

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II: Co-pilot

Personal Experience

O. H. 1484

FRED L. RENTZ

Interviewed

by

Thomas J. Burns

on

November 18, 1991

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INTERVIEWEE: FRED L. RENTZ

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SUBJECT: Training to be a pilot, experiences.

DATE: November 18, 1991

B: This is an interview with Fred L. Rentz, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on World War II, by Thomas Burnes, at 111 Park Lane, New Castle, PA, on November 18, 1991.

Fred, would you please give us some information concerning your personal history, such as the date and the location of your birth and the names of your parents, brothers, and any sisters you have.

R: I was born on October 15, 1924 in the old Shenango Valley Hospital in New Castle, PA, which was off what I think is Locust Street now. The Hospital no longer exists. My father was Jacob F. Rentz. My mother was Alice McCreary Rentz. She was one of the McCreary's from out around Eastbrook Station. My Grandfather was Fred L. Rentz who started at the New Castle News when he was about fourteen years old. He had a very rudimentary education and didn't finish high school. He started there and ended up as president of the company. I was married to Suzanne Shannon, who was interestingly born on the same day that I was, the same year. I was two hours older than she was. She was born at home on Wallace Avenue, a house which is probably three blocks from the hospital where I was born. We started in first grade together. Her dad had worked in the tin mill and later was a safety man with U.S. Steel.

B: Could you outline your education for us.

R: I went to public schools in New Castle from first grade through high school. I then attended Oberlin College for one semester in the Fall of 1942. I had intended at that point to be an attorney and I was going to take a pre-law course at Oberlin. I was influenced by a good friend who was an attorney, William J. Coldwell, who had gone to Oberlin.

While I was at Oberlin in November of 1942, I enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps and was allowed to finish that semester and went into the service at the end of the semester along in February of 1943. When I got out of the service in 1945, I did enroll at Carnegie Institute of Technology. I decided that I did not want to be an attorney but would like to be an engineer. I was not able to gain admission until February of 1946, because the class was full. I took electrical engineering and completed that course of study in two and a half years, graduating in August of 1948. I went from there directly to Pasadena, California, where I enrolled at the California Institute of Technology and got a masters degree in electrical engineering in the Spring of 1949. In a matter of three and a half years, I had managed to go from essentially no credits to a masters degree in electrical engineering.

B: That's very impressive.

R: I was married at the time and I wasn't burdened with a lot of extracurricular activities. I lived at home and I used to kid people that my roommate was a girl. That wouldn't even raise an eyebrow today. Of course Susie and I were married when I even started college.

B: Fred, what can you remember concerning the rise of Adolf Hitler in the 1930's as it affected you, your family, your schoolmates and the community as a whole? My primary interest is in the degree to which people were aware of what was happening in Europe, how well informed they were and the concern people felt. Not so much the specific historical facts per se. For example, did you ever discuss these events at school or at home over dinner?

R: I don't recall there was a great impact on what was happening in Europe on life at home or in the school. My family was in the newspaper business and of course we read about these things but they didn't seem to have an impact on us directly. I can't recall any very deep discussions about it at school or in any other context. Hitler was someone you just heard about. He didn't seem real to us. Of course, he became real when the United States became involved in the war. But back in the 1930's when he was invading all the countries, he

seemed very remote to us and I guess we were pretty provincial and really didn't pay that much attention to what was happening over seas. We were pretty isolated.

B: Can you remember what you were doing when you heard the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Can you remember what you did the rest of the day?

R: I do happen to remember. They always say that you can remember where you were when you heard momentous events. My father always used to love to go to the international livestock show in Chicago. We went every year. That particular year in 1941, he and I were on our way home from Chicago on a train. It seems to me that when we arrived in New Castle we found out that the United States Forces had been attacked at Pearl Harbor and we found it pretty impossible to believe. That's what I was doing and it was in the evening. I'm sure that when we got home there was a discussion about what this meant and how it impacted our lives and what not.

B: Tell us something about when you joined the service, when, where and what branch and the like.

R: I had already indicated that I had enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps while I was at Oberlin College, as did a number of other people. A number of them joined the Navy. I was actually taken into the service in February of 1943 and went to San Antonio for basic training for nine weeks there where I received infantry type training. I had been tested for adaptability when I went into the service and I was told that I would make an excellent navigator, an excellent bombardier and a good pilot. I very much wanted to be a pilot so I opted for being a pilot and that is what I became. I never regretted that decision. I enjoyed flying very much.

B: Your decision to actually go in and be involved in the actual war, was this motivated by patriotism or did you feel any sense of anger, was there any dominant emotion that you felt at the time?

R: I don't think it was a sense of anger as much as it seemed to be the thing to do. Most people my age were either facing the draft or decided to enlist as I did. We all felt we wanted to be a part of the effort to do what we could for our country. I guess you would call it patriotism. It was an opportunity for me to learn to fly, which I very much wanted to do. In high school, I had lived a rather quiet, studious, life and this was a big change for me. I found it kind of adventuresome. I would say it was not the tremendous righteous indignation against what had been done to us.

It was a feeling that this was a job that had to be done. We might as well get to it.

B: What were the dates you were stationed in England?

R: I had completed my training in this country. I got my wings in December of 1943. I was in the class of 43-K. Every nine weeks there was a class and they gave them letters. Then I was assigned to Wendoverfield in Utah for training in a B-24, which I had never flown (a four engine bomber). We trained there for two months going overseas in February of 1944. We went over as a bomb group. It was still early enough in the war that we were not going as a replacement for other groups, but we were going as a whole group. Some of us went by ship, some flew airplanes over because they had to get the planes over there too. There weren't enough airplanes for all the crew people to fly. We arrived there in late February or early March in 1944. It was a requirement then that you fly 30 missions before you were allowed to go home. It was just prior to D Day, which occurred June 6, 1944, so we were flying hot and heavy (as many as two missions a day). By the end of June, I had my 30 missions in. I was allowed to come home in July of 1944.

I received my primary flight training at Coleman, Texas, which is a little tiny town in the center of Texas. It was a civilian flight training school. The instructors were civilians and we flew the PT-19 made by Fairchild, a low wing open cockpit airplane, which I enjoyed immensely. I then went to Sherman, Texas to get basic training, where I trained in a Vultee BT-13, which was a fixed gear low wing airplane with a canopy cover. I received nine weeks training there and then went to advanced training at Pampa, Texas, which is up in the pan handle of Texas and flew a twin engine, what they called the bamboo bomber. It was a wooden airplane but it was a twin engine airplane and I received my advanced training there, where I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in December of 1943, class of 43-K. They gave letters to the various classes starting with-A, B, C and so on. I was in the last class of 1943.

B: Do you feel that the training you received was generally adequate or was there a great deal of on the job learning?

R: It was adequate for as much as you do to be a pilot. I ended up flying a four engine B-24. We certainly had to learn that on the job because we weren't exposed to that. The fundamentals were very well taught and I had good experience in flight training.

B: When you were sent to England what were the dates you were stationed?

R: Before we went, we had a staging area which was at Wendover Field, Utah, which is on the western edge of the great Salt Lake. We received a number of weeks training there in B-24's and then went overseas as a group. This was early enough that we weren't just going as a replacement group.

Our whole group, which was the 467 bomb group, went through Wendover and then went overseas as a group. We went over in February of 1944. Some went by ship, which unfortunately I did, and some flew planes over. There weren't enough planes for everybody to fly their own plane over. We went on a troop ship, the SS Frederick Lykes, which was still under construction as we were on our way. It was a Liberty ship. It was a rather sad experience that we went by convoy. We had destroyers escorting us. We woke up one morning and everybody was gone. We were sitting there dead in the water, nobody knew where. There was nobody around. Certainly we were sitting ducks for any submarines. Fortunately none found us and we eventually made it to England. We met the rest of our group there and activated a new base near Norwich, England. It was a little base called Rackheath, which was the name of a country mansion. They had built a base on this farmer's property.

B: How were the missions that you flew planned and targets assigned?

R: I'm sure they were assigned by somebody higher up than our colonel. They fit into a strategic plan. I have been on flights where there were as many as one thousand airplanes in the air at one time, that our group could maybe put forty or fifty in the air. So there were quite a number of groups involved in planning these, I'm sure. I was not privy to that information but if somebody up the line would have decided that we needed a strategic bombing of this particular target, and we should hit this on this particular day....The United States forces flew in the day time, the British forces flew at night. They did more individual bombing; where we flew in mass formations. I'd say one thousand airplanes. That is a lot of airplanes to get over a target being so close at the same time. It took a tremendous amount of coordination. As a result, we always had to leave at the same time (dawn). So the Germans knew we were coming and they were ready for us.

B: How often were you expected to or required to fly a mission?

R: I'm sure that varied with the group. In our particular

time, that was just prior to D-Day, the invasion day that was June 6, 1944, they were trying to soften France and Germany up as quickly as they could. There had been some occasions when we flew two missions in one day. I was only there from February until July and flew 30 missions in that period of time, which was the required number for a crew to return home (a flight of 30 missions). There would be two or three days between missions. If we had a mission to Berlin, which was ten or eleven hour flight, naturally we would get a day of rest before or after that. But if we were hitting the coast of France, we might get two missions in one day.

B: Were all of your missions over Germany or did you have targets in occupied countries like France?

R: Yes. France and Holland, and Germany. We did not get down too far into Austria.

B: Can you describe what a typical mission was like? First of all, how long did a mission take, normally?

R: There was no normal time. Let's trace a mission from the beginning. They would wake us in the dark. We lived in Quonset huts with two crews of officers to one such hut. The enlisted men from the same crews would be in another hut. So between those two huts, there would be two crews involved. That is twenty men altogether, because there were ten men in a crew. They would awaken as many people as they needed for the flight that day. We would be put on alert the night before that we were going to be flying and we'd walk over to the mess hall where we would have breakfast which consisted generally of powdered eggs, reconstituted milk or whatever you call it. I never liked coffee, but everybody drank coffee, so I made do.

After breakfast, we would then walk over to the briefing hall and everybody would be seated. They would have a big chart on the wall which was covered up. After we were all seated, they would come in and they would uncover the chart and you would hear groans or moans, particularly if it happened to be a bad target, because a lot of them, you had to fly through heavy flack (anti-aircraft shells) concentration to get to them. They were well known. The coast of Holland was particularly notorious for German Flack Installations. They were good. You could be flying at 20,000 feet with solid cloud cover under you and those bursts of flack would come up right at your level right next to you. They were very good gunners.

After you were briefed, everybody would pick up a parachute, which had been packed by the parachute crew and they would take you on a truck out to what they

would call a hard stand, which was kind of just a little turn around thing made out of blacktop, where your airplane was sitting. The ground crew would have already loaded your airplane with whatever kind of bombs were going to be used for that day, 100 pound bombs or 500 pound bombs or fragmentation or whatever, depending on the mission. Everybody had certain assigned duties to check the airplane out. The pilot and co-pilot generally checked the controls and control surfaces to make sure they were movable and that everything was ship shape.

B: Did you have the same crew that always stayed together?

R: We always had the same crew. We didn't always have the same airplane. The crew became very superstitious. If somebody would be sick in the crew, that person would really sweat bullets to make up that mission because they would have to make it up with a strange crew. If they missed a mission, it was really difficult to fly with some strange group of people to make up your mission. So yes. We always had the same crew. Once in a while, we would have some ground officer or information officer, or supervisor fly with us in the command pilot capacity.

B: So far as the flight, was this normally a direct flight towards the target? Did you try to fly a straight line, or was it an evasive route to confuse any German defenses?

R: A couple of things happened. Before, I had gotten us to the point of having the airplane prepared and we'd start up then engines. Then the planes would take off one at a time and we would have to assemble over what was called a Buncher, which was a radio control place. You would circle on what you would call the assembly ship. The assembly ship would be painted in some wild color scheme, with tiger stripes or spots or something that was very visible. Also, that lead ship would be firing what they called a Veri Pistol, which shot signal flares out the top of the airplane. Depending on your group, it might be red and green or it might be pink and blue or a variety of different combinations. You would assemble as your group on that lead airplane. Then, that lead airplane would assemble his group onto another group and you would go over...To answer your question, many times, there was a dog leg so the Germans would not know for sure which target you were heading for. You might take a southerly route and then cut north to evade some of the flack areas. Sometimes we used to fly over the North Sea, which was good because there weren't any flack installations or anti-aircraft installations over the North Sea. Then we would cut inland down around Denmark, especially if we



were going some place in the northern part of Germany. That was a good tactic. The only difficulty was they informed us that if you were ever shot down over the North Sea, you might just as well not bail out because you're good for about five minutes in the water of the North Sea. It was so cold that you would never survive.

B: Did you have radar at that time on your plane?

R: We did not. There was ground radar. They could detect our coming. We used to throw what was called at that time, chaff, which was like tinsel that you put on a Christmas tree. They would throw boxes of that out of the back of the airplane and the radar would think that was another airplane and it would confuse the radar to a degree. But as I said, they could detect your height very accurately and put those antiaircraft shells right at your level. It had to have been through a radar that they did that.

You had asked me earlier what the length of a flight was and it varied from short ones into the coast of France which were a couple hours to a flight into Berlin which would be a ten hour round trip.

B: They counted equally towards the number of missions that you had?

R: Right. Everybody got a mix. Sometime you would get "milkruns", which were the real easy ones into France or you got some of the real tough ones like into Berlin.

B: You mentioned the altitude before. Normally what altitude did you fly?

R: About 20,000 to 21,000 feet. With a full load of bombs, that was just about as high as a B-24 could fly and be maneuverable and maintain any kind of semblance of speed.

B: What was a normal load of bombs?

R: I think around 15,000 pounds. It was a pay load. I don't really recall it specifically.

B: Were you able to carry very much food on the plane?

R: A sandwich or something like that. No warm food. There was no pressurization. We went on Oxygen at 10,000 feet. Generally the temperature outside your plane was about 50 degrees below zero, so we all wore electrically heated shoes or socks and heavy flying suits with fleece lining.

B: As far as the German fighters that you encountered, what sort of tactics were you able to employ to protect yourself against these? And were the planes or the flack more of a danger?

R: In my own instances, we were more damaged by flack than by the fighters. By the time we had gotten there, they had developed the U.S. P-51 Fighter with wing tanks, so they could escort you as far as Berlin and the fighters made a tremendous difference. There were two airplanes, the ME-109 and the ME-190, that the Germans used very effectively. This was pre-jet. There were no jets on either side at this time. Our own fighters protected us pretty well from the enemy fighters. It was very difficult to fight off fighters with just your guns that were aboard the ship. It was done, but with very indifferent success. We had a tail turret, a ball turret underneath, a turret above where the radio operator sat and a nose turret. There were two guns in each of them. There were eight guns right there and a waist gun on each side, so there were ten machine guns, fifty caliber machines guns that were available to defend yourself with. Yet, the fighters were coming so fast, it was very difficult to shoot one of them down. It was done, certainly, but we were much more at ease when the U. S. fighters were with us.

B: What was the worst experience that you had on one of your missions? Was there any particular time where you thought that this was it?

R: I guess the worst experience had nothing to do with the enemy. As I mentioned earlier, they generally tried to have you take off at dawn so that you could be assembled and go over in the day time. Then some higher up got the bright idea that we would take off in the dark and we could get a couple hours jump on them. So here are these 800 or 900 airplanes milling around over England in the dark. It was chaos, believe me, because I had also mentioned earlier that they would fire veri pistols (the signal pistol) out of the top of the airplane. One of the groups near by who was not our group, fired a red and green combination of flares. As they went up, they would diverge from each other. The red and green also, are the running lights on an airplane. So every time they fired off one of these things, the pilots were sure that was an airplane coming right at them. It was terrifying.

We did lose quite a number of airplanes that day just getting assembled. Because when you have a large group of airplanes flying, you can't turn them on a dime, you have to turn very gradually. I looked down once and there was a flight of B-17's and a flight of B-24's just going through each other. I saw one of the B-17's

engines cut the tail off of a B-24. I could look down and see it happening. So we were above it and not in danger, but they never tried that again. It was really a disaster. I would have to say, that maybe it was because it was so visible that that was more terrifying than a flight where you could see the flack. It is no wonder they send young people to be soldiers because young people think they are invincible. I will not be killed. I didn't know that many people who were terrifically frightened of the war. I'm sure ground soldiers thought more vividly but we flyboys thought that it wasn't going to happen to us. We saw it happen to our friends but it wasn't going to happen to us. Even when your plane was hit by flack, you thought, well, I'll get out of this some way. I guess that experience of assembling in the dark over England was scarier than any of the actual combat that I saw.

B: If I may go back to that point just a little bit, was there any time, over Germany, for example, when your plane was hit badly when you thought, there you might be going down?

R: No. We were fortunate that way. We lost one or two engines but we never were so bad off that we didn't think we could get back. There was a great rivalry between B-17 pilots and B-24 pilots. B-17's were the more graceful airplane but the B-24 was a very stable airplane. I have no purple hearts so I am very grateful to the manufacturers that I came home safe and sound. I never really felt that we would never get back, at any time.

B: Getting into an area that is very subjective, what were your feelings about the German fighter pilots attacking you and even the people firing the anti-aircraft guns on the ground? Did you develop any kind of personal hatred of them? Or did you see them in terms of professionals performing a job? How did you feel about them?

R: They were just doing the same thing that we were. That was their job to be a German soldier. I know there was an instance in the longest day where the Germans and the Americans are facing each other and one American says, "Gee, you have to wonder which side God is on?" and switches over to the German and he is saying the same things. You have the same kind of feelings I'm sure.

I guess the strangest feeling I had in that respect was that a number of years after the war, we visited Berlin, my family and I. We went to a huge church in Unter-der-Linden which was the main drag of Berlin. It's a famous church, whose name I can't recall at the moment, but there was a bombed out steeple of the

church there and they had built a modern structure on it. So we went and worshiped there one Sunday morning and the only thing I could think about was one day, we had flown to Berlin and our target had been obscured and the secondary target was that we fly down Unter-der-Linden and drop your bombs. I wondered if one of my bombs had hit that church. That is about as personal as it got with me. It didn't occur to me at the time, but you're way up there and you can't see what your bombs are hitting and you can't see people dying. You are kind of removed from it in the air force, anyway.

B: Studies both during and after the war indicated that a very high percentage of the bombs dropped missed their targets by a great deal. Do you think this was because of fighter interference or inadequate technology? First of all were you aware that you were missing your targets generally?

R: I'm not sure I believe that. I have some data here. It happened that the 467 bomb group of which I was a member, had the best record of any bomb group in the 8th air force as far as bombing accuracy is concerned. Generally they were very careful about trying to avoid civilian installation except this one instance in Berlin. I can't recall that there was a civilian target which was a secondary target. If you flew all the way to Berlin and your target was obscured by the clouds and you couldn't see it, you had to get rid of the bombs somewhere or you couldn't get back. I can't recall that that was a real problem for us.

B: During the first years of the war, bombing missions were aimed primarily at destroying German Military Capabilities, such as U-Boat pens, industrial targets which supplied war material and the like. In the summer of 1942, before you went over there, Sir Arthur Harris, the air chief marshal convinced Churchill to concentrate on German cities. In his 1970 book, Inside the Third Reich Memoirs, by Albert Speer, who was the defense minister, stated that the war would have ended much earlier if the allies had not shifted from strategic bombing to attacks against civilian populations. Air Marshal, Sir Robert Saundby agreed with Speer. Do you have any feelings along this line?

R: Obviously it's contradicting what I just said. I was not conscious of bombing any civilian targets. They would tell us that the target is the ballbearing factory. Twice we went to Toulon, France, where there were submarine pens. Very heavily reinforced concrete bunkers for submarines. I can't recall an instance of bombing civilian targets, especially in what they call Nabal Targets in France where we attacked the installa-

tion of the V-2 and V-1 launchers, which were the places where they launched the buzz bombs that flew over to England. We hit those pretty heavily. I can't recall any instances to tell you the truth where we just hit a civilian population just for the sake of it. We may have taken out a bridge which was across the Rhine or the Elbe river which was a military target. I have some descriptions of the various targets that we hit. I unfortunately did not keep an extensive diary. I don't have a lot of detail on that. All the people I have talked to have talked about strategic bombing and if they made the shift, I was not conscious of it. We still dropped a lot of strategic bombs at these bombing targets when I was there in 1944.

The British bombing at night, may well have bombed more for cities. While as we were bombing in the day time, we could pin point targets more easily.

B: There was quite a bit of bombing civilian targets during the war. Now I can't be real specific as far as the dates of this because I just don't have that information here. For example in February 1945, Dresden was obliterated in a succession of air raids which created an incredible fire storm. Virtually, every living thing, even down to the bacteria, was wiped out within the city.

R: That was after I was back. I was not conscious of what the targets were then. I was still in the service until September of 1945, but I don't recall anything like that, to tell you the truth.

B: What were your feelings towards the German people as such? Now I understand, and I don't mean to necessarily get into a sensitive area. I understand you are of German heritage?

R: That is correct.

B: Did you have problem along this line at all? Did this cause any kind of personal conflict for you?

R: Well, when you think about it, my great grandparents came from Bremen, Germany. Naturally you wonder if any of your relatives are left down there. I can't say that there was a severe problem. I had a job to do and the quicker the war was over, the quicker we could go home and the less people would be killed in the long run. No, I would say there was not a severe problem.

B: So far as the German people, themselves, what was your attitude toward them in the sense that...Did you think of them as Nazis or did you think of them as being people who were being victimized by...

- R: I think more of the latter. I think we blamed the leadership and more, that the people were just kind of herded around and that they were not too enthusiastic about what their leaders were doing. Whether that is true or not, I don't know. But that was the impression we had.
- B: In so far as the events taking place in other theaters of war, such as North Africa, how well informed were you during the war?
- R: I would say reasonably well. The 14th Air force was in Africa coming up into Italy. Some of us had friends there. I think we were fairly well posted on that theater of operations. Probably less so in the Pacific. I don't think we were as savvy about what was happening in the Pacific theater.
- B: Did you get most of your information just through the grapevine?
- R: Well, from the Stars and Stripes, which was a military publication. Now how accurate it was, I have no way of knowing. We didn't see civilian publications too much, but we did get the Stars and Stripes regularly.
- B: Did you feel basically, that you were essentially operating in an information black out, or did you feel that there was a reasonable flow of information given war time necessary restrictions?
- R: I felt there was a reasonable flow of information. I have always been a very disciplined person. My father was a disciplinarian. It was very natural for me to obey orders. When I was with the cadets, I mentioned the first nine weeks of training was a matter of instilling discipline in you, so that when they told you to do something, you did it without question. When you are part of a crew, that is extremely important. You've got ten individual thinkers and they are going to say, "Well, should I do this or not?" you got chaos. So the response immediately was, "Yes, sir." is extremely important for a well functioning crew. So when we received orders to do something in the service, I generally didn't question them too much.
- B: In May of 1944, again this was after you left?
- R: No, I was still there.
- B: Oh, you were? Okay. William Corper and the American Consulate in Goteberg, Sweden, which was a neutral country, wrote to his superior in Stockholm that some allied pilots were landing in neutral countries to

escape the war. After news of this possibility became wide spread knowledge in England, there was a significant increase in the number of emergency landings made in Sweden and in Switzerland. Major Irving Drew, a United States fighter pilot claimed after the war that he and certain other pilots had been assigned to watch for indications that bomber pilots were faking emergencies and to report these planes which flew towards Sweden without damage. Drew implied that he and others even had been given permission to fire upon American planes. Were you aware of any such controversy during your tour of duty, and if so, what do you think of it?

R: In a word, no. We didn't have any planes go to Sweden from our group. I was not conscious of any. I had heard about this afterwards, but I was not conscious of it at the time. I think everybody was more anxious to finish our tours. There may have been some that felt that way I'm sure, as I already indicated, we felt that we were leading a charmed life. We were going to make it and our main concern was, "Let's get our missions in and let's get home, rather than spend the rest of the war in Sweden, somewhere."

B: So you really didn't have much fear when you were on these flights?

R: I would say, no. People say that is fool hardy but when you are only 19 years old, which I was, you feel like you lead a charmed life and it's not going to happen to you. As I say, if you're in a situation where your buddy is killed right beside you and bleeding all over, that probably would be different, but in the air corps we were fortunate in not having anybody in our crew that was killed or even seriously injured. So it doesn't quite hit home to you the same way it does for the infantry or some other group.

B: Surely, you must have seen planes shot down.

R: Yes. I mentioned already a plane where the tail was cut off and that kind of thing. It is a little impersonal that it's in another group. It may even be in another squadron. There were four squadrons in our group. I can't recall any close friends that were seriously injured or killed during the time I was there. There were people I went through with cadets, who were killed, but I didn't know that until after I was back.

B: From the time of the Trojan War, military men have complained about the capability planing and wisdom of their leaders or superior officers. Do you think the top military planners did the best job they could, all things considered, or was it one snafu after another?

- R: That night take off was the only one I can think of that I thought was a severe snafu. I think in general, they did pretty well. All of us were extremely unhappy with our colonel who I have since met and he is very friendly and everything, but he had us doing calisthenics and things. We thought, "Gee, we're a bunch of combat soldiers and here we are doing calisthenics." I think in retrospect, he was pretty wise. He wanted us in good shape, he wanted us disciplined, and he wanted a fighting unit. That was what he was going to have no matter how unpopular he was. He was very unpopular. His name was Al Shower. They called him "Black Al Shower". I've met him since and he calls me Fred, but I didn't like him much at the time. I respected him. I thought he knew what he was doing alright, but I just thought he was a mean SOB.
- B: Certain writers have argued that the use of the atomic bomb against Japan was unjustified because of the number of civilians killed. Do you agree or disagree with Truman's decision to employ the atomic bomb against Japan?
- R: It seems terrible. Truman had a terrible decision to make and I would have hated to have been in his shoes but he is quoted as saying, "he felt that would be the ultimate saving of lives, that it would have shortened the war immensely." He proved to be right. So I'd have to agree with his decision.
- B: If the atomic bomb had been available earlier in the war and you had been selected as a pilot to drop it on Germany, would that have been a problem for you? Not if you had known what you were carrying.
- R: I'm not sure how many of the crew actually that did deliver it knew that they were doing it. I don't know if they would have told you ahead of time or not. I'm sure it would have been a problem for me and I don't know how, you can't go back and play the record again. I probably would have respected the decision of my superiors and would have done what I was told.
- B: At what time, did you learn of the final solution, the Holocaust, the concentration camps and the attempt to eradicate Judaism in Europe?
- R: I don't think I learned of it while I was in the service. I think it was after I came home that this all came out.
- B: After the war?
- R: Yes. My brother, as I mentioned, was eight and one



half years older than I. When I enlisted in the Air Corps, he enlisted in the Infantry. He went over and he was one of those who liberated Hitler's hideout. I don't think even he was conscious at the holocaust. He was right in the area where the gas ovens were. I don't know how they concealed it. It just blows my mind that people wouldn't have known. I can't recall much discussion at all about this until after the war was over and it all came out. It was such a horror and you wonder, "Why didn't I know?" I didn't. I can't explain why we didn't or how it was concealed or anything else. I don't know how wide spread it was amongst the leadership of our country.

B: Do you remember you last mission?

R: There was nothing outstanding about it, no. I recall when we landed, the colonel came over and congratulated us for having completed our missions and that was very rare, because he never came out to greet you for anything. We were still out by the airplane. He remembered it. I think we were either the first or the second crew to complete our missions from the crews that went over as a group. So he made quite a thing of it. "Yes, you can make it through. Here's a group that did it." He used us sort of as an example.

B: What kind of cooperation existed between the American forces and the British military?

R: Well, of course, D Day, there was very highly coordinated effort. We didn't fly with the British. They didn't use their fighters to defend our planes as I said. They flew at night and we flew in the daytime. I guess the biggest interchange we had was that we were based on British bases and there were British soldiers there to act as support people. We had no British pilots or British crews. Once in a while, one of our planes would have to land on a British base when the plane was damaged or something of that kind. There was a good spirit of cooperation but there was very little active cooperation I think.

B: What did you do in your off-duty time for relaxation? Were you able to do anything like go to the historical sights, was there anything like normal amusements, theater, movies, operating?

R: There were movies. We were near Norwich, which is a town northeast of London. In Norwich as in most of the communities, there was a Red Cross center where people would spend a lot of time. It was kind of a social center. The pubs were very popular. At the time, I still don't, I was not a drinker, so I really didn't go to the pubs that much. I did get to London just once

while I was there and there were movies still operating. I can recall sitting in a movie at Picadilly Circus in that area, and a sign would come on the screen that the city is under attack by B-1 bombs (those were the buzz bombs that came across horizontally, instead of the ballistic bombs) and you could take cover if you wished, but nobody left. We sat there. You could hear these things all around, but we all stayed and watched the movie. I did get to see a little bit of the countryside, not a whole lot. We went by train through Cambridge. We traveled around. Many people, begged, borrowed, or stole, or rented, bicycles. There was a lot of bicycle riding by troops in the Norwich area. Those were mostly ground troops that had been there quite a while. The flight crews really did not have that much free time. When you are flying every other day or so, you just welcome the chance to sack out and get a little rest between times.

I recall one instance where a lot of us had passes to go into town in Norwich from the base and the colonel issued an order that everybody had to be in dress uniform. We had a rather long dark green jacket and kind of what they called "pinks" -they were sort of gray pants. They were good looking uniforms. When I went to get my jacket back from the dry cleaners, somebody had sliced the lining on it completely, into shreds. I don't know how it happened. They said they would repair it for me. When it came time to go on the leave to town, I didn't have a jacket. We also had another piece of dress uniform called the Eisenhower Jacket, which was shorter and belted at the waist. It was the kind Ike wore and it was the same color, green and everything. So I wore my Eisenhower jacket and a tie and I thought I looked pretty decent. So I went into a place where the colonel was with some of his crew. I always resented the fact he didn't have guts enough to come over and tell me himself. He sends one of his flunkies over to tell me that I was out of uniform and to get back to the base. I guess that was one of the reasons I didn't care much for him. Here I had been flying my butt off for him and I didn't have the proper uniform and I wanted to go into town and I went and I was sent back to the base. That stuck in my memory.

B: Were you glad to get out of the service when you were finally discharged. Was it a moment of great elation? You seemed to have adjusted to life in the service very well.

R: I didn't mind the service time at all. I liked the discipline and I liked the flying. When I came back to the states, I had a lot of good experiences in flying, but I was glad to get out. I wanted to get on with my

life. I had gotten my wings in December of 1943 and overseas in February of 1944 and I had gotten engaged in December of 1943, right after I had gotten my wings as a Second Lieutenant and I was most anxious to get back and complete this war thing. There was this girl I had started first grade with and we wanted to get married. So when I returned in July of 1944 from overseas, we were married post haste. In fact for our honeymoon, they sent me to Atlantic City on rest and rehabilitation in a beautiful big hotel on the boardwalk. That was when Atlantic City was really very nice. For \$.50 a night, we had a room overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and we were there for I think for two weeks for rest and rehabilitation. It was a beautiful honeymoon.

I think I mentioned off tape that I had been trained as a pilot, was overseas, flew my missions, was home, and was married before I was twenty years old. I was twenty in October of that year and I had been married in July of that year.

I was glad to get out of the service and start back in my schooling and get on with my life.

B: When were you discharged?

R: Either August or September of 1945. We had been married. We were in the service for a year together. She traveled around with me for over a year and we went to San Antonio and Victorville, California and Westoverfield up near Springfield, Massachusetts. I was discharged from up there, about 13 or 14 months after I came back from overseas.

B: Did you have any difficulty then, adjusting to civilian life after the war?

R: None. No, I did fine. Uncle Sam was very good to me in helping me get my college education through the GI Bill. I didn't have any problems.

B: I understand your brother, Richard, was an infantryman who fought in Europe. Did he fight in Italy as well?

R: No, he went over from England to Europe.

B: From what I understand, he had a much rougher time of it though, than you did.

R: He always claimed that all I did was go over and bomb the ground and make it rough for him to walk over. Yes. I think the infantry did have a tougher time. I admire them greatly. He was a corporal and a company clerk. He had a lot of interesting experiences. He

came back relatively intact. He did receive the purple heart. I think he was wounded in the foot or something like that. It was not a serious injury but he was wounded. He was there in Hitler's eaglesnest, in that area, when the war ended.

B: Was he able to return home without any psychological or physical scars? Do you think?

R: Yes. As far as I know. We got along fine. He and I ran the paper after my father died in 1946. I am leading up to the fact that from 1954 until 1988, which is 34 years, he and I worked together everyday very closely and we never had a fight or an argument. He was a very tolerant guy and I loved him dearly and he was my best friend.

B: I remember him well. I worked at the paper for about a year back in the 1960's. I remember him quite well. He was a very nice person.

R: He had a great sense of humor. He and I got along very well. If he had any problems, he adjusted silently.

B: Do you still have contact with any of the men that were in your crew? If you could tell us about the one reunion that you mentioned off the record.

R: I only had contact, specifically with one member of the crew and that was our navigator. I had stood up with him when he was married in Topeka, Kansas before we went overseas. We always exchanged Christmas Cards. I never was able to find any of the rest of the crew. There were ten of us and he was the only one.

What I was saying off the tape was that in October of 1990, a good friend of mine, with whom I had trained in Texas who had gone overseas with me, called me and said he was chairman of our bomb group's reunion in Omaha, Nebraska and would I consider coming. So I was at loose ends. My wife had died. I never had been to a military reunion of any kind. I said, "Yes, I'll come." So I went and had a good time. There were six of us there who trained as pilots together in the class of 43-K. We were all in the same bomb group overseas. We had a mini-reunion out there of our own. That is the extent of my involvement really, with veterans groups.

When I first came back from overseas, I remember I was a member of the VFW and the American Legion. My paths just diverged from theirs and I am not an active member, an active veteran. I'm not an promoter of veteran's rights or anything like that. I did what I thought needed to be done and I don't think the govern-

ment owes me anything for it. I did what I had to do and I think that is what everybody's supposed to do. I don't expect them to carry me on a platter for the rest of my life. I don't mean that to be judgmental. There are other people that have suffered far greater than I did in the service who ought to be taken care of. It was through no fault of their own that their lives were ruined. I was fortunate that that was not the case of my instance.

B: If we can, lets go back and pick up one question that I realize that I had left out and that I'd like to go back and pick up. Don't misunderstand the question here in the sense that I am not trying to give any one any guilt feelings. From a psychological point of view, as you flew over targets, did you ever think or did it ever bother you, the fact that people were dying below, or were you able to just simply look at this as something that was inevitable in war time and if it weren't you flying the plane, it would be someone else. What was your reaction?

R: I think it naturally crossed everybody's mind. I don't think anybody felt terrifically guilty about it because we saw it happening in England. We are fortunate it didn't happen in the United States that the Germans came over and bombed the places where we lived and bombed the cities around there. There were people dying at the hands of the Germans so we didn't feel a tremendous guilt. It was the case of, "If we do enough damage, especially to the war machine, this thing will be over and that will be the end of it." You are kind of detached when you are flying bombers and that you can't see the people's faces. You could see a city down there, but you are up high enough that you can't see vehicles moving-or very seldom. You don't get the immediacy of feeling that hey, I just killed some people down there. It just does not bear in on you.

B: There was a kind of isolation to what you were doing.

R: You are sort of detached.

B: Fred, would you like to add anything at this time?

R: I think it has been kind of interesting that during the affair in Kuwait when our troops went over there and some people from New Castle did and they were over there for three or four months and we rightfully gave them honor when they came back and yet, some of the people who I served with and were gone for two or three years said, "You know, we didn't get that kind of reception when we came back. We were over there for three years and gave it everything we had and these people were over there for three months and when they

came back they were big heroes." It is the public attitude and I certainly don't take that away from our soldiers from operation Desert Storm. It was not their doing. They didn't ask for it. The people needed that kind of healing I think to make up for Vietnam, when they were so negative to the soldiers. They felt guilty about the way they treated them I think. I'm not a psychologist and they needed to make it up to these people. It did kind of amuse some of us to think that people weren't even in a tent as long as we were in training and they got this big ticker tape parade and that kind of thing. That's the times. I don't know if anybody was really bothered by that. I hope there was nobody bothered by that. It was the topic of discussion.

B: Well, thank you very much. You were a very good interview.

R: One exciting experience I'd like to cap this off with is that there are very few B-24's left in this country. They were all scrapped after the war because there was a fear that they would be converted into airliners and it would interfere, I suppose that was the reasoning, with production of commercial airplanes. They were all scrapped. But there was one that was discovered down in the South Pacific and it was brought back and it was restored by an outfit in Kissimmee, Florida. The Collins foundation decided to restore this airplane to flying condition. As far as I know, it is the only B-24 that is actually barnstorming around the country. The restoration was supported by public contributions.

A semi comic-tragic set of events: I had to fly from Florida, I have a place down there, and I flew up in January of 1990 for my brother's funeral. He had died while I was down there. I flew up and when I flew back into Sarasota, this airplane, which is called the All American was sitting on the airplane parking area at the Sarasota airport. So I went over and I was nosing around. I hadn't even seen one for 45 years and here I am crawling all over this airplane. They had had a program where if you had made a donation towards the restoration of this airplane, they would put your name on the side of the airplane. So there is my name on the side of the airplane. I got to talking to the guys and they were going to fly it from Sarasota to the St. Petersburg airport the next day. That is only 50 miles or so. So I wiggled it around so that I could fly with them. I didn't fly the air plane but I flew in the air plane, back in the waist section. A friend of mine drove up to St. Petersburg and picked me up and brought me back. It was a thrill to tell you the truth.

This airplane was also at the convention in Omaha, Nebraska. They take it around the country. It has been down to Beaver Falls at the Chippewa Airport for air shows. It's funny how nostalgia can be triggered by sights, and smells and sounds. That airplane has a very distinctive braking system and when you're taxing the airplane and put the brakes on, the brakes squeal. That airplane was coming around a hanger out there in Omaha and I knew that it was a B-24. I heard it before I even saw it. It was kind of fun. That's my story.

B: Well, thank you again, Fred. We really do appreciate it.

R: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW