

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

William Schaefer

conducted by Martin W. Thomas

September 10, 2002

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
in partnership with the Library of Congress

Part 1: Introduction:

This interview is being conducted on September 10, 2002, at the Indian Prairie Public Library. My name is Martin Thomas. I am speaking with William Schaefer. Mr. Schaefer was born on August 10, 1921, in Chicago, IL, and he now lives in Indian Head Park, IL.

Mr. Schaefer, how did you find out about this (Interview a Vet) program?

I was referred to the program article that appeared in the local paper by Trustee Dolores Cesak of the Village of Burr Ridge.

Do you remember what paper she had seen the article in?

I believe it was in the Des Plaines Valley News.

Part 2: Entering the Military:

Mr. Schaefer, when did you first enter the military?

I enlisted with a thousand other aviation candidates on the 11th of June, 19 hundred and 42, at Soldier Field, IL.

You say there were a thousand other aviation cadets?

Candidates.

Candidates. And how were they, you, recruited?

Well, there was a series of tests taken at Armour Institute of Technology on Michigan Avenue. We were recruited into the program if we were interested in becoming trained as an aviation cadet. Upon physical examination and testing we were accepted into the program.

What were you doing before you were recruited into that program?

I was involved with a carpenter apprenticeship program at Washburn's Trade School, up on the north side of Chicago.

When you took the aviation cadet test, did you have to enlist to get into that program?

Yes, they expected you to enlist. I was not drafted. My two elder brothers were drafted. All three of us were in the army at one particular time.

If you had not passed the aviation candidate school, what would have been your fate then?

Well, you could have gone into the ground mechanics training and so forth, and other branches of the Army Air Corps at that time. This was just merely a testing to see if you qualified and had enough training in high school to compete with others in courses that were offered thereafter.

So, you would have been just shy of 21 when you went into that program. Where you inducted?

Right then and there, on the spot. We were all sworn in at Soldier Field.

At Soldier Field. So Soldier Field has some history that I didn't know about.

Yes, it does.

And there were a thousand of you there all at one time?

All at one time. And the parents, of course.

What was your motivation? Was it patriotism? Looking for something better to do than you were already doing?

No, I can only tell you that back in high school that I graduated with the June class of '39 from Calumet High School, and being a history buff, I kind of saw the handwriting on the wall when my brother was drafted, my second eldest brother was drafted, and then consequently thereafter my eldest brother went in, and I enlisted with the thought in mind that I wanted to be with my brothers for the same cause. And September 1st, 1939, after I was out of high school, is the date that the Germans' Nazi program moved into Poland and bombed and strafed the civilian population, and from that point on, my motivation had to deal with the civilian population, and the Nazi program. The opposition that I had in my heart, I knew that it was not right, and I had no qualms about going to prevent any further mayhem.

Your two brothers, are either of them living today?

No, they have both succumbed to natural deaths.

What were your first days like after you were sworn in?

I just went on with my training as long as I could. Of course, then came the actual Day of Infamy, December 7, when Pearl Harbor occurred. And I...

We are going off record for a second.

OK.

We were talking off record about Pearl Harbor and the sequence of events. So, you went in, and the training you mentioned...you said you went on with your training. Was that the military training or your civilian training as a carpenter?

Civilian.

So they didn't call you up. You were sworn in, but you...

Sworn in. On call to go whenever they had positions for us.

When did they actually call you in then?

They called me in five days after our wedding. We got married on the 7th of November, 1942, and my father called us down in Kentucky where we were honeymooning and says, "You have to come home. They want you to get on a train Saturday." Which was a week after our wedding.

So you were on your honeymoon when you were called up?

That is correct.

And you had to cut your honeymoon short to come home?

Oh, yes. They told my father, who said, "He's on his honeymoon. I don't really know exactly where he's at." And they told my father, "Well, if you can't find him, the FBI will."

(both laugh) So, he somehow located you, and you came home?

Oh, yes. Yes. The notification came on the 10th, and I was on board a train the next Saturday, a week after the wedding. To California - Santa Ana, CA - the Separation Center and Classification Center.

What does that mean, Separation Center?

Well, they separate those people by testing, first off physically, "are you qualified" secondly "what type of experience or training have you had," "what kind of an education have you had," and they separated the flying from the ground forces.

Were you put into flying at that point?

No. At that point in time, after classification, I was classified as an aviation cadet, pilot training.

And that was based on testing that they gave you to see if you were suitable?

Right, and your physical condition as well.

Part 3: Training:

Where did you have your "boot camp," or basic training?

Basic training - I would consider that to be right there, in Santa Ana.

Was that a part of the aviation cadet training, or was there a separate boot camp?

It was just in general. They trained people who were there separated to the categories of navigators, bombardiers, or flying personnel, such as the flying crews would be in the bombers, which I finally wound up in.

For the basic training, did you do any of the infantry training that other army inductees would take? Or were you put directly into the aviation training?

More or less into the aviation. We did have considerable bouts of PT. We had "mess training." KP. We called it mess training. We had guard duty and we had all the other functions that had to do with that, parade, so forth, and dress uniform, just a good general military training, basic.

And how long did the basic training last?

We moved out of there to primary school, I would say...Oh I would have to get back to my log book for that, but a couple of months afterward.

What you call primary school, was that advance training?

No, it's a primary trainer, low winged trainer in my case. A single engine aircraft. And then you went to a little bit more powerful aircraft. That was at Hemet, CA.

Would you spell that, please?

H-E-M-E-T. Hemet, Ca.

Was that an airfield?

Yes. Primary training. And there they determined what skills you had, as far as a flyer. Whether you were more proficient in aerobatics, or whether you were more stable and can concentrate on being able to fly. And what separated the crews in that respect, and if you failed in flight training then you were transferred down into navigational training, or bombardier.

And you passed the training, though.

Yes.

How long was the primary school training at Hemet?

About three months.

When you completed that training, you were solo piloting?

Oh, yes. I soloed after six hours of primary training. Actually, my instructor said that he wanted to turn the aircraft over to me. He said, "I'm going to get out here, and then you take it from here." I said, "No. One more time around, and then I'll take it." He said, "That's all right." He says, "You do what you feel like you're comfortable with."

But you said that after six hours you were able to solo. And how many hours altogether of flight training during that three months?

Oh, I'd have to go back to my pilot log on that, but it was usually had about an hour a day or more, depending on how many students he had. And then you had ground school, training you for combat, and combat recognition of the different things, ground school. And thrown in with that you'd have your PT, your gunnery, pistol range and so forth. We didn't go to rifles. And also we had...

What was the purpose of that training? Was it in case you were shot down?

You carried a .45, yeah. (laughs)

The training at Hemet, then. It was the air training, the combat recognition, and survival training?

Right.

Was there any other training after Hemet before you reported for...?

Yes, we went to what they called "basic" training again, in the heavier aircraft. Two seater low winged aircraft. We advanced into the position where we would be able to use more of the skills of aerobatics and landing and so forth. Link Trainer, ground training.

Was this still at Hemet?

No. It was at Bakersfield, CA.

How long did you train at Bakersfield?

Probably about three months there, too.

I'm trying to do the math here. It sounds like you would have been in the service at this point... three months at Bakersfield, three months at Hemet, and a few weeks at...eight or nine months?

Could be, yes.

What happened after Bakersfield?

Then we went to advanced training. Which was twin engine aircraft.

Where was that?

That was at Yuma, AZ. And I graduated out of Yuma with the class of 43J. And that was on the 3rd of November.

November 3rd. Of what year?

1943.

And then what?

From there, I had a fifteen day leave, to go on home.

You came back to Chicago?

I came back to Chicago, and then from there we went to Salt Lake City to gather up a crew. To become part of a crew. As they called it "crew up."

Before we get to the crew up, a quick question or two. You went away {laughs} shortly after your honeymoon. Did you see your wife at all, between the time you actually went into uniform and the time you came back on that 15 day leave?

Yes, I did. My wife came out to California, spent some time with me. Was fortunate enough to get a room and a bath, so to speak, with other cadet wives. And that's when we did get back together, and it seemed like she'd...that's the only place she did follow me around to, until I got to...oh, I think... well, my dad came out to see me at Hemet, but...she was with me at Hemet too, come to think of it. My son, incidentally, was born...I was not home with her at that time. He was born just a few months before I went overseas.

She was living back in Chicago?

She was living with her parents.

Did you see your son before you went overseas?

No, I didn't.

Oh, you didn't see him until you came back?

No.

Was that difficult for you?

In a way, yeah.

So, you went to Salt Lake City...

To crew up.

And this was after the 15 day leave. Was your...Your son was born when?

The 27th of December, 1943.

So he was born after you crewed up in Salt Lake City?

Yes.

So, where were you when your son was born?

I was down in Alexandria, LA for "OT," overseas tactical training.

How long did that training last?

Oh, I'd say about...two months.

Part 4: Going Overseas

Did you have any leave after your training in Alexandria?

Yeah, fortunately I did. My navigator's father passed away, and we all stayed behind with him. I had a short three day leave, and that's the first time I did get to see my son. Just briefly. On an overnight stay. One shot in, and one shot back.

When you mentioned this crew up situation, is that the crew you are supposed to stay with during your combat assignment?

Yes.

So, there's a crew and a plane, and you go over as a unit...

Correct. You fly a new plane over.

So you flew your plane from Louisiana?

No. We picked it up in Salt Lake City, picked up our crew, picked up a plane in Grand Island, NE, flew down to Louisiana for the overseas tactical training. Then we flew up from Louisiana, across the northern route, to Goose Bay, Labrador, Newfoundland, across Greenland, and we landed in Iceland. Keflavik, Iceland. And from there, then we flew toward Great Britain, trying to get to Prestwick, Scotland. However, we had radio communications...we lost, and we had to land in on an offshore island, never getting into the combat area. You couldn't fly into a combat zone not having communications. And that's why we had to land offshore.

Just your plane, or your whole group?

Our plane. Just our plane alone.

And how long did you stay on that offshore island?

Overnight.

There was an airstrip there for you to land on?

Yes.

And then from there where did you go?

Prestwick, Scotland.

Was that going to be your base?

No, the base...we landed the plane there, took the train to our base, which was the 306th, Bomb Group, 369th Squadron.

Where was that based?

Thurleigh. T-H-U-R-L-E-I-G-H, England. Outside of Bedford, England.

Was that a permanent assignment, to that base?

Yes.

And you spent the duration of the war based at Thurleigh?

Yes. That spot. I was with the 1st Division, 306th Bomb Group, 369th Squadron, 440th Combat Wing. There's a book, The First Over Germany, written by one of the surviving combat officers that tells the story.

How long, in total, were you with the 369th at Thurleigh?

I flew with them, my first mission...I'd have to get back to the book...there was a prior training in formation flying... I'd have to get back to the book, but the first mission I flew was the 24th of April in 1944. And the last mission I flew was the 24th of July, 1944.

So it's roughly three months of...

Right.

With 35 missions, I think you told me before we got on record.

Yep.

What was your mission, the 369th Squadron?

The 369th Squadron, which I was attached to, was known as the "Fightin' Bitin," one of four squadrons on the base. And our mission was strategic bombing. Daylight strategic bombing. Which, as history records, the 8th Air Force lost 43,000 airmen in this effort. 43,000 airmen. 8th Air Force alone.

How many squadrons were in the 8th Air Force?

That I couldn't tell you. But I can only tell you that we had the four squadrons on our base, and how many were there...like I said, we were the 1st Division, 440th Combat Wing. Actually, we flew with 36 aircraft. We took off with 37, carrying one for a spare, so that we could go en masse, 36 aircraft. And on our first mission we flew as a composite with another, I believe it was the 100th Bomb Group. They were known as the "Bloody 100th." They had suffered so many losses. That's why we flew a "composite" mission with them. We were the high squadron. And that was the first and the worst of all the missions.

In another part, I'm going to ask you specifically about the combat missions, but just for some background, you said the 100th Bomb Group, and you said the "high"...?

High. High squadron. There's high, lead and low squadrons. They make up the group.

Bill, you told me before we got on record that you were copilot and then a pilot, but I'm going to ask you, what was your job when you first got there, and how did it change as those three months went along?

You were always in group with the officers and in synch with the airmen that flew with you. They were part of a composite group of ten airmen that were all dependent, one upon the other. Nobody had priority.

So there were ten airmen on your plane?

That's right.

And again, you told me off record that it was a B-17.

B-17.

And that's known as the Flying Fortress?

Flying Fortress. B-17 Flying Fortress.

What was your rank at the time?

At the time I was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant. The other officers were 1st Lieutenants.

So, what was life like for you? Let's talk about on the ground and in the air. On the ground, what was life like when you weren't flying missions?

Well, on the ground we still went into training with the group leader, and explaining where we were going to go with the navigator, and bombardier. Everybody was in synch and always well informed. We had Link training over there as we did all through our training, on the ground training.

When you say Link training, you mean the trainer aircraft?

Yeah, that kind of thing.

Did you get off base at all? To go see any of the surrounding area?

Not too often.

Not very often?

No, because as you can see, in three months I put in 35 missions.

Yeah. I'm going to ask you about your life in the air, but while we're on the ground let me ask you this: How did you stay in touch with your family?

Only through letters. That's all.

Was that V mail, or other type of mail?

Oh, just regular V mail, at that time. It was always censored. You had to be careful.

Did you communicate with anybody else at home besides your wife?

Yes. I did finally get in touch with my eldest brother. He was in the 108th Hospital Evacuation Corps, which came up into Manchester, England.

Did you ever see him while your were there?

Yes, I did. By a stroke of luck, I did see him.

How did that occur?

The place where my brother was billeted had...the woman's husband was a flyer, and he got in touch with my father and said that your son was living with him and getting along fine and so forth and so on, and communicated back and forth. And my father happened to mention in one of the letters to him, (that he) had a son also over there that's a flyer. This British pilot used to fly the Sutherland amphibian aircraft over the submarine routes, protecting the ships in the convoys. He mentioned that I was over there in England. This is the way I came in contact with my brother, through Mr. Mairs.

So you got in contact that way.

I saw my brother once outside of Manchester, at his base. I hadn't seen him in two years. I stayed overnight. We went out into the countryside for a walk and talk. That's how we got in contact, one with another.

While we're still talking about your time on the ground, did any USO shows ever perform in your area, do you recall?

Yes, we did have, I think the Glen Miller show was there. And one time, at our particular base, we had the Princess Margaret out at our base. Here she is right here. (shows newspaper photo) They named an aircraft after her, "The Rose of York," and this is one of our squadrons (same photo?). We did have that camaraderie. You can see the gang of guys out there. I can't remember any particular...

You say you did see Glen Miller in person at one of the shows?

One of the bands. I didn't see him personally. Just one of the bands. And Andy Rooney was on our base. He was a correspondent over there.

Did you by any chance ever read his book, "My War"?

No. Jimmy Doolittle was there too. He buzzed the tower. (both laugh)

Was he already famous?

Oh, was he famous! Yeah.

Part 5: Air Combat

Let's talk about life in the air. You said you flew 35 missions. And you've already referred to the first one, the "first and the worst". When was that? When was your unit first in combat?

The 24th of April. 1944. 24th of April, if I gave you that right. The target was near Munich, which was the birthplace of Nazism. Well defended. By a formidable foe, I'll guarantee you that. The 306th Bomb Group was the first over Germany in 1942. In 1942 (June 11 or 12), along with 1,000 other aviation cadets, I enlisted at Soldier Field, Chicago, IL.

What was the specific target?

It was a FW190 aircraft engine factory that we were going for. The place was called Oberpfaffenhausen. O-B-E-R-P-A-F-F-E-N-H-A-U-F-E-N. That's an old German name. I don't know what the heck it means, but that's what it was.

Sounds like you remember it well.

Yeah.

Would you describe that mission? From when it took off, and through the incident, and get us back home?

It was the first, and I was a rookie, so to speak. The first time I had encountered flak. I thought - we were up at 25 or 26,000 feet - how in the hell could it be hailing? And I didn't know it was shells bursting over our heads, piercing the aircraft. So, then I began to realize, we're in combat. And the second thing that brought my attention to it, was after leaving the flak field that we encountered up there, then the fighters appeared. They usually came in after the flak, to see if they could pick up any damaged aircraft and take them down. They usually left if you were approaching a flak field or over the target. If the intensity of flak became more intense, then they would stay away. But they usually came right after the first flak. They'd pick up the strays.

How many planes were in your formation?

36.

There were still 36 at that time?

Yes. We were in the high squadron with 12. And I was in one of two planes that came back that day. To base.

Two of that 12 high came back that day? The others were all shot down?

(with difficulty) Yes.

What happened to your plane, and your crew members?

Well, the first attack was hot and heavy. After the first approach they didn't come in 12 o'clock high. They came in about 2 o'clock high. Then the next group came in about 11 o'clock high, and they kept coming in from different directions that they picked out. There were numerous

planes. I couldn't identify the number, because I was too busy watching other things.

You were copilot at the time?

Yes, at the time I was copilot. And you're sitting there strapped in, and see these machine guns along the wings blinking at you! And there's not a damned thing you can do! Just sit there! And wonder, are we going to get through it? So, I can remember saying a very simple prayer. I never will forget. Three words. "God help us!" And He did.

How long would you say that attack lasted?

I'd say, in total, maybe 20-40 minutes. After the first wave came over, there were so many that kept coming through that the top turret gunner, the man right behind the pilots, with twin .50s, was firing burst after burst after burst, and he locked up the barrels. And when the Germans saw this, they did what they call the "Chandelle" and came right back after us. And they actually blew the top turret right off the plane.

Killing that man?

Not killing him, but wounding him. Shot him right through the head. He fell down in the walkway, about 18 inches between the seats. And I reached over and slapped the pilot, "I got it" (control of the plane). He did hear me say, I got it." I took control. He went down and dragged the man up into the nose, put an oxygen mask on him, give him an oxygen bottle. And he and the bombardier and navigator took him up, took care of him, and got him back alive, about five hours later.

He survived.

He did.

This was the top turret gunner?

Yeah. Actually, when he hit the floor his helmet came off, and I could see his brains streaming out into his helmet.

He was that badly wounded.

Yes, that badly.

What was his name?

Welsch. W-E-L-S-C-H.

Was anybody else wounded on that mission? In your plane?

Yes, as we found out at a later time, that the bombardier was wounded. After briefing with the intelligence officer, we went back to get some chow... we got a shot of scotch, I remember that, to settle us down, and then we had a little bit of food, and went back to the barracks, and the bombardier took off his flight boot, which was a fur lined heavy leather boot, and it was full of blood. Because he was shot in the foot. From anti-aircraft, and never even knew it. So two were wounded, I lost an engine, but got the plane back, feathered the engine on my own. And I

had one of the waist gunners come up and work with me in the cockpit. But we got her back, and we got direct clearance to come in. They kept in touch with us. They knew about the attack, where it occurred. They knew where the flak was. They knew exactly where we were every time we were hit. We came back, I slipped down underneath some of the other group planes and stayed with them with three engines. Of course when you get rid of your bombs and half of your gasoline load you have a better chance of making it on three engines. We came back with just the engineer and myself in the plane's cockpit. I had him calling out airspeed. I followed the best instinct I had, and that's "get in there hot, on three engines and chop it." And we were always taught to make a three point landing, dead stick, stalled landing, so that when you touched you stayed down. But this time I brought it in as a transport landing. I landed on the two front wheels. And all Matty heard- Matty was my engineer- he says, "Was that a squeal I heard?" I says, "Yeah, that was a squeal you heard." We were off our oxygen masks. It was the smoothest landing I ever made in my life. (both laugh)

That was ironic.

Yeah. I had wounded aboard and only three engines.

Well that was the "first and worst" mission out of 35 that you flew. Was there some rule about how many missions you had to fly before you could be rotated out?

Yes. Going in, at the very beginning, when heavier losses were incurred, there was 25 missions to a tour. Then, they could see that we were gaining a little bit more experience, getting different type of aircraft, (a newer B-17G) getting fighter support. There were times we could go in so far with fighter support, and then we'd fight our way in, fight our way back. And try to stay clear as those maps would indicate their locations and we zigzagged around the flak guns. The accuracy of those 105 mm guns was deadly in broad daylight, tracking the lead planes and thus disrupting the formations when they were successful in shooting them down. These were their tactics. The record of losses in the 8th Air Force, European Theater of Operation (has difficulty speaking) was 43,000 airmen. And that's a heavy loss. That's a lot of young men!

Do you know how many airmen were serving there? 43,000 out of how many, total?

I don't. England was spotted with fields all around. They had the 8th, and they had the 9th, medium bombers, the B-26s, Marauders, and then you had all the fighter fields there too. P-47s, P-51s, P-38s, and there were airfields all over England.

Your missions all originated at Thurleigh?

Yes. Near the town of Bedford, 30 miles north of London.

Roughly, what would be the approximate time in hours of a mission, from the time you took off until the time you landed?

It varied. Some of the missions had to be scrubbed and had to return because the targets were obscured. We always had a primary target, and if there was a secondary target free of the flak fields that we could approach and go for the secondary, we'd go. Sometimes the missions were five and a half, six hours, eight, ten hours long. We had missions up into Poland, way up into Posen, Poland. Quite lengthy.

That was without refueling?

Without refueling. 2800 (gallons) 100 Octane gas.

How much fuel would a plane take on?

2800 gallons. They were always topped off after they warmed up. And we would go back when we got ready to fly a plane, all ten of us, and pull the props to clear the engines of any gas in the cylinders. Of course, preceding this you would have the crew chief in there, having shut off the engines, to be sure that everything was off. And we pulled it through, they refueled it, and we were ready to go.

Besides your first mission, was your plane ever hit by any other...on any other mission?

Oh, yes. We were the first 1000 planes over Berlin. And Berlin was surrounded by anti-aircraft guns, by 500 anti-aircraft guns, 105 millimeter, in different pods, according to intelligence reports. It was the capital city of the German Reich.

What was the date of that?

I have to get to my book on that. (refers to log) May 7.

OK, so on May 7, this was the bombing run over Berlin. Would you describe that for me?

Well, that was preceded by another recalled mission over there. When we could not identify the targets that we were assigned to hit because weather closed in, we abandoned that particular mission and hit a secondary target instead. But this was the first 1000 plane bomber raid over Berlin, by the 8th Air Force. And it was quite lengthy and quite treacherous. They had, surrounding the capital city of the German Reich, 500 anti-aircraft guns of the 105 millimeter range that could go up to 25,000 feet very effectively.

But you apparently flew just a little above that, at 28,000?

No, 26,800. Maximum ceiling.

You mentioned some other missions that were more significant to you?

Well, following the Berlin raid, which was very successful, both psychologically and with the number of planes that we sent over there, it kind of broke the spirit of the German people, and this is what was the beginning of the end for them. We could see at this particular time that the German air force was not a formidable foe, nor were the ground forces within their aircraft defense, were not getting to us, because we had put a thousand over them that day. Another thing that followed that Berlin (raid) was the Hamburg raid, to the submarine pens, and also to the oil tanks there, oil storage plants where they had recycled- used oil...

Those were two targets for the same mission? The sub pens and the...?

Yes. They were close together. Very close together. There's a picture in here in this other big book of mine I can show you after we're through, of what devastation was wrought there. That was on May 12th.

So it was just five days after Berlin.

So we hit them another blow.

Keeping pressure on them. Now, you mentioned sub pens and you said synthetic oil storage. Would you describe that?

They were so desperate in the need of oil, which proved to be the demise of the German air force, because at the end of the war there were 3000 flyable aircraft on line at the air fields. No fuel. No oil.

So they were making synthetic oil from...?

Used oil. Recycling. Clean it up and re-use it.

After Hamburg, were there other significant missions that you'd share?

Then, we had them to D-Day, from there on in. And that was quite a historical thing for us as well. Let's see what else I have. I've got some more German missions here, but I don't remember exactly what they were. I'd have to review this a little bit further to...

Well, I see here, Bill, that you're referring to your original flight log...

Yeah, pilot's log.

Or pilot's log. These were entries you made personally after each mission.

Yes.

So, you mentioned D-Day..

Yes. That's the most historic event, this little paper I will leave with you. You can read further about it. At the scene of the briefing there are smiles upon the faces of several of the individuals you can see there.

Would I see you in there?

No. I don't think so. You'd have to use a magnifying glass, because it was wall to wall, all four squadrons together there. And we have our more senior officers with the serious looks on their face. They've been there. They know what it's all about. Our operations man, Bill Cassidy, and our operations- squadron leader, Charlie Flannigan, two Irishmen going to beat up on the Germans. But anyway, it was a turning point in history and it's a story in itself. I can remember so well being there, over above the channel, seeing the battleships down in the channel firing broadside into the shore guns' positions. The ships would wash sideways. You could see the force of those twelve inch guns that they had on board.

You're saying that the force of the guns would actually push the boat?

Push it sideways. The recoil.

Not just rock it, but push it?

Push. Yeah. And that, along with the effort of what you knew was going on down below. Prior to taking off on D-Day I lined up the crew. The officers had their work to do (end of tape)

On the first side of the tape we were talking about D-Day and some of your observations as you flew over. What was your specific target, Bill?

We were to be in support of the ground forces the British had at Avaranche.

You were dropping what? Anti-personnel bombs?

Basically, I believe something in that range. Or it could have been, if we had a specific target, would have been a bridge, but, no, we were in support of the ground forces with personnel bombs. And we went in, in squadrons of twelve, in a line. All the way across, wing tip to wing tip.

Twelve across?

Twelve across. Wing tip to wing tip.

And how many squadrons would you estimate participated?

Oh. Well, we had twelve in a squadron, there'd be three times twelve, four times twelve, would be 48 planes, following twelve at a time. Four squadrons going in there. 36 planes per squadron, or 144 times the two missions that made it, or 288 planes put up in the air by the 306th Group. That was the first and third missions that made it. The second mission "weathered in" (was scrubbed due to weather).

As you flew over from England to the beachheads, did you see the convoys below? The troop convoys?

Oh, yeah, definitely. I had a front row seat. We were up there at 15,000 feet. You can see a lot. We had no anti-aircraft fire to worry about. We just went in there and swept over the top of them. The first time we were very successful in getting to our target on time. Our targeted drop was no later than 07:20. We all dropped on the lead bombardier. Each time there was a lead bombardier for each 12 planes who was familiar with the area and studied the terrain and everything. He knew where to drop so there would be no mistakes. There was enough of that, mistakes on the ground, and we didn't want it to happen on our part. Friendly fire. God helped us again!

We talked about three of the most memorable of your 35 missions, four I guess actually. When was your last mission?

24th of July, '44. St. Lo, France. In support of the advancing ground troops. We took out a bridge. A tactical target.

Before we go on to the next segment, I should ask you...

I wanted to make one comment about D-Day.

Oh, sure.

Prior to taking off on our first mission, D-Day, I had the six enlisted men of our crew, after we had pulled in, to stay out in front, I said, "Look, I don't care what kind of religion you have, or if you have none. That makes no difference to me. But you've got to know how to pray. And I want you praying for people on the ground as well as for the crews. And for all of us. Especially those on the ground." Not a one of them batted an eye. They knew damn well I meant it.

Overall, there was a lot of pressure, I would imagine, on these missions. How did you feel about it? From all standpoints? I mean the danger to you? What was happening on the ground?

Actually, I felt pretty secure in the sense that, after surviving the first mission, I was going to make it all the way. I had a Christian education, and I had a contract with my Maker, and we had an agreement: God help us. And He did. I knew it. That's what gave me confidence. I couldn't say I wasn't scared. I wasn't frightened to the point of being fearful, but I knew I had a good feeling about making it all the way.

Are there any other stories or anecdotes that you might have about your times on those missions? Any humorous incidents? Was there anything to break the tension?

Oh, yes. There is always, in combat- you get to hear stories that come out of combat sometimes. They almost make you cry. I do recall a couple of them, that were quite serious. We were in intense fighter attacks as well as attacks from down below from the anti-aircraft. The ball turret gunner who was with us, knees pulled up in that little round ball down below, actually wet his pants. Short circuited the electric flight suit, and his outer suit froze to the ball turret. The temperature's 50 some degrees below zero; this could well happen. So, he told us he was getting cold, "Get me out of here." So we cranked him around and pulled him out of the opening. When you lose control of your electric power you lose the ability to move the ball turret around. The (others in the) flight crew hand cranked (the turret to position it in line with the access hatch) him out of there. They pulled the seat out of his flight suit. His outer suit was froze to the metal. They dragged him out of there, put a spare flight jacket around him. It was fur lined, and he sat on that, and it kept him warm. Put him on oxygen. That was one, in our own crew. We had another. One of the squadron members was a big strapping Russian young man. More or less the outspoken typical Russian. He said the first time he ever got over to Berlin, he was going to go in the bomb bay with an oxygen bottle, and wait until we got ready to drop the bombs, and he was going to take a crap right on the Germans' heads. Well, it didn't turn out that way. Before we got into Berlin, because of the heavy anti-aircraft fire from down below, he did his crapping

in his pants! (both laugh) The crew got off of the plane, after we got down, with their oxygen masks on, and others that were in the same area where we had to park our plane were all holding their noses and oxygen masks. We just laughed 'til we cried. "Old Grubavich just dirtied his pants" (both laugh)

They all knew?

Oh, everybody just rode his ass! (both continue laughing)

So, after June of- it's going to be July, of 1944, you had fulfilled your missions. And then what happened?

Part 6: Going Home

Get ready to go home.

You're still at Thurleigh, England at that point?

Yes.

And then what happened?

Well, we got the crew all together, but we had to leave behind...actually two of our original crew members stayed behind. A waist gunner who had suffered combat fatigue, and the one who was injured. We had picked up another crew member from one other section of the squadron, and they went along home with us. They had completed their missions.

To make sure I understand, you say that two members had stayed behind. One had combat fatigue, so he was hospitalized?

Yes. Yes.

Was he a waist gunner? Was that what you said?

Waist gunner.

And the other?

Was the man that was wounded, the head wound. He was the top turret gunner and flight engineer.

And how did you travel from England back to the United States?

Well, we went back up into Glasgow, Scotland by train. We were, of course, treated royally, with cheering crowds at the platforms wherever we stopped. And the Salvation Army was there, with hot coffee that they handed into the open doors of the trains, and donuts and so forth. And it was there that I saw one of the most beautiful Scottish women in my life. Beautiful red haired girl. And she smiled, and I smiled at her. I knew then that I was still alive. (both laugh)

So then, from Glasgow, Scotland, how did you get back to the United States?

We came back on the Queen Elizabeth, which was a very luxurious trip. We were given whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted it.

So, you came back to the United States, and then what?

Well we came to the harbor. It was the first time I saw the Statue of Liberty (has difficulty speaking). I cried.

I imagine. When did you meet your wife, then, after that?

Yes. We went back to the embarkation-debarkation port and got to a camp. I can't remember which one, and from there we checked out our material that we brought back with us, and were given some new uniforms, so forth and so on. We were ready to go back to Ft. Sheridan.

To Ft. Sheridan?

Yep. And on the way back, as luck would have it, the El train that was taking us to Ft. Sheridan stopped right at an overpass where my dad worked, and he was outside. And I hollered to him, "Dad. Hey, Dad." Some of the others joined in the yelling.

You...you saw him?

Yes. And I cried then. I knew I had broken his heart when I was the last of three sons to leave when I enlisted. I was the first to come home.

Did...did he recognize you?

Oh, yeah.

He saw you waving?

Oh, yeah. He knew who it was.

I imagine that was an emotional moment for both of you.

(Mr. Schaefer becomes slightly overcome with emotion)

Do you want to take a moment to stop?

Yeah.

(tape recorder is stopped)

OK, we just took a couple of moments to reflect on what you were just telling me. While we were off record, you started to tell me about when you got back on the El. Would you tell me that again?

Well, after we disembarked on the east coast, and I can only say it was very emotional when we crossed from the Statue of Liberty, and it hit me then. I had something to come back home to. And, I'll tell you this much. By coincidence, after we had gone through the separation, or

disembarkment camp - I don't remember which one it was - in Jersey or somewhere, I don't recall anymore, but we took an El back, to go up to Ft. Sheridan. And by coincidence, the elevated train stopped, for some unknown reason, right above a street where my father worked. And I was hollering, "Hey, Dad." And then the chorus of guys looking out behind (me) were hollering, "Hey, Dad. Hey, Dad." And my father looked up. I knew it was him. He had a white frock on, and a pipe in his mouth. I said, "That's my dad." And he waved and I waved.

Did you see how he reacted?

I can imagine. (both laugh)

What business was that, where he worked?

He worked at Oscar Mayer and Company. On Sedgewick and Division.

And that's where the El stopped. So, then you went back to Ft. Sheridan. Is that where you were released from active duty?

Basically, yes. We came back from Ft. Sheridan, back into the place where we could meet our family.

And that was the first time you saw your wife in how long?

Oh, I guess a year.

Emotional reunion?

Oh, yeah. Very.

Part 7: Life After the Service:

And after that, what did you do? After you got out of the service.

Well, I didn't really get out. I went into the reserves. To try and teach others.

Were you ever called back into active duty? For Korea or any other?

No. I was attached to the 928th Troop Carrier Wing, out of O'Hare field, which flew C-119s. I did not fly anymore. I was on ground duty. They went to Korea and we were the backup group at home.

So, you went to reserve meetings out at the 928th?

Oh, yes. Twice a month and 15 days active duty.

And when did you finally retire from the reserves?

I think altogether it was in 1975. I think. I'd have to look that up. But it was 28 years of active duty and reserve duty total. Three and a half years combat active duty.

Have you retained contact with any of your fellow fliers? Any of your wartime buddies?

Yes, I have. The pilot who was the senior pilot, was killed shortly after we got back, in a training accident. He was in training for the B-29s, on McDill (?) Field in Florida. The bombardier and navigator...the navigator became an instructor, and he went back in the Berlin conflict. He was back in the service again. The bombardier went back into a sawmill in Kentucky. We've been in contact even until last year, back and forth, holidays, telephone calls. And one of the crew members, the waist gunner, Matty, who was my assistant on our first mission, we stay in contact with him.

What was the bombardier's name?

Jim Reeves. Out of Kentucky. He was a true Kentuckian. He was a crackerjack marksman.

And what was the waist gunner's name?

That was Matty Cutugno. He was an Italian boy. C-U-T-U-G-N-O. Out of Jersey.

You called him Matty?

Matty. Matthew was probably his first name.

Do you still keep in touch with either Mr. Reeves or Cutugno?

Yes, I do. Christmas cards, that sort of thing. The remaining three officers and Matty, we all get this feeling of bonding together three or four times a year. It's still in existence. That's something about this particular bomb group. We have a memorial site over there, which is by the 440th Combat Wing. And there's a little school over there. We took out a bond, which would memorialize and support that grammar school over there. We all chipped in as a group effort.

Where is that?

In England. Outside of the village of Thurleigh. The children get a good education and good books. We took out bonds. Most of us bought bonds. And supported that memorial. It's still there today.

Have you joined a veteran's organization?

Oh, yeah. I belong to the Robert F. Coulter Post. 1941. La Grange, IL.

How do you spell Coulter?

C-O-U-L-T-E-R.

And you're active in that post?

I was active. Until such time as I felt that I could not participate in the position that I had. That was trustee. And then I gave it up, let somebody else do it because I couldn't do the things I wanted to do, let somebody else do it. I was not in good physical condition.

Have you ever attended any reunions?

Yes. The 50th reunion of our group, the 306th Bomb Group. Over in Bedford, England. At the same time, I was celebrating our 50th anniversary.

That's right (laughs). You mentioned earlier that your honeymoon was cut short. How many of you went to that reunion?

Over 400.

So, you met a lot of people that you hadn't seen, maybe in 50 years?

Yep. We visited the old base, were given carte blanche treatment over there, and the town of Bedford came out in full force.

How long did that reunion last?

Fifteen days, from the time we left until the time we came home.

In closing, Bill, how would you say your military service and those experiences affected your life?

In the positive way. It increased my value of life, for one thing. I met a lot of quality people in service. Educated above the average. And the camaraderie that I had with these people is one that lasts forever. And it strengthened my faith, which was strong at the time, in one God, with whom I was personally in touch. The triune God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. And I'm very thankful for the extension of life that I had, after my first mission. Another 60 years. And each day I keep that thought in mind. Live one day at a time. Count your blessings. Be aware of the Almighty.

You came back and continued with your family. You mentioned the son that was born right when you were ready to go overseas. Do you have any other children?

Well, we had a total of seven. He was the first born son. And I had six daughters afterwards.

You told me off record that you went into business for yourself. You were a contractor?

Yes. Right.

Built houses?

Homes, commercial, residential, custom built, and so forth.

Part 8: Conclusion:

Bill, is there anything that you'd like to add that you can think of that we haven't covered in the interview?

No, the importance that people should have today is, don't forget the flag. You saw an outpouring of patriotism after 9/11. But let's not forget it, and let's not take it for granted. That's a mistake, we're too complacent about it. That's why we're in the trouble we are right now. That's it.

Thank you, very much. Bill is there anything that you'd like to add that you can think of that we haven't covered in the interview?

No. The importance of, people should have a day as don't forget the flag. You saw an outpouring of patriotism after 9/11, but let's not forget it and let's not take it for granted. That's the mistake, we were too complacent about it. That's why we're in the trouble we're at right now. That's it.

Thank you very much.

One more thing for the interview, I want to get a record of the medals Bill won in his combat service. And you just showed me the Distinguished Flying Cross. What do you have to do to earn the Distinguished Flying Cross?

Stay alive.

Stay alive.

Yeah.

In missions?

Yeah.

And you also have the Air Medal. What does that represent?

That's the various missions that we accomplished, outstanding missions. There's two of them there, two Air Medals.

Are these Oak Leaf Clusters?

Oak Leaf Clusters, right.

And what does that symbolize?

That was the distinguished targets that we accomplished.

Each one of these represents a specific target?

Right, right.

And what do they represent?

Either part of the campaign was part of the air war at the very beginning we fought in the battle for Britain. And then, of course, we into D-Day and so forth and so on. That's outstanding, outstanding participation.

I'm now looking at the ...

That's a Campaign Medal.

Campaign Medal. It reads: United States of America, 1941-1945.

That's a Victory Medal.

World War II, Victory Medal.

This one here is a medal that we got recently from France for participation in the Battle of Normandy.

You say recently.

Yeah, just a couple of years ago. There's an article on that I can show you. They came over and gave those medals to people who were there but never got a chance to get a medal.

That's a Life Line.

In addition to the medals, Bill, you brought another piece of equipment.

Throat Mike.

You call it a Throat Mike? And you also referred to it as "A Life Line."

Yep.

Says here it was made at Western Electric and you told me that it was made at ...

West Cicero Plant.

At the Cicero Plant.