

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War 1939-1945

Personal Experience

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PAUL BARINGER

Interviewed

by

Joseph Nuzzi

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## PAUL BARINGER

Born in Niles, Ohio on September 9, 1922, he was raised in Austintown Township, in what is known as Ohltown near the Meander Reservoir. His family moved to Elwood City, PA during the Depression when he was about 12 years old.

In 1940, he graduated from Lincoln High School in Elwood City. For a time, he worked in a grocery store and for about a year with the Aetna Standard Engineering Company in Elwood City. On December 19, 1941, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

He received basic training at Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi from December 1941 to June 1942, where he received training at the Army Air Corps Air Mechanics School. After graduation from Keesler he was sent to further schooling at the Wright Aeronautical Plant in Patterson, New Jersey. The Wright Aeronautical Plant provided the Wright engine that was used exclusively on B-25s. He trained at the Wright Corporation from July to August of 1942.

After his training was completed with the Wright Corporation, he was transferred to Godman Field at Fort Knox, Kentucky. There he was assigned to an observation squadron that was responsible for spotting enemy troop movements, artillery hits, etc. While at Godman, he worked as an airplane mechanic on the squadron aircraft.

From Godman Field, he was sent to a field near Baton Rouge, Louisiana for maneuvers for about two months. As part of his training he and his crew practiced simulated bombing raids by throwing small sacks of flour out of their plane over "enemy troops" below. After his training was over, he returned to Godman Field and was transferred to Columbia Army Air Base in Columbia, South Carolina.

During the fall of 1942 and until May of 1943, he remained at the Columbia Army Air Base as an air mechanic and as a crew chief aboard a B-25. This was a training base for B-25

aircrews. Here the seven-man flight crews of the B-25s were formed. Time was allotted for each of the crews to train together.

In May of 1943, Baringer, along with his crew and seventeen other B-25 crews, left Columbia Army Air Force Base and flew to Hunter Army Base in Georgia. There each crew picked up an air craft and flew it to Homestead Army Air Base in Florida. From Homestead they flew as a group (a total of 18 aircraft) onto Puerto Rico, Georgetown, in British Guinea; Belem, Brazil; Natal, Brazil; the Ascension Island; Roberts Field, Dakar, and Marrakech French West Africa. After refueling in each of these fields they finally landed at their destination at an air field in Rabat, Morocco assigned to General Doolittle's unit.

From Rabat, his squadron moved to Souk El Arba Air Base in Algeria. However, because of contracting yellow jaundice he was sent to a hospital in Tunis, Tunisia. After separation from the hospital he was reassigned to the 447th Bomb Squadron, under the command of the 321st Bomb Group, 57th Bomb Wing, 12th Air Force in Toronto, Italy. From this base his squadron's missions consisted of bombing railroad yards, bridges, and factories in Northern Italy, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Greece.

On his last and final mission (fiftieth mission) in February of 1944, he and his crew bombed Anzio Beach with incendiary bombs from an altitude of about 9,000 feet. Their mission was to clear a path for the U.S. Infantry below. They had just dropped their bombs when they sustained major damage from German Eighty-eights (anti-aircraft guns) forcing them to bail out over the German lines. Subsequently he was captured by the German infantry soldiers and was taken to a holding area; a sound stage south of Rome, what was referred to as the "Hollywood" of Italy. He remained there for a few days then was taken to a transit camp in Munich, Germany. From Munich, he was shackled and taken by train to Stalag Luft-VI near the Lithuanian border.

He remained there from March to July of 1944.

In July of 1944, the Russians were penetrating south of the camp. Unable to transport the POWs by land, they were taken by an old coal barge and shipped down the Baltic Sea to Stettin, Germany. From there they were taken overnight by train to Heydekrug, Germany near the Polish Frontier. After a short stay in Heydekrug, he and his fellow POWs finally arrived at their destination, Stalag Luft-IV in Gosstychow, Germany. He remained there from July 1944 to January 1945. Because the Russian infantry was advancing toward Stalag Luft-IV, the POWs were marched out of the camp and forced to march for 89 days throughout various parts of Germany in a vain attempt to out-distance the Russians.

On April 26, 1945 he was liberated by the U.S. 2nd Army near Bitterfield, Germany. Returning to the United States, he was discharged on October 25, 1945.

Among his many medals and unit citations, he was awarded the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters, the POW medal, the good conduct medal, E.T.O. Ribbon with six battle stars, and a Unit Distinguished Citation. He belongs to the United Methodist Church in Canfield, Ohio. He is also a member of the AARP, the Canfield Community Club, the Canfield Community Chest, and is a counselor for S.C.O.R.E. He married his wife Amelia in September of 1949. The Baringers have two children.

N: This is an interview with Paul Baringer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on World War II POW Camps by Joseph A. Nuzzi at 212 Moreland Drive, Canfield, Ohio, on February 17, 1990 at 10:45 a.m.

Mr. Baringer, for the record, you were born and raised where?

B: I was born in Niles, Ohio and was raised principally in Austintown township called Olhtown down there near the Meander Reservoir.

N: You mentioned to me that you had moved to Ellwood City.

B: My family moved to Ellwood City when I was about 12 years old. I finished high school in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania.

N: Do you come from large family?

B: No. Three children.

N: Why did you move from Austintown to Ellwood City?

B: It was during the Depression and my father happened to get a job in Ellwood City, then we moved. He was a chief electrician for Aetna Standard Engineering Company.

N: You graduated from what high school?

B: Lincoln High in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania. That was June of 1940.

N: Did you go into the military immediately thereafter?

B: No. I worked for some time at a grocery store and then I worked for about a year at the Aetna Standard Engineering Company in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania. I was working there when I enlisted in the Army on December 19, 1941.

N: Did you automatically go into the air corps?

B: Yeah. I enlisted directly into the air corps.

N: Why did you choose the air corps?

B: Well, I wanted to be a pilot, but things kept happening and I never did get around to pilot training school. They sent me down to Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi. I attended

and graduated from their air mechanics school. Then I spent some time in Patterson, New Jersey [at the] Wright Aeronautical Corporation Plant. They provided a school for us concerning the Wright engine that was used on B-25s.

N: When you were at Keesler air force base, you said you were in air mechanics. The reason for sending you down to Patterson, was that specifically to train on the B-25s then?

B: Actually, no. In air mechanics school, you learn basic mechanic skills. Actually, I did not get on the B-25 until some time afterwards. I suppose one of the reasons that I got on the B-25s was because I had trained at Wright Aeronautical Plant. They were the ones that manufactured the Wright engine that was used on the B-25s.

N: How long were you at Keesler Field for air mechanics?

B: I was there about six months.

N: So, we are talking about June of 1942, here.

B: Yes and then I was a couple months at Patterson, New Jersey.

N: Would you say July and August?

B: Yes, I believe. Then I was transferred to Godman Field which is an air field right in Fort Knox, Kentucky. There I was assigned to an observation squadron.

N: What is an observation squadron?

B: That is a squadron that, just as the name implies, it had the responsibility for observing troop movements, supplies, spotting artillery hits and things of that nature.

N: You did from the air? Was that the idea?

B: Yes.

N: You had knowledge of photo equipment?

B: No, I did not. I was primarily involved with the aircraft.

N: The mechanical part of the aircraft?

B: The mechanical part. I worked actually, as an air mechanic repairing and inspecting and so forth. From Godman Field, we went to Louisiana for maneuvers that summer. We took our equipment and the planes with us. We supported the headquarters with their

small messenger service type airplanes and did simulated bombings. We would fly over enemy troops and throw sacks of flour down, and that was a bomb. If you were hit with the flour, you were bombed.

N: How big were the sacks of flour?

B: Just small.

N: You say that was in Louisiana? Whereabouts?

B: It was near Baton Rouge, out in the country.

N: Do you remember the name of the air field?

B: Actually, I do not, to be honest with you. It was not much of a field. We were out in the boon docks. For quite a while, I had a couple guys and a truck and a bunch of aviation fuel and I was stationed at -- it was either the blue or red headquarters -- and I had to service the aircraft that came in and out of this field. It was just a field. There was no air strip or anything. It was just a field where the small Piper Cubs and that type of aircraft would land. We would gas them up and get them ready to go.

N: How long did you stay on these maneuvers?

B: That was about two months, I would say.

N: About two months doing this, every day? Was there a specific time of day, morning or afternoon that you did this?

B: Wherever. All hours.

N: Including one or two o'clock in the morning?

B: Yeah, if anyone came in. They were small planes, so they usually just flew in the daytime.

N: Where did you go from Louisiana?

B: Okay, back to our base at Godman Field and then I was transferred there to Columbia Army Air Base, in Columbia, South Carolina. That was a training base for B-25 flight crews. That is where they formed the flight crews and they trained together as a crew on B-25s.

N: What was the name of the outfit you were there with? Was it a bomb group?

- B: It was a bomb group and I cannot tell you off hand what the number was.
- N: What month and year are we talking about?
- B: That would have been in the fall of 1942.
- N: How long did you stay in Columbia, South Carolina?
- B: Well, I stayed there until about May. In May of the following year, 1943, we picked up our planes and flew over seas.
- N: Okay, let us get back to Columbia, for a bit. What primarily did you do there everyday?
- B: My assignment at Columbia Army Air Base was as an air mechanic. I was a crew chief on a B-25. In other words, I was totally responsible for its maintenance and servicing and seeing that the plane flew on its regular missions. At that time, we had to have the plane ready to go by daybreak. While my plane was flying, I had to help another crew chief do maintenance work or repair work on another plane. My plane would come back before noon and I would have to service it and fix anything that was wrong and get it ready to go in the afternoon. While it was in the air in the afternoon, I helped somebody else. Then, when it came back in, I would have to service it and get it ready to go in the evening.
- N: Why weren't you flying with you crew at this time?
- B: Because I was not a crew member at this time. I was still a mechanic. Then, my plane flew at night and I would have to tuck into bed at around midnight and service it and fill it with fuel and get it ready to go in the morning. So, it was an all day, seven day a week situation. After a while, I saw these mechanics that were engineers. They just flew. The one day, they would fly in the afternoon and the next day, they would fly in the morning and at night. I said, "This is a pretty cushy job." So, I volunteered for a flight crew. I had my choice of a number of pilots. Most of the aerial engineers did not have any actual mechanical experience. Most of them just came out of mechanic school and never had any mechanical experience. They were happy to have me. I was able to take my pick of some crews, so I joined the flight crew with the most experienced pilot. I started training as an aerial engineer. That encompassed flying as a crew. We would fly in the morning and the evening one day and at noon the next day. In the mean time, we had gunnery practice and would do some schooling involved in becoming a member of the flight crew.
- N: And that went what, five, six, seven days a week?
- B: Seven days a week.
- N: When did you guys have any time for fun for God's sake?



- B: Not very much. We all had class A passes. Whenever we were not flying, we could go to town.
- N: How big of a town was Columbia, South Carolina at that time?
- B: Well, my daughter lives there right now. The Columbia Army Air Base is long gone, but Columbia, right now is 100,000. It is the capital of South Carolina. The University of South Carolina is there. The state government is situated there.
- N: How were you guys treated when you got into town?
- B: We were treated very well. They had all kinds of USO and other kinds of local activities.
- N: How often did you guys manage to get off base?
- B: Not very often.
- N: So it was pretty much training from the time you got up in the morning to the time you went to bed at night?
- B: Yes.
- N: Did you guys have a lot of night flights?
- B: Every other night we would fly. We were in the air, usually, about four hours. We would fly all over the southern part of the country. At night, we would sort of play tags with the people on the coast that had the search lights. But, we would have a lot of fun. We would go and land someplace and take off again. We would fly as far as Texas, in and around that area.
- N: You were a flight engineer at this time?
- B: Yes.
- N: Describe to me, a little bit about the plane. Was it a two engine, low-flying bomber? Is that what it was?
- B: Yeah. At that time, it was called a medium bomber. It was a twin engine and had a crew consisting of a pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, navigator, radio man, gunner, and engineer.
- N: So, we are talking seven people, then?
- B: Yes. In combat, they did not always have a navigator or a bombardier. We would have

one or the other. Usually, a bombardier. The reason they did not have a navigator was because in combat, we flew as a group and/or as a wing, which is four groups. A wing consists of four groups. Each group consists of four squadrons. We would have several navigators in the wing when we were on mission. So, each plane didn't have to have a navigator.

N: How many planes are in a squadron?

B: We would have anywhere from 12 to 20 in one squadron. There is four squadrons in a group and four groups in a wing.

N: What primary altitude did you guys bomb at?

B: In combat, most of our missions on the regular B-25s would be anywhere from 10 to 14,000 feet. Usually around 12,000. The reason for that is, to save as much weight as possible. On the B-25, the first thing you did with those planes when we got overseas was to take out all of the oxygen equipment and all of the heating equipment. We had no heat and we had no oxygen, so we were limited to how high we could fly because of the oxygen. So, when you got to 12,000 or 13,000 feet, it was about the maximum that you could fly.

N: Let's get back to the states for a second. You went to Columbia, South Carolina, where did you go from there?

B: From there, we went overseas to combat.

N: By this time, you were pretty familiar with your crew.

B: Yes.

N: Did you guys have a lot of comradery together? Was it a solid crew?

B: No. We had a solid crew. We had no problems and worked well together.

N: Did you stand on formalities with respect to enlisted saluting their officers all of the time?

B: No. You could not do that in the air corps at that time. On base, you would salute officers, but not too often because there were approximately the same number of officers as there were enlisted men, so you would be saluting all the time. In as much as a crew consisted of officers and enlisted men, you just could not stand on formality as far as saluting is concerned. You are always an enlisted man, and they are always officers, so you have to obey their orders.

N: I know on the B-24 and the B-17, the guys had flight suits. Did you have a flight suit as well that you would plug into the wall to keep warm?

B: No, we did not. We had the flight suits, but we took the heating equipment out.

N: And the reason for that was to make the aircraft lighter?

B: Right. We also took out the lower turret in the B-25 that was terrible. If it was not useless, it was the next thing to being useless. You had to operate the turret which had twin 50 caliber machine guns. You had to operate it by being on your knees on the floor. The sights, your vision was so limited, that it was not worth anything. So, we took that out and threw them away. We would put skin on where the hole was. We would cut holes in the side of the aircrafts and mount 50 caliber machine guns in both sides of the back of the fuselage. We would cut a little bit of the tail off and put some armor plate in and mounted a 50 caliber machine gun in the tail of the aircraft.

N: You mean your aircraft did not originally have a gun in the tail? It did not have original waist gunners?

B: Right.

N: Did you guys read up on the effect of these modifications?

B: Yes. Later on, the aircrafts started to come from the United States with those modifications already made. They modified the tail of the aircraft. They put a machine gun in the tail and a place for the tail gunner to sit and operate his gun. The way we had to do it, a tailgunner had to lay prone on his stomach and fire the gun for looking backward on his stomach. Unfortunately, I usually got the job as the tail gunner. The engineers usually do. We of course, would be responsible for our regular duties, which was standing in the cockpit with the pilot and co-pilot when you took off. When we were flying, before we would get into enemy territory, the engineer was in the cockpit with the pilot and the co-pilot. Usually, when you got into the enemy area, the engineer would man a gun; either a waist gun or a tail gun.

N: What was it like laying down on your stomach and trying to fire?

B: Terrible. And it was all a very cold. With the holes and the waists, that air would just go right through there and you would freeze. It was terribly cold.

N: That was probably about the time you were thinking, "Gee, I wonder why we took the heating elements out?"

B: Yes, and "Why did I volunteer for this in the first place?"

N: So you guys were a seven-man crew, and you had two 50 calibers on either side of the fuselage and one 50 caliber in the tail.

B: Yeah. And we had an upper turret with two 50 caliber machine guns. There was a fixed 50 caliber machine gun in the nose.

N: The one that was fixed in the nose, how come that was not in a turret?

B: Because that was operated by the pilot.

N: I see, the pilots operated that one. Let's talk a little bit about when you left the states. Where did you fly to?

B: Well, there were 18 crews and we went to Hunter Air Force Base in Georgia. We picked up the aircrafts. Each crew had an aircraft. And then we flew as a group, just 18 aircrafts, to Homestead Army Air Base in Florida. From there, we flew to Puerto Rico, Georgetown and British Guinea.

N: What were you doing when you flew to Puerto Rico and to Georgetown?

B: We would just stay over night and go on to the next place. We would refuel. From Georgetown, we stopped at two places in Brazil, Belem, and Natal.

N: Was that also refueling as well?

B: Yes.

N: How far could the B-25 go before you had to refuel?

N: We had about a 1000 mile range. Natal, Brazil is where we hopped off to the Ascension Island. That is a real tiny island. It is about half way between Africa and South America. It is about five miles by ten miles.