but you didn't want to be enlisted? So you ran down there and...

And signed in.

But you were going to be drafted, so you decided to enlist?

I knew I was going to be drafted, so I enlisted. That way I felt that I could get into the branch of the service I wanted to get into.

And you enlisted into the Air Force. And why did you choose the Air Force?

Because flying has always been in my heart.

Flying was something you enjoyed?

Yah.

Had you flown before or you just liked the idea?

No, I'd taken a ride in a plane, that's all.

Do you remember the date or year when you entered the service?

Probably thirty-two wasn't I?

Daughter: I don't know, Dad.

Do you remember how old you were?

Yah, I guess I was around twenty-three.

Daughter: No, I think you were probably a little bit older than that.

I might have been older than that. I don't know.

Daughter: I think you were twenty-three when you got married.

I was twenty-two when I got married, and shortly after that ...

Daughter: Six years you were married before the war. I think, before you went it. I'm not sure.

So maybe you were thirty when you went in?

No, I don't think so.

Daughter: Well it says here (inside a memory book) 1942. So he was in there before '42.

So, early 1940s?

Daughter: I would say '41 probably.

It was a long time ago. (Mr. Pfleger chuckles)

So you would have been about twenty-six then.

Right about that. I was getting to the point where I wouldn't be drafted.

Because you were getting too old for that. But still thought you might be, so you enlisted?

Daughter: He got a letter.

I figured I'd be drafted ...

Induction and Basic Training

You did get a letter that you'd be drafted. Where were you inducted?

Right here in Chicago.

Can you tell us what it was like when you went down for your induction?

It was just like a business day. Just went in and saw the people at the desk, and they directed me to where to go, and do what. That was it. It was all cut and dried.

Did you go right into the Air Force, or did you have some time after your induction?

A very short time.

A couple of days?

A couple of days was all.

So there was a chance for you to get things together at home.

I suppose that would be it, and I don't really recall. It was a little far back.

When you went back -- when you went into the Air Force -- what was it like? Where you were first stationed?

Santa Ana, California.

That was for your basic training?

I guess you can call it basic training.

What was your basic training like?

Well, it was mostly physical exams and check see if you're qualified to be fly boys.

Because you knew that was what you wanted to do.

And basically that was mostly it.

What type of qualifications were there to be a "fly boy?"

To want to fly.

Right.

I can't really think of what the qualifications were. They certainly weren't very stringent.

Daughter: Didn't you tell me one time that they were in such terrible need of flyers that they just kind of pushed you through real fast?

Basically, that's true. The need for flyers was great, and they kind of pushed us and advanced us rapidly. I think in a total of seven months I was commissioned as a second lieutenant.

Wow, that is quick.

And that was because of going through the flying schools.

What was it like living on the base there? Were you in a barracks?

In the barracks, yes.

How many men were in the barracks?

Probably about six.

About six other men?

Yes.

So it was a small group?

Yes, small group.

Were you all going to be on a flying on a team together or you were just all going through school together?

No just going through the program together.

What was your barracks like, since you had such a small group? Was it ...

Canvas.

Canvas tents! Sleeping on cots?

No, I didn't want the top if I could help it. (Mr. Pflieger and Ms. Barrett chuckle)

So you had bunk beds?

Bunk beds. Yes.

Daughter: Did you tell me it was muddy in Santa Ana?

Oh, yes. We had lots of rain, for sure. Santa Ana, California -- that's the rainy season in winter.

So you were there in the wintertime?

Yes. Because the war started when?

Pearl Harbor was December.

December, and it was within a year's period. Because we were going through all this.

What kind of things did they do with you in your basic training? You had physical training?

Physical training was the biggest thing, and then ...

And what was that like? What did they have you do?

Well, it was just physical training.

Was it just like exercise?

Exercise.

OK.

That and marching.

Lots of marching?

Wherever you went, you marched!

Was everybody who was at Santa Ana going to flight school?

Well, one division of it could have been flying, could have been bombardier, could have been navigator, could have been disqualified and go back and just go in as an enlisted man.

So if you were in the flight school, you were commissioned?

You weren't commissioned yet.

Not yet, but when you got out.

When you got out you were commissioned.

So if you didn't make it through flight school, you went back and you were just an enlisted man?

Possibly. You probably would have gone back as a bombardier. You've have gone to bombardier school. Because you had enough aptitude, I guess they figured, to go through that program.

How long was your flight school? How long were you at Santa Ana?

When did I graduate?

Daughter: It looks like spring in the pictures.

So a few months?

It was a number of months. It had to be two, four -- at least six months. Usually a course was two months, and there's three courses.

Do you remember what those three courses were?

Well, they covered a wide range. Flying was one. We went out and looked at the airplane, which was a big B-17, (unclear) the only thing I really remember about it. But it was so long ago ...

I understand. Six months was a long time to be away from your family. Did you communicate with your wife and your relatives while you were in California? You wrote a lot of letters!

Daughter: Mom was still in Chicago?

Yah.

Daughter: But your mother and Aunt Ruth were still in California.

They were in California, so I got to see them. They were in Glendale.

So you got to see them, but you weren't able to see your wife because she was all the way back here.

She was back in Chicago, working.

So you just wrote to her regularly.

That's right.

While you were on the base, what did you do for entertainment? Did you have some free time?

(Mr. Pflieger chuckles) There wasn't a lot of free time. Everything was rush, rush, rush.

Did you have any time on the weekend to go out – any pass to go to town or anything?

No, no, not that I can recall.

They were just really trying to get people to the school.

Trying to get people -- it was a rush program. Well, we didn't have anything

So this was right after Pearl Harbor, so they were trying to respond quickly, trying to build up.

Yes, trying to cover up all their misgivings, mistakes.

So you graduated -- you said it was about six months.

I think six, seven months, something like that. Probably about seven months the school lasted, and I graduated. (Speaks to his daughter) What was the first date?

Daughter: The first date is April 27th.

Of 1942?

Daughter: It doesn't have it here. It probably is 1942.

Advanced Training

So after you graduated, where did you go after Santa Ana?

To, Roswell, New Mexico.

And what was in Roswell?

Training in twin-engine bombers. It was a training air craft.

Daughter: So you found out you're going to be a bomber pilot when you left the first place?

Yes.

Daughter: And you were happy – because that was what you wanted to do?

Yes. I'd prefer to be in a bomber. I didn't like any part of the fighter.

Daughter: What did they call you as a nickname in basic? They coined a nickname for you.

I don't really remember.

Daughter: Oooh, I remember! I found out last year.

Yah?

Daughter: They called you "Barrel-Chested Bessie."

Oh, Barrel-Chest. Yah.

Daughter: Why did they call you Barrel-Chested Bessie?

I'm round in the chest!

Daughter: They had nicknames.

They nicknamed everybody.

Daughter: Who did you fly with that was a real fancy football player?

Tom Harmon.

Daughter: Tom Harmon was a football player at the University of Michigan.

He was an all American football player.

Daughter: Nice guy, you said.

A real nice guy.

Daughter: So you went to New Mexico to learn how to fly twin-engine bombers.

So you had already been flying other planes -- in your first school in Santa Ana?

Yes.

What was it like the first time you went up in a plane?

It was something different (chuckles).

How did you feel -- excited?

Well, I was achieving the goal I had. Would I be excited or not, I don't know. I knew I was accomplishing one of the goals I had in my mind. I may not have publicized the goals, but they were in my mind anyhow.

So what was it like flying one of the bombers as opposed to the planes you flew in Santa Ana? Any difference?

Oh, yah! A world of difference!

What was different?

The size, the weight, the speed, the power.

It was kind of exhilarating.

That's right.

So was your practice in school?

My first practice in the bombers was that I was put in the co-pilot seat and learned to be a co-pilot. And that's the way it went until I went overseas and went to war.

So you were a co-pilot?

A Co-pilot. And after I was overseas a while, the pilot and I didn't see the too well together -- we didn't "marry" close.

Did you go overseas after Roswell?

Dad: After Roswell, yah.

Daughter: Didn't you go to Florida? I found Florida here.

Dad: Oh, yah. We went to Florida.

What was in Florida? What did you do there?

Daughter: He joined another bomb group.

Was that in preparation for going overseas?

Basically that's what it is.

So you joined up with the group that was going to be your team? Or not yet?

Daughter: Then you went to Shreveport.

I went to two, three or four different places.

Was that for different schools?

They just moved us around, that's all. Not really, really any reason for it.

Daughter: Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Trinidad, Brazil ...

War Experiences

We were on our way overseas. We picked up the airplane in the United States, and then from there we started going overseas.

Daughter: OK, then you picked up the airplane and went overseas.

How did you travel from the United States overseas, and what was your destination overseas?

We flew a B-26 bomber. And we flew that from the United States all the way over to Europe.

Where did you land in Europe?

First, was North Africa. And then from North Africa we proceeded across, up into England.

Did you fly with a whole squadron there, or was it ... How many of you were flying together?

Basically, we took on board a navigator to guide us. Basically we were like a lone wolf – a lone aircraft.

Just one at a time?

Yes. And we were on our way, and that was it. They had these navigators, and we were also training with...supposedly they knew what they were doing. We did get the equipment (chuckles).

What was it like flying across the ocean?

Just like flying over the ground. There's something down there and you're way up here. We had utmost confidence in the aircraft. We figured it was good and safe. We weren't worrying about safety, actually -- we were going to war!

(Both chuckle) It must have been a beautiful sight though, to be over the water?

Yah, but up at 10,000 feet you don't see that much. The water is just like this table down there, that's all. You looked down and it was just green, blue or whatever. You couldn't see the ripples or anything like that.

So you flew. Was North Africa your first stop? Did you fly straight across, or did you make stops along the way?

Let's see, I'm trying to think now. We had a couple of stops, till we got up to near the coast of North Africa.

Where did you stop along the way?

Was there a town in North Africa called Belem?

Daughter: Belem, Brazil. Then British Guiana,

We went from California to Brazil ...

You went into South America?

South America, then into Africa.

Then you went across to Africa?

Across Ascension Island, and landed in Granville.

Daughter: Liberia first.

Do you remember how long it took you to get across the ocean?

We probably took about the best part of two weeks. I don't know.

And you were flying, you and your crew -- two weeks in a bomber, you got to know each other pretty well.

Oh, yah. The crew became a solid unit.

A very tight-knit group?

Tight-knit.

How long was your shift? I mean, you took turns as pilot and co-pilot as you were going across?

No, the guy that was the main pilot was sitting in the left seat, and the co-pilot on the right.

The whole time?

Basically, that was it.

When you slept, what happened? Did you sleep on land?

We slept on land. Our flights would be, at the most, they wouldn't be over five hours or six hours.

And then you land somewhere and eat and sleep?

It was an incredibly fast airplane.

Do you have any recollection of how fast they flew?

About 220 miles an hour.

That's fast.!

Yup, at that time that was fast.

That was very fast! So you landed in Africa, you went up the coast of Africa, and where did you go from there?

To England.

To England. Where in England did you go to? Do you remember?

What was it? It wasn't Raintree.

Daughter: It says here, St. Eval field in England.

Do you remember what town?

It had to be in the southern quarter. Someplace in the southern quarters. Let's face it, England was nothing but a big air base.

Right.

I mean wherever you looked, there was an air field there. Because, this was their life. I mean, the war was brought to them, and the Germans would make a nightly chowder out of a lot of it.

And so you stayed in England. And did you make your bombing runs from England?

At first, yes.

Where did you fly? Where did you make your bombing runs into? Was it into Germany?

Into France.

Into France. That was when the Germans were already invaded there.

Oh, yah. The Germans had France completely under their control. Except the southern end of it.

So where did you do your bombing runs in France? Do you remember the towns or the areas?

No, not really, because they were just something that would come up for the day. Well, we didn't do bombing runs at that time. We were transporting our aircraft to the theater where we would operate out of. We were on our way to England. So we're landing in these areas in France which were safe, and where we could re-fuel and maintain anything that had to be repaired. And we could continue our flight until we got to the English coast – the English Channel – and we made the jump across the Channel and landed in England. Then we practiced in England for a while, until we became operational.

You practiced just doing the runs – the flying?

Doing runs. We'd practice runs, and practice bombs on targets. And the practice bombs were nothing much of a bomb, but they were shaped like a bomb, so a lot of the characteristics they had, the bomb had.

So you'd get used to the look and the feel?

The idea was we'd know how to load them into the aircraft, and the bombardier would look through the bomb sight and drop the bomb. The pilot would pilot the aircraft according to the bombardier who was looking through the bomb sight. Lining in the crosshairs in the bomb sight is like moving the cross-sites of the rifle. If we were to the right of the target, he'd bring us over to the left. If we were high, he would bring us back down until those crosshairs were right in the middle. And that was a point that when we went over the spot in his bomb site and he'd press the button and release the bombs.

Daughter: Did you have that special bomb site there?

No.

Daughter: You got that later?

No, that was later -- the Norton bomb site.

Daughter: The Norton bomb site?

Yah.

Daughter: Is this...is this your first one here?

Sortie number one. Yes.

Daughter: And what year was that?

1943?

Daughter: That was your first...

Yah, August the 2nd 1943.

That was your practice, or first real run?

We were in combat.

Combat.

Yup.

And where was that first sortie?

I can't tell you.

Daughter: It says right here.

Oh – Le Trait shipyards.

Daughter: So they were shipyards in France.

It's on the coast of France – Le Trait is a good sized town in France.

What sort of targets did you have -- shipyards?

Daughter: Infrastructure

Shipyards at first, and general just military targets.

Shipyards, communication ...

Bridges, trains, railroad stations, railroad yards.

So it was really to disrupt transportation, materials, and men.

Tear the area up and make inoperable for the Germans; bombed their airfields and knocked their airplanes out.

So your first sortie was successful. You bombed ...

Shipyards – it was a three-hour mission.

From leaving to returning.

From leaving to returning. It wasn't a long distance – 150 miles from where we took off to where we dropped bombs, until we got back home.

And where was home at this point – was it in England?

In England, yah.

That was still at the same place.

Yah, now we're in England. And from here on out its England. Then we moved into France, then we moved into ... well I left them when they moved into Germany, and I went home. The war was over.

When you were living in England, what was it like? Were you on a base?

Yes, a base. It was a base.

Was it all Americans, or...? Was it...

No, no it was all Americans on it. There's four bomb groups assigned to a base, and we each had an area we were located in and operated from. There was a headquarters at one place, then four different squadrons subordinate to that group. I don't know how else we had it.

Daughter: That was just in England?

That was just in England. Well, we did the same thing in France.

Daughter: At Beauvais?

Yah.

You were going on those missions. Did you have any time for yourself while you were in England, or were you always on missions?

You were on alert.

On alert.

You were on alert. You could be called at any time.

So what did you do when you weren't flying?

We would take a tour in London.

Did you take a tour in uniform? Were you always in uniform?

We were always in uniform.

And what was the reaction of the British people?

Oh, we were welcomed.

Yah?

Yah. Great! "These guys were here to help us."

So what did they do? Did they say hello? Was it smiling?

Well, some invited us to their homes, and we'd participate in a meal. We went to the nearest pub to have a beer. Just normal life is all.

They made you feel very welcome, very appreciated.

We were welcome. They were happy we were there. They were getting rocked pretty heavy, pretty bad.

So they saw you as the people who were coming to rescue them.

Yah, and when we got going good, why the offensive towards England even diminished. Because we kind of cooled them off a little bit.

So you took some of the heat off England.

We took some of the heat off of England by going in. At first we were bombing the air fields and tearing them up. Well, if you tear up the airfields they couldn't fly against us very well.

How long were you in England?

About a year.

So it was 1943?

To early 1944, wasn't it?

Daughter: I think so, and then you went over to France.

We went to France.

Where were you in France?

Beauvais.

When you were in France, were you on a base of some sort?

Oh, yes, an air base.

So you were doing the same thing.

Oh, yes. We were doing the same thing.

Daughter: It was previously what kind of base?

It was a Luftwaffe base.

So you just took over their air base (chuckles).

We took over their air base.

Daughter: You just bombed the heck out of it.

We had personally our own squadrons. We moved into the area that we personally bombed! We tore it all up, and then had to live in it. (Everyone chuckles)

Daughter: You had to go and fix it up, didn't ya?

So you had pushed the Germans back enough, and then you were able to use what they had built. Except you had to fix the damage that you had done! (chuckles)

We had to rebuild it.

So, when you were in Beauvais, you did bomb runs in Germany and other parts of France?

Bomb runs. There were some parts of France yet that were still under German control. But we just followed the line. The Allies moved to the east and we were right along behind them.

You were pushing. How long were you in Beauvais?

Daughter: Until he left the service.

No.

Daughter: You didn't go to Belgium, too? Did you go to Belgium?

Yes.

So, in Beauvais you were doing bombing runs into other parts of France and into Germany.

Yes, into Germany, and then we moved on over into -- I'm, trying to think of the name. It was a little town in Belgium. I don't recall the name now.

Let's talk a minute about what your life was like in France on that base, besides having to repair the damage you had first done.

It wasn't much. Let's face it -- it was nothing but a big mud-hole.

Daughter: Oh that's not what your buddy, your co-pilot, said.

What'd he say?

Daughter: Well Jim said that since you were an officer ... (Ms. Barrett chuckles)

In the meantime I had been moved from a flight officer to second lieutenant to captain.

Oh, Captain.

Daughter: And you were also CO, right?

Commanding officer?

Daughter: Right? Weren't you the guy who told people what to do?

Yes. I was the operations officer.

Daughter: So what's this? This was the officers' quarters?

Yes, the officers' quarters.

Officer's quarters!

Daughter: You got to stay in a building with bricks and windows.

This was the Commander's.

Daughter: Yes, but Jim said that you lived there.

Oh, he's nuts! (All chuckle)

Daughter: And where did the guys live? In that tent city?

Not quite as posh! (Ms. Barrett chuckles)

Daughter: Where the snow and frost built up on the blankets over night.

You see here, also, we're all working on the engines.

Daughter: She wants to know how you lived over there at Beauvais, and I said you got to live in the fancy places like this.

You got to live in a building?

Wellll...

Daughter: You lived in tents, and he said...

Well Jim is just rubbing it in because I was an officer.

What were your meals like when you were there? (Mr. Pfleger laughs)

Nothing to brag about. They were edible (chuckles).

What sort of things did you have?

You had your mess kit and put it up and the guys just ...

They just threw something on.

And you moved on. You didn't ask what it was or anything. You ate it! (chuckles)

So it was regular old military cooking.

It was field cooking. If it was ordinary, that was fine! But this – great big pots ...

Pots of stuff (chuckles).

And they had a soup ladle.

Did you have any free time when you were in France?

We'd get a couple of days off now and then.

What would you do?

Go to Paris. See a Paris show.

So they still had the shows going on.

France recovered – they were under German command for quite a bit, we came in so fast they didn't have time to tear it all apart.

So you got to see some shows while you were there.

We saw a couple shows. Maybe one or two shows.

Daughter: Did you go with Bob Pike?

Bob Hike? He was there.

Daughter: Did you go with him, because I see pictures in here with you and Bob Pike in France.

Oh, Bob Pike, yes. You know there was no such thing as you and your type. You were a big gang. Today you were with this one and the next day you were with that one. We kept going.

(Mr. Pflieger and his daughter are paging through Mr. Pflieger's memory book.)

Daughter: Here's Bob and there's you.

Here and we got down to ...

Daughter: Where's this? Is this France?

This is France, and this is France. This is – oh, you see it on the TV every now and then – Old Sarum.

Daughter: Well, what is Old Sarum? .

This was the early History of England.

Daughter: That was next to where?

Stonehenge – it was next to Stonehenge. Things like this, when I was with the headquarters, and I was doing paperwork of some sort, I had aircraft available that I could get to fly. Even some of my old war buddies who would come up to visit me, I'd take them up and fly over the area which they had captured by ground.

So you could see it from above. They must have really enjoyed seeing that.

Yes. Like this guy, Bob Pike, and myself ... North Africa – where I had a number of natives.

So you had a chance to see some things that maybe you were familiar with from history books – from your studies. You enjoy history, right.?

Yes. Like that Stonehenge. Like now, I saw that on TV the other night – stories about Stonehenge. It was a believer's temple.

So while you were in Europe doing these bombing runs, your wife was back home. Did you write to her?

Oh yes, constantly.

Were you able to get packages?

Packages?

Did she send you anything?

No, no she didn't have to. She sent me letters.

Were your letters – was your mail censored at all?

Oh, all of them yah.

All the mail was censored.

All the mail was censored. Sure. And even the letters that she sent – if there was something in there that should not be there, it would be marked out.

What type of things would they mark out?

Well, something that dealt with the enemies' actions. Like what they were doing and any of the activities you participated in, in the actions of war.

Could you tell her where you were?

Oh, no! .

Nothing – not even what country you were in?

She knew we were in England, and so forth, but where – no.

Did she know you moved on to France?

Not until after we were in France. Then we were able to say we're in France.

So she knew what country you were in, but that was about it.

That's about it, right.

And what sort of things would they censor that she might write to you?

I couldn't say -- nothing very much, because normally the people at home didn't write anything that they didn't have access to write. So they couldn't do much writing. And whatever writing they did -- I can't remember any mail that I received that was scratched or blacked out.

Did your wife ever receive anything that she said things were blocked out?

Oh, I think so.

Daughter: I never remembered that until you mentioned it. I remember seeing letters that had blacked-out blocks.

Where they thought it was maybe a little too much information?

Daughter: I was too young to realize what it was.

Yes, because you weren't even two years old.

Daughter: Yes, but I remember seeing them when I was older. They were down in the basement in Wheaton.

We've just turned the tape over. We were talking about your time in Beauvais, and what your life was like there.

In Beauvais we had a mid-air collision between three aircraft, and we lost my crew.

Your whole crew?

The three enlisted men.

How many men were on your plane?

Six.

So half the men were lost.

Again, I wasn't on the plane. They were flying with another pilot who I felt was a very, very highly qualified pilot -- a good pilot. In fact, he was the only survivor from these three aircraft that went down.

So, it was three men in addition to the pilot on the plane?

Maybe, three, four, five ... there were probably five to six men on each plane.

So only the pilot survived on yours?

The only one that survived was the lead pilot on the whole gang that were joining up for the mission. Now, this was a practice mission, but they would take off in the same way they would as if going on a regular mission. And they were taking off the field, leaving the ground and coming up. And one pilot – he was a brand new guy from the States and thought he knew everything, I guess. Well, he found out that what he knew wasn't that great.

What happened?

He crashed into the other aircraft. He killed the six men in his plane, six men in another plane, and killed five men on the plane my boys were with. My boys were with the plane where one man survived.

So this was an accident take off.

It was an accident on take off.

It was a difficult time.

It was a difficult time. I had three crew members that I thought the world of, and they were wiped out, just like that. Not with me, but with somebody else.

And this was a practice run.

This was a practice training flight. And they basically were trying to log some hours so they could go home. I was eligible to go home ahead of them. I had time overseas that was being used up pretty much. In order to get them to be eligible to go home with me, we put them on a training mission so they could get the amount of credit they needed to transfer home.

So that was what they were trying to do.

That was what they were trying to do.

Daughter: And you were commanding officer that day, so you assigned them to the run.

I was the operations officer at that time for the squadron, and I'm the one who decided they'd go on the plane.

So that must have been very hard news for you to hear, then.

It was very unpleasant, I'll tell you – three beautiful men.

So they had been on your crew – they had been part of your crew?

They were my crew. The only reason they were with them was because they had so many missions less than I had.

So they wanted to catch up.

They wanted to catch up so we could all go home together.

So you came there together, and you wanted to go home together.

Well, I inherited them. They came in later. I was already there. And after I had gone through being the co-pilot and this and that, and then became the operations officer, I finally found out that I'm going to have my own crew again. My own crew were long gone, so new boys had come in. Those were the boys I lost. They didn't have too many missions yet, but they were a fine crew.

When men were lost in combat or in training, were their bodies returned home or did they stay where they were?

I don't know.

Daughter: These boys were buried there.

They were buried there, but later on they were exhumed and sent back to the States. I'm sure that's what happened. All and all, we didn't lose all that many. But again, if you lost twenty, you lost quite a few.

This happened in Beauvais. Were you in Beauvais much longer after that, or then you went to Belgium?

A little while longer, and then we went over to Belgium.

About what year did you go to Belgium?

1944 or 1945.

So you were 29 or 30 years old and this point.

Daughter: No, you weren't 29. It was 1945 and he was born in 1915. Oh, I guess you were.

I was 30 years old.

You're an old man for this service.

I was an old man.

What did you do in Belgium?

Bomb the Germans!

Just kept pushing.

That was our job. We were bombers and were out to disrupt their transportation – like the railroad tracks and that; we'd tear up the yard, the railroad yards.

Where in Germany did you bomb? Do you know the towns or the areas anymore?

There might be some mentioned there (referring to memory book).

Daughter: Yes, there are. Did you want to look?

Bithberg Crossroads, Superior, on that bombing run.

How many sorties did you have altogether – I see you have them numbered.

Sixty.

Sixty sorties all together?

Xanton Crossroads we got a superior on. Simmern railroad bridge, Weisbaden, Neunkircher, Marksburg Rail Road Bridge.

What did the superior mean?

Just like you get a mark in school.

Like a gold star?

Dinslaken, Ebrach, we aborted Maumburg ordnance department, Colton ...

Why would you abort a flight?

After we got air born, we decided the target was no longer necessary to be demolished so they just told us to go back home.

How long were you in Belgium doing these runs into Germany? 1945 is when you went to Belgium. You have a date there>

Daughter: Let me figure it out.

When you were in Belgium, were you living in tents or living in buildings?

Tents. Don't forget, everything was torn up.

Everything was torn because ...

Daughter: It looks like you came back in August – Texas, it says here, August, 1945.

So you were there not quite a year.

Not a year, no. We were only there maybe about three or four months.

So you just had a very short time there. And you did a lot of sorties into Germany at that time?

Well, my total time there was quite a bit – overseas. Actually, when you get into combat, you're at the area that you want to bomb, but the opportunity to bomb it isn't there all the time – the weather's bad, or this or that, or you can't see it, so you had to abort the mission and come back home.

When you where on these sorties, were you ever – how did the Germans try to counteract what you did?

Anti-aircraft fire.

So you were shot at?

Oh yes. Also, they had fighters who would come after us. We had defenses, also.

And what sort of defenses did you have?

Machine guns – mainly about fifteen or sixteen on each aircraft.

Well, I would imagine – you said just flying was exhilarating – but flying while being shot at would be something a little different.

You didn't have time to think about it.

What did you do? (chuckles)

You went home and changed your pants! (Everyone chuckles.)

So, you were heard the flack outside the plane?

Daughter: He heard the flak inside the plane!

What did the flak sound like?

Croak!

Just very noisy?

Yes.

Plane shaking?

It had to be close to hear it. Don't forget, now, each aircraft had two 2,000 horse power engines on it.

So the aircraft was noisy?

The aircraft were noisy. The best I can say is when you heard a croak, it was too close!

Daughter: Can you tell her the story that Jim was telling us the other day, about when you were taking that flight to Brest, and he's six-foot tall and he was trying to pull himself down into his flak vest and flak hat.

That was just a daily occurrence.

Daughter: They were telling stories on each other. And his co-pilot, Jim, who was six-foot tall, was trying to pull himself down real small, and was sitting there laughing at him about it. Because, Dad could pull myself down real small – he's only 5' 6", you see.

When you were flying these missions, what sort of protective clothing did you have? (Everyone chuckles.) Or did you? Just shirts?

Jackets we might have on, it all depends.

Flak Jacket?

Sometimes we wore a flight jacket.

Daughter: Didn't you wear a flak jacket for protection?

Not too much. An aircraft had its own armament. Around the pilots seat it was like a big bucket.

Daughter: That's what saved that one pilot.

That's what saved that one pilot in that collision. The pilot had a seat that had protected him from the right quarter or the left quarter, and from behind. And there was a seal about that big.

That protected him because he had to keep the plane steady?

Yes, to keep the plane going. Hopefully it didn't hit any part of the engines – the engines were about twelve feet apart. So the ones that came in, you hoped they didn't affect the engines – or the pilot.

So was everyone issued a flak jacket or flak vest?

Oh, yes.

Did you just choose not to wear it sometimes, or did you always wear it?

We usually put it on, sure.

Did you have a helmet or something?

No.

No kind of helmet?

No, we didn't wear helmets.

Daughter: Did you use your earphones or did you just yell at each other?

We had a headset. The pilot had a headset because he had to listen to the commands from head quarters – they might be changing the mission and so forth. The gunners and so forth – no, they didn't wear the headsets.

Daughter: You just turned around and yelled at them?

The ones in back who were further out, they wore the headsets so we could converse with them.

Did the co-pilot have a headset, too?

Yes – the pilot and co-pilot wore headsets, and also the bombardier because he was up in the nose.

He was in a different area.

And the tail gunner and the top turret gunner – pretty near everyone had a headset, to know what the leader was contemplating and what to expect from the leader. And to listen to the engineers – what kinds of conversations were going on.

You must of have gotten very, very familiar with your plane.

Oh yes.

Did your plane have a name?

We never got it painted on there, but I always called it “Daldres.” But, for some reason or another, something happened to our squadron guy who was the painter – he’d write the letters and so forth. But I didn’t get to him in time, and then we got so busy we couldn’t use his expertise.

Did you name the plane “Daldres” after somebody?

Yes – my wife!

So you didn’t get any of the art, but that was Daldres.”

That was “Daldres.”

When you finished your three months there, in Belgium, what happened?

That was when we went over to Germany.

Did you go with them?

Oh, yes, for a short time.

How long where you there?

The war ended, and us guys with a lot of time were sent home.

So you where in Germany when the war ended?

I was – let me take a look at that (refers to the memory book).

Where in Germany were you?

It’s on the last pages.

Daughter: It doesn’t say, Dad. It says you went to San Antonio after. It doesn’t make any difference.

What was it like to be in Germany when the war ended? What happened when you got the news that it ended?

Nothing – it just another day.

So there where no celebrations?

Oh, you always got someone who got rifles out and fired in the air – it was something to celebrate that it was all over.

It was more relief?

A little bit or relief.

Did you come into contact with any of the German people?

No. I left Germany in May – May 7, 1945.

So you didn't come in contact with any of the German people?

No, we didn't.

Coming Home

So you left Germany. How did you get back home? Did you fly?

We flew back home. We got to England and got on board transport and came home ...

Daughter: The transport was a ship.

So you flew over there, but you took a ship when you came back.

Daughter: That's when you met Jack.

That's when I met Jack – Jack Havener and I met then.

Daughter: He was another B26 pilot from another group. You made a good relationship with him.

How many men were on the ship? Do you remember?

On the ship that was coming back?

Yes.

Oh, a couple thousand.

Do you remember the name of the ship?

No. In fact, they didn't name them.

Was it a Navy ship? I know there had been a lot of cruise ships that had been converted.

It had been a cruise ship, probably converted at sometime or other.

And where did you stay ...

There was nothing luxurious about it at all! (Everyone chuckles.)

They had taken all the luxuries out of it!

You had nothing but the plain old Army cots for beds, and whatever.

Still military food?

Still the same old stuff.

What did you do on the trip back? How did you pass time?

Sit and go. That's it.

Daughter: What did you and Jack do? Did you play cards?

Sometimes we played a little cards. We had to watch out ...

Daughter: Was there booze?

No

You had to watch out for what?

Some guys would be so called "card sharks." If you tried to play their game ...

They'd take your money!

They'd take your money if they could. But with me, nobody got it. (Everyone chuckles.) I kept it.

Did you have any duties while you were on ship, or was it all just going home?

No, they had the crew that maintains the ship that's it. We had to keep our areas clean. That's all.

Where did you sail into, in the United States?

Boston. Don't ask me what I saw in there. I didn't see anything!

What was it like when you first saw the shore? Were people excited to be home?

Oh, "We're home." You know.

Daughter: Were you excited about seeing Mom?

Yes. That was the biggest excitement – when I saw my wife.

Did she know you were coming home?

By then I think she knew it.

But was she still in Chicago?

She was in Chicago. But she didn't know until I got into Chicago.

So how did you get from Boston to Chicago?

Train.

Just a regular passenger train or a troop train?

I guess it was a regular passenger train. I don't remember now. You know, at times like that, some of the things are so little that they don't mean anything to you.

You were in your uniform.

Oh, yes, we were all in uniforms. We were in uniform from the time we left Santa Ana, California, until we got home. You were in uniform at all times. You never wore civilian clothes.

How did the people in the United States, when you were on this train, how did they respond to you? Did they say anything to you?

We were on a troop train.

So it was a troop train, not a passenger train.

It was loaded with troops. Yes. Here is something, here (referring to the memory book). This is something we were talking about, here. Flak.

Al has a jar here with some pieces of flak (opens jar).

Now you can look at it.

Albert gave me some flak. It looks like chunks of metal. One piece is maybe three-quarter of an inch long. Small pieces are maybe a half?

Small pieces, those are made and put within the shell that they shoot up. And these pieces tear the airplane apart.

Daughter: And what happens, Dad? The ground crew takes them and removes them? Tell her.

When you've been on a mission and get back home, they inspect the aircraft. They'd sometimes find half a dozen holes.

Are these from "Daldres?"

Daughter: That was your first mission, wasn't it? They'd take it out and bring it to you and ask if you wanted to keep it?

So you got home. You got to Chicago. Was your wife waiting for you at the station, or did you go to your home?

I think I went home. Who knows!

Daughter: Where were you living then?

North Dearborn.

She knew you were coming, or she didn't know you were coming?

Oh, yah, she knew I was coming.

So I bet she was so relieved to see you – to see you in one piece!

She probably had a big club and wanted to beat me over the head with it. "That's what you get for joining the service." There was nothing else I could do!

What happened when you got home? Did you have a little party, a little celebration?

Oh, I don't know. I don't think it was anything more than I just went out and had a couple drinks.

Daughter: Probably went and heard Nat King Cole, didn't you?

Probably did, yes.

Daughter: And he was singing where? Was he at the Blackhawk?

No – a little night club. Oh, that was before the war.

Retiring to the Reserves

Where were you discharged – formally discharged.

I never have been.

You never have been!

I'm finally getting the papers that was a participant and so forth.

But you weren't formally discharged?

Actually, no. I'm retired military. Does that sound right?

Daughter: Is that a difference – discharge versus retired?

Discharged is fired! (chuckles)

Daughter: Oh. So you went into Reserves.

Yes. I went into the Reserves program.

And so you spent ...

A number of years with the reserve program.

And then you retired from the Reserves.

Then I went to Korea.

Oh, you went to Korea, as well?

Yes, I went to Korea afterwards.

As a bomber, again?

No, I was director of plant operations.

Daughter: No.

That wasn't it?

Daughter: In Korea you had something about plant operations – you saved things?

We had a Japanese airfield, and we had to take and rebuild it for our aircraft. Their aircraft were smaller and lighter than the stuff we had. I headed the department of the engineers to rebuild what they had to take the weight of our aircraft.

What year was this? Do you remember what year?

1946? 1947 or 48?

Daughter: Korea? Albert was born. So after you came home, you and Mom decided to do something very special.

Huh? (chuckles)

Daughter: What did you and Mom decided to do?

We had you! You came along.

So Vicky was born when you came home. And then you had a son – Albert – who was born in 1949?

Daughter: I was born in 1946, and Albert was born in 1949. Perfect!

So you had your wife, and now you had two kids, but you ended up going to Korea to help with rebuilding ...

To assist our troops over there.

What rank were you when you went over there?

I think I was the captain. Since then, I'd made Colonial.

Daughter: Lieutenant Colonial.

How long were you doing this work in Korea?

Was it about eight months?

Daughter: I don't know. I don't remember that. I have no idea.

It couldn't have been too awful long. The Korean War didn't last that long. It was a mop-up action. We tried to reestablish things and get things working for the Koreans. It was a mop-up action – clean up, straighten up and move on.

So you had been in the Reserves since Korea?

Yes.

Between the time you got home to Chicago in '45, and the time you went to Korea sometime in the 50's, what where you doing as far as work?

I worked as a stationary engineer.

At a company in Chicago?

At the Knickerbocker Hotel.

Oh, at the Knickerbocker Hotel.

Daughter: No, it was at the LaSalle Bank.

Not the LaSalle, but it was a bank, though, up on Walton.

So you did that, and then you where sent to Korea, and you helped rebuild the field. And you where there for just a short time, you said?

Yes, just a short time.

Less than a year?

Yes, less than a year. And my time came to go home.

Was that because of ...

Well they even indicated at the time that we where short-timers.

So you came home. You flew home?

Yes, I did. Then I continued to participate in the Air Force, in the Reserves. And that was it.

And when did you retire from the Air Force?

Daughter: He didn't, really.

Well, I didn't really. I just got papers saying I got separated from active duty. You just don't remember these things.

So Lieutenant Colonel was your rank when you retired?

Yes.

And you've been doing plant operations at Northwestern Memorial Hospital – that was your last job here.

Right, Right.

So that's the type of work you continued until your retirement from the business world.

Right.

I saw the news article in the Chicago Tribune about the meeting you had with Jim, who was your co-pilot? Have you gone to other reunions?

Oh, yah.

What kind of reunions?

Just gatherings of the boys and their families.

Is it a regular thing?

We tried to do it every year. It usually worked out pretty good. We went to quit a few of them.

Daughter: You and Mom would go every year, right up until the very end. They used to have three reunions, and then a big reunion. They had what they called an “alligator wrassel.” Until they retired to Florida. Then they had a leaf hopper up north for those who were still up there. But there were three reunions, and the big one – somebody would host it in the city they lived in. It was all over the nation.

She covered it better than I would!

Have you joined any Veterans organizations?

No?

Daughter: He belongs to the B26 Marauders.

But not a general one like the VFW or American Legion?

Daughter: His son – my brother – signed him up for the VFW. But he belongs to the B26 ...

So it’s more a special group that relates to what you did.

Final Thoughts

When you look back at your time in the military – both in combat and in the Reserves – how did your time in the military affect your life? What do you think you got out of it – good, bad or otherwise?

It gave me moral strength to stand up on my own two feet and fight back.

It made you very self-sufficient and ...

That’s correct.

How did it affect your thinking on the world – your view of the world? Maybe some of what you see happening in the world today.

It’s “straighten out and fly it right.” That’s all. We’ve got a lot of things that need correcting in this nation. You can’t depend just on the military to do it and straighten things out.

Is there anything we haven't covered in this interview that you'd like to add before we go off record?

No, that's pretty near everything. I can't think of anything else.

In that case, Albert, thank you very much for your time. We are going off record.