

This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, July 3, 2024 at the home of John J. Sladek. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with John, who served in the United States Army Air Corps and is a Veteran of World War II. John learned of the Veterans' History Project through a mutual friend, and has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

John, when and where were you born?

Chicago, Illinois May 5, 1925.

What were your parents' occupations?

My Dad had a family grocery store; my Mother was a homemaker.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Just had one sister.

What did you do before entering the service?

Went to high school.

So you graduated high school and you went into the service?

Right.

Did you have any other family members serving in the military?

Well, my Dad was a World War I –

Okay. How about any in World War II?

I had two cousins that were in the Air Force also.

They were in the Air Force?

In Africa.

Were you drafted or did you enlist?

I was drafted.

You were drafted into the Army Air Corps?

I had a choice. I took a test in school – and – made the Air Force –

And – what happened with the test? What did the test show?

That I chose the Air Force.

So you picked the Air Force.

Yes.

Any particular reason that you picked the Air Force?

Seemed like more -- seen too much of what was going on on the ground. I didn't want to be on the ground.

Oh, okay. Did it have anything to do with your two cousins being in the Air Force?

No.

What happened when you were drafted? Where did they send you?

Well, I went to basic training and then I went to Gunnery School.

Where did you go for basic training?

I think it was in Miami.

So basically your training was in a camp or fort in Miami -- do you remember the name of that place?

I think it was Miami Beach; it was at a motel.

Wow, that's nice, ha, ha! And this is 1943 we're talking about.

Trained on the gulf --

Tell me again, you said Miami Beach in a hotel.

That's what it was -- like a cadet program.

How old were you when you went in?

18.

So how long did you stay in Miami?

About three months.

You had your basic training there?

Yes, then we went to Tyndal Field -- in Panama City, Florida.

And what did you do there?

Gunnery School.

How long did that last? That was considered specialized training?

Yeah -- couple of months.

After Gunnery School was over -- did you get a Certificate? You completed it?

After we graduated – it's gonna be a long story now –

Okay, go ahead, I've got time –

We went from – to Salt Lake City for Crew makeup.

In other words get a crew together that you were gonna fly with

We were all strangers now. So we flew to Dalhart, Texas in the panhandle. WE flew there for crew training.

How large was this crew? How many men?

Ten.

What type of plane was that going to be?

B-17.

And this was specifically for a B-17 bomber crew – 10 men?

Right. (Added – Later 9 men – eliminated 1 waist gunner)

How long were you there in Texas – training?

WE were there a couple of months. Then we flew to Gulfport, Mississippi for aerial gunnery training.

How long did that take?

That was maybe a month or so.

And then what?

Then we flew to Norfolk, Virginia. The Officers were getting their instructions – for going overseas.

Getting instructions – getting orders for overseas duty.

Then we flew from Norfolk, Virginia to --

What was your rank at that time?

Sergeant.

How did you get to be a Sergeant that quick? You just got in, didn't you?

Everybody was made a Sergeant at that time.

Was the whole crew made Sergeants?

Except the pilot and co-pilot; they were Officers.

Oh, they were Officers; the rest of the men were Sergeants.

Right.

That was normal for a crew at that time?

Right.

What did you do at Norfolk, Virginia?

We didn't do anything; that was for the Officers.

Oh.

Then from there we flew to Bangor, Maine. We got a new plane there and then we flew to Goose Bay, Labrador. We were there only overnight. From there we flew to Iceland. In Iceland we were supposed to be overnight also but the weather was so bad we couldn't fly – so we were there for three days.

Due to the weather?

Yeah. From there we flew to Prestwick, Scotland – and then we went to –

Why did you go to these different places?

It was just one or two days – nothing –

You were just sort of hopping around getting to Europe?

Yes, that's right. From there we went to – it was called "The Wash"; it was on the North Sea.

And then we were given our – assigned to our groups –

You were given specific orders?

We lived in tents along the shore and we had more gunnery practice. That was the first time I saw the water come in at night and there was nothing there in the morning.

Oh, the tides – high tide.

Yeah. I was surprised when I got up in the morning and the water was gone. There was people out there picking shells and stuff.

So that was Iceland? Oh, that was the North Sea, you said --

Uh, England – Prestwick, Scotland we went to The Wash – they called it.

All this time you've been in the service now, a good six months it sounds like, how did you adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks, the social life, the food?

It was okay.

You had no problems?

No.

Is The Wash a part of England?

Yeah.

How long did you stay there?

Just a couple of days, then we were assigned to our Groups – 381st Bomber

And you were assigned to which Group?

Our base was in Ridgewell, England.

Are those English bases?

Yeah; that was the town next to our base.

Did the base have a name or was it just the base at Ridgewell, England?

381st Bomber Group – that's it.

So what did you do in England?

That's when we started to fly on our bombing missions.

How often did you fly these missions?

It depends; some were every day; some were 2 or 3 days apart.

So daily or every other day, you flew

Yeah.

Did you drop bombs? Did you encounter other planes? What happened on these forays?

Can you tell me about a mission that you went on and what exactly happened?

Well, on my – the one I remember most is the one I got wounded on – and that was my 16th mission over Munster, Germany.

Go ahead; describe it.

Meanwhile I was in the hospital, my crew was shot down.

So after you left –

While I was in the hospital – yeah.

So what happened on your flight when you got injured?

What happened? Well, I was turret gunner and I got hit by shrapnel.

This is a big plane, a B-17.

Yeah.

What kind of planes were you fighting against? Are they large planes or small German planes?

German fighter planes – Messerschmitts. And then I got out of the hospital, I was put on the crew of the boy that took my place. And he ended up as a prisoner of war.

Oh. So you were – you became a crew member on a different team?

Yeah, because my crew was shot down while I was in the hospital.

Did they die, your crew, or what happened?

Two of them did, but the rest were all taken prisoners.

So your crew was – two men died and the rest were taken prisoners. So you had no team. No crew.

I joined another crew from the boy who took my place.

Right, right. And did you continue flying, daily or every other day?

Yeah. On December 9, 1944, over Stuttgart, Germany, I was wounded again. There were five of us wounded. We made an emergency landing in France; we ended up in a field hospital that the Army took over from France and made a hospital out of it – like a mansion.

But it was an American hospital? Like MASH, huh?

Oh, yeah. I was there a couple of days and then we flew back to Dover, England –

Wait a minute – when you were injured the first time, where were you injured?

In the back, shrapnel.

And how about the second injury?

In the head; on the top of my head. I've got scars there – from a rough landing.

Wow! You were lucky. So this is your second injury – what happened now at the field hospital –

They flew me back to Dover, England for treatment on my head, not on my back. My back was just taped up.

Just removed the shrapnel and taped it up.

Yeah, minor injury.

But you had surgery on your head?

Yeah, no surgery, treatment.

How long were you in the hospital?

Not long; went back to the base and joined the second crew.

How about your other crew members? What happened to them?

I don't know. Five wounded and hospitalized.

How do you feel – what were your emotions relating to combat and witnessing casualties?

Witnessing destruction – how did you feel about that?

When I first went in I didn't know what was gonna happen –

You were young; only 18.

And after two missions I knew what could happen and I got more –

Hardened?

Scared -- I got more scared 'cuz I know what could happen.

But you went anyway, right? You still went.

35 times !! –

Wow! 35 missions you did – You deserve a lot of praise for that. Thank you, very much, for your service. So you were in Dover, England in the hospital; that's where they did the treatment. What happened after that?

After that I was released and I went back to my base –

Which base was that?

Where the crew was – home base.

Were they in the original place you said in Ridgewell, England.

Yeah, Ridgewell.

So you went back to your Bomber Group. So what happened? The war kept going on –

Did you form friendships with the guys that you kept in touch with when you got back home?

Well, they were all prisoners. I got out – come home and the war in Europe was still going on.

Oh, okay. I'm talking about now – friendships made with the guys you were with.

Did they ever get out of the prisoner camp, the first crew that you flew with?

Yeah.

Are you ever in touch with those guys?

Not any more.

They're all gone now.

I was the youngest one on the crew. Couple of the guys were married; they were all older than me.

Did they eventually come out of the war okay?

Yeah, yeah. And I wrote to several of them.

You kept up correspondence with them.

Yeah, yeah.

Did you ever go to any reunions?

Yeah, went to a couple of reunions; one was in Wisconsin and one was here on the south side of Chicago.

But not anymore; they're all gone probably.

Yeah, yeah.

John has his DD-214 here and I would like him to read off the Medals, Honors and Awards that he received. Just tell me which medals you got.

I have the two Purple Hearts, the Air Medal with the Silver Oak Leaf Cluster, the Good Conduct Medal, the Victory Medal, the East Coast –

That's plenty – what have you got here?

This was after.

You got the Lapel Button, Aerial Gunner, European- African-Middle Eastern Theater Ribbon with four Bronze Battle Stars and one Overseas Service Bar. John didn't read that.

And what was your rank at that time?

I got a raise to Staff Sergeant.

Did you leave the service with that rank, Staff Sergeant?

Yes.

Your highest rank. This will sound funny, but were there ever any recreational or off-duty pursuits. Did you ever have any time to go out and do anything other than –

Yeah, we could go out visit the town – visit the pubs in the town.

Oh, you visited pubs?

Yeah. London --

Anything else – did you ever do any kind of sightseeing or go places or anything?

We had a PX there – the PX had parties and dances, bringing in the girls on trucks –

Like the USO?

Yeah, something like that.

I don't know if they called it the USO in Europe but –

At that time, no. We used to have a Red Cross bus come; you could get a drink or get a hot chocolate or coffee after we landed.

They didn't have any kinds of shows for you guys, movies are –

Movies on the base, and we had –

Did you have any sports teams – like guys playing baseball against each other or anything?

We played a couple of games –

You probably didn't have time – you were actually fighting a war. So you went back to your home base. Did you continue flying more after you were injured twice?

Yes. The crew that I was assigned to were five missions ahead of me so when they withdrew, I still had five missions to go, so I was a replacement. I flew different positions – I had one in the tail, two in the waist and two in the ball.

So the tail, the waist, like the middle of the plane, and the ball.

Yeah.

So your mission on all the planes was the gunner; always the gunner.

Right.

At different locations on the plane.

Right.

So all in all you made 35 trips – missions. Where were you when the war ended?

I went to California because I was assigned to go overseas to the Pacific, because three of the first bomb group was going to the Pacific. But then they checked my records and they found out I had enough points to get out. I had more points than some of the older guys. So it was either go home or go to the Pacific – get out of here.

So you were then discharged. You were deactivated.

Right, right.

How did you get home from California?

On the train – to Fort Sheridan.

So you were discharged from Fort Sheridan?

Yes.

How did you get home from Fort Sheridan?

My Dad picked me up.

You were only then 20 years old, right?

Right.

How was your reception by family and friends?

There was no reception; it was late at night.

I just mean in general – they knew you were home –

They were glad to see me; I knew a lot of the people from my Dad's store.

Your Dad's store; that was 1945; the war was over.

Yeah.

The war in Japan – in the Pacific was over too, right.

How was your readjustment to civilian life?

I got a job right away at R.R. Donnelly & Sons and I worked there for 42 years.

Wow! Did you retire from there?

Right.

Were you a printer? What was your job there?

I worked in the photoengraving shop.

Did you ever use the G.I. Bill – did they have it then?

I used the G.I. Bill just to get me what I needed in my job. I got like magnifying glasses and tools for my work.

Oh, incidental things like that, but did you use it to go to school?

No, I didn't use it for that – work instead

You did have contact with fellow veterans over the years – you did have, but they're all gone now.

Yeah, right.

Are you a member of any Veterans Organizations today?

The American Legion.

Do you attend meetings?

I haven't recently but I'm gonna start again.

Good for you. Do you use any VA services today?

No. Don't need to, so far.

Yeah, you're in good shape for your age (John is 99 years old).

How did your wartime experience affect your life – when you look back on it?

Did it change you? Did it make you a different person?

No. Don't think so.

Any life lessons you learned from military service?

No.

Anything else you would like to add to the story – any bad storms you encountered or any other incidents that happened that you didn't talk about. Did you ever have any shows – like Bob Hope came later on – but show people to come and entertain the troops when you were there?

Like the plane that I flew in was christened by Sarah Churchill – Churchill's daughter.

Oh, really, the plane was christened by Sarah Churchill, wow!

Stage Door Canteen was the name of the plane.

Wow, so they did have a few shows.

Yeah, they had shows – movie stars – orchestras --

Which movie stars came? Do you remember any?

Lana turner or some of those older movie stars to entertain troops. They must have had some but you probably didn't have time to do that, you were pretty busy.

I didn't see too many of them. I was glad to get back to my bed.

Okay, well, how are your injuries now – do you feel the effects of them or are they okay?

They're okay.

You've very lucky.

Yeah, I was lucky.

If there's anything else you wish to add you could always let me know and we will include it later on. I think that covers it all. I thank you very much for this interview and thank you for your service to our

country. Continuing on – I just asked John how he prepared to fly a mission – he’s going to talk about it a little more.

We had a bulletin board that had all the missions – all the planes, numbers and crew members who were on these missions. You had to look it up to see if you were flying the next day, and then they would wake you up, take you to the mess hall for breakfast in a truck. The truck would take you from the mess hall to your plane. They knew all the stuff; the places we had to fly to, who belonged to which plane.

Did they have a Chaplain there? Did you say prayers before you flew?

The Chaplain – yeah, if you wanted to .

Was this Chaplain – John showed me some books he has here, the title is “They Came From Over the Pond” by David Osborn and another book – “The Mighty Men of the 381st – Heroes All” – written by Chaplain James Good Brown. (their Chaplain). I will review these books and return them to him. That’s why I’m asking him to provide a little more detail about how they prepared for a mission.

How did the other men seem – were they anxious? Were they scared? All those things?

It was hard to tell.

I’m sure everyone put on a brave face.

Well, we didn’t know what the target was till we got to the plane, then it’s “oh, no” –

Really -- so you didn’t know where you were going. Once you got on the plane the Captain told you where you were going.

Cuz they had to – the Officers went to a briefing first and they had to brief us. And when we found out where we’re going, oh, no, not that place.

So where did you shoot over – where did you bomb in Germany? What cities that you remember you flew over? Did you drop bombs or were you just fighting against other planes?

We dropped bombs; then planes would attack us.

Exactly, the smaller planes. Which cities do you recall dropping bombs on?

I had another list; I couldn’t find it. It had all my missions –

John is looking through a suitcase full of papers -- looking for his 35 missions – we can always add that to the interview. I certainly will include it in the tape. If he recalls anything else we will add it to the recording. John is pulling out items and is showing me a paper in a plastic sleeve; it is an American flag with Russian language under it. John said if they came down in Russian territory they had to carry these papers so the Russians would know that they are friendly – with instructions on the reverse side.

John has found a list of missions— paper documents saying “CONFIDENTIAL” at the top – a list of cities bombed as of April 1945 – Ausnebruck, Cologne, Magberg Castle, Cologne, Shoenburg (all phonetic) Munster, Merisburg, Stuttgart, December 9, 1944, Stuttgart, Dresden, Fernburg, Castle Leggensdorfer, lots of others, can’t pronounce the names – times and dates from September 1944 till February 1945 – end of tape.

John J. Sladek,

13158 S. Carlisle Court

Plainfield, Illinois 60544

815-293-0506