YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY

World War II, B-17 Project

Personal Experiences
O.H. 1285

DONALD RAY FREER

Interviewed on

October 4, 1989

By
Joseph A. Nuzzi

Donald Ray Freer

Born and raised in Warren, Ohio, Donald R. Freer attended the Warren City Schools, graduating from Warren G. Harding in 1941. During World War II he flew as a B-17 pilot.

He entered the Army Air Corps shortly after school and was stationed in Pampa, Texas where he learned to fly multi-engine aircraft. From Pampa, he went on to Kansas to be a flight instructor early in 1944. He volunteered to go overseas but instead was sent to Dyersburg, Tennessee, where he learned to fly B-17s. Dyersburg was a replacement training center for B-17s. And, with no previous background in B-17s, he was made a co-pilot of a B-17 and assigned a crew.

On June 6, 1944 he and his crew were transferred to Carney, Oklahoma where they were to get a B-17 and ferry it to England. When they arrived there something had gone wrong and they were reassigned and shipped to New York City where they went over to England on a convoy, arriving in Liverpool, England early in July.

Shortly after arriving in Liverpool, he was assigned to the 91st Bomb Group in Bassingbourn, England. There he flew non-combat training missions for about a month until his first combat mission in August of 1944.

On his twenty-seventh mission he was shot down over Berlin in December of 1944. His aircraft sustained a direct hit to the number three engine causing the engine to explode. As part of the engine flew through the air, a part of the engine pierced the aircraft killing the bombardier.

After bailing out of his aircraft, he landed near the small village of Tamplin, Germany, where he was taken to the local jail. From Tamplin he was transferred to Berlin then finally to Frankfurt where he was interrogated for two weeks.

After interrogation, he was transferred by train to Stalag Luft I in Barth, Germany. He remained there until liberated by the Russian Army on May 14, 1945.

After the war, he returned home to Warren where he went back to work at Packard Electric. He was at Packard until 1956 when he went with North American Aviation. In 1970 he left North American and went to work for Rockwell until 1986.

Mr. Freer lives with his wife Mary in Warren. He and his wife have two children; Susan, age 30 and Tom, age 25. Among his hobbies, Mr. Freer enjoys amateur radio, photography, and travel.

Joseph A. Nuzzi

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Crucible Steel Project

O.H. 1285

Interviewee: DONALD FREER

Interviewer: Joseph Nuzzi

Subject: World War II, B-17 project

Date: October 4, 1989

JN: This is an interview with Donald R. Freer for the Youngstown State University Oral History project by Joseph A. Nuzzi at the Warren Public Library (Warren, Ohio). The date is October 4, 1989. Time is 19:02 hours [5:02 PM].
Were you born and raised here in Warren?

DF: Yes, here in Warren.

JN: You attending Warren City Schools?

DF: Yes, I went to Warren Harding.

JN: What year did you graduate from Warren?

DF: January 1941.

JN: Did you go to college from there?

DF: No, I went to work and then I went to the service. I went to college after I got out of the service. I went to Ohio State.

JN: What factors made you want to go into flying?

DF: It was hobby- model airplanes. And all the kids at that time were very interested in it. As a matter of fact, I was as much interested in electronics and radio but when I went up to Cleveland, the Signal Corps had a recruiting office right across the hall from the Air Corps, and I thought "What the hell, I'll go into the Air Corps first and give it a shot." I had a disability that I thought I wouldn't be able to pass the Air Force requirements. It turns out they waived them and I was able to go ahead. On impulse I went into the Air Corps. I liked the idea, but I didn't think I had much of an opportunity to do it. So I thought I'd give it a go. Everybody was being drafted. This was 1942 and the war had gotten up to full steam. I enlisted in September 1942.

JN: You went right into the military after high school then?

DF: No I worked at Packard for almost two years.

JN: When did you get your commission? You were a pilot for B-17 aircraft?

DF: Right. Not originally but I was a co-pilot to start with but I became a pilot in combat.

JN: In combat.

DF: You're a pilot in either case, but one is what they call a command pilot. The first pilot and the co-pilot, the guy in the right-hand seat. What happened: I went through training through the Gulf Coast Training Command. When I graduated school (it was a twin engine school at Pampa, Texas) and from there I was sent back to school in Kansas to be an instructor pilot for a while. This was in early 1944. They asked for volunteers. They were going to close this training school down in the future and would someone like to volunteer to go overseas. So some of us said yes we'd like to volunteer. And so we volunteered. My personal choice was twin engine fighters. Everybody thought that would be a great way to go at that time. P-38s. Since I had a multi-engine background, I thought I'd be an entrée. Well, what happened was they sent us down to Dyersburg, Tennessee which was a replacement training unit for B-17s. That was a multi-engine

school and everyone that went down there from my school became co-pilots. With no previous background at all in B-17s, we were assigned to crews and we learned as we could as these guys were getting ready to go overseas.

JN: So you were more or less doing on-the-job-training at that point?

DF: I really didn't get any official training in a B-17 other than that short stay at Dyersburg.

JN: How long were you there?

DF: We went down there in April and June 6th was D-Day. We were still there but we were immediately sent to Carney, Nebraska within a few days after June 6th to get a B-17 to fly back to England as replacements. They needed replacements immediately they said.

JN: How many guys were in your squadron?

DF: Well I don't know. There's 10 on a crew and there were probably 25 or 30 crews in the squadron training. I'm not positive on the numbers now. When we got to Carney, Nebraska, something went wrong and they reassigned us. They put us on a train and shipped us to New York City. We went over on a convey instead of flying. We arrived in England very late in June or early in July. We were on a 65-ship convoy out of New York. We went into Liverpool. In the process of doing that, we learned that if we volunteered to help unload the boat, take charge of the logistics problems, we could have a choice of bases. When I say we, a navigator and myself, had learned this through our contacts on the boat. So we volunteered to do the work and as a result we got a choice. We selected the showplace base of the ETO and we were given that assignment.

JN: Which base was that?

DF: It was called Bassingbourn. It was the 91st Bomb Group. It still an active base. It was an RAF permanent station before the war and it's still active.

JN: Where is it? Around London?

DF: Its Cambridge, right near Cambridge. And it had permanent facilities.

JN: You guys lucked out!

DF: We went for the best and we got it in that respect, as far as facilities. Just like you see in the movies. It had permanent pilot houses, just like regular homes. You had to have seniority to get those. I gradually got enough seniority with my crew to get into that position. It had dormitories like college dormitories. It had tile showers- the whole nine yards. It was the best base in England without a doubt. So it was nice, but the flying part of it was rough.

JN: Let me ask you this: you get to this cushy base, how long were you there as a new kid on the block before you got your bubble burst? Did you go into training at that point?

DF: Yes, we were in training for a little over a month. We flew but we didn't fly combat until August. And then it was rough because we flew very frequently and the missions were a lot tougher than you were led to believe in those days. We did have a lot of losses even while I was there, even though it was in 1944. There was a lot of casualties.

JN: Where did you fly your missions to? Primarily across the Channel into Germany?

DF: Yes, I didn't know if you'd want this. This is a list of missions that I accumulated. I marked my missions on a map that I had in my barracks. I went to these. I was actually on what I thought was my 27th mission when I got shot down. And these were listed by chronological order.

JN: Tell me some of these words because I'm not familiar with them.

DF: Ok. I can run through the different targets. Wiemar was number one. Pigume was two. Essen. Mannheim we went to twice in a row. Halle, Hamm, Cologne, Frankfurt, Nuremberg,

Freiberg, Schweinfurt, Cologne, Karlsruhe, Brunswick, Hamburg, Hamm, Hamelin, Metz, Aachen, Otterborne, Strasberg, Hanover, Ludwigshafen. And then on my last mission we were right into Berlin and I got shot down over Berlin. That was in December of 1944.

JN: You have that you were shot down December 1944 at 7:15. Was that AM or PM?

DF: That was number of hours on that mission, on that flight. I didn't survive that long.

JN: So seven hours and fifteen minutes.

DF: That was the round trip time off the log books.

JN: I want to talk about you getting shot down. But before we get into that there's a few more questions I want to discuss. What type of comradery existed among the men? Being in the military myself and I know there's supposed to be no fraternization between officers and enlisted men. But under wartime conditions and since you guys were so close in one aircraft, did officers and enlisted men say "the hell with it" and become friends? Or did you always have that in the back of your mind that you have a job to do and I have a job to do? How did that work?

DF: I think I was rather unusual situation because of the training I went through. When I got into the training command, it turned out that I was put in with a bunch of people who had returned from the Pacific. They were enlisted men who were given the opportunity to see if they could get a commission as a pilot or navigator or what have you. So, I went through with people who were not actually aviation cadets. I was an "aviation cadet" but they were considered "aviation students" and they retained their rank and retained their pay scale while we were going through the training. And of course, I palled around with these guys and as far as I was concerned, they were the greatest guys in the world. Some of them had combat duty in the Pacific before they got back here. And then when I got into the so-called officer classification, I still identified with the non-com type personnel. But when we were actually on duty, when we were out of the training command and assigned to the bases, there was a definite segregation between the non-coms and the commissioned officers as far as housing, dining, bars, and that sort of thing. They forced you

to be segregated pretty much. Now when we were overseas and in combat situations, I personally didn't pal around with the guys. I wasn't in any position to do that. They were in different housing and they were in a different part of the base then we were. But if I saw them in town, I'd stop and have a beer with them. That sort of thing. And I felt they were my buddies. And I've since learned over the years from letters that I've gotten after the war, that they felt the same way towards me. The pilot that I was with had a different background and he never really did identify with the crew as being on the same social level as he. He and I got along fine. We'd run around together and chase girls together. But he never really buddied around with the crew. Whereas I was in-between- not having had any college at the time, not having a feeling of seniority over anyone and having palled around with those people all those years. I felt that I was one of them. But if I did identify with anyone, it would be the commissioned officers.

JN: What rank were you when you were shot down?

DF: First Lieutenant. When you came out of the school, you could be given a flight officer which was a warrant officer, or you could become a Second Lieutenant. And some of the guys were given Flight Officer and some were given Second Lieutenant commissions. (I got my First Lieutenant overseas.) But I don't know how they distinguished between the two. But I didn't have a college background at the time, so I felt that I wasn't quite at the level of some of these guys who had four years of college.

JN: How old were you at the time? 21, 22?

DF: I was 23 when I got out.

JN: Here's this young kid from Warren, Ohio and all of a sudden, you're behind the controls of a B-17. How did that feel to you?

DF: Didn't feel real. When I was first in combat, it almost felt like you were sitting in a movie, look at all this stuff going on on a screen in front of you. It didn't ring true that you could actually be sitting there and have all going on around you at the time. It became pretty obvious

that it was true once you started seeing some of the results of it, the action. It still didn't feel real about it. I couldn't figure out what I was doing sitting out here way out in the middle of nowhere. I didn't know how I got there that quick. I did bypass an awful lot of the training that most people had. Just by a quirk of fate I was pushed ahead rather rapidly through the system because I didn't go in until January 1943 and I was in combat in the middle of 1944 in Europe.

JN: And that's just the time that we were in dire need of getting guys and planes up in the air. Right?

DF: Well, they thought they were going to be. As a matter of fact, we did run into a situation where we really were shorthanded. That's why I became a pilot instead of a co-pilot because had one mission in particular (I brought some information on that) where we had the highest casualties that our group ever had. Back in 1942, 1943 they never ran into anything like that.

JN: What was that?

DF: It was on November 2nd, this is the actual data that I picked off of the flight board. This is our squadron and this is the results of that mission.

JN: November 2nd, 1944. Read to where? I think it was to Merseburg.

DF: Yes, its to Merseburg. We were on our way to the target and we had an engine blow out. We were just starting to turn in to the IP (initial point of the bomb) and we lost an engine. We had to turn and leave. We got fighter protection. We went back to England, but I monitored this over the air. At the time we got hit with 400 to 500 fighters.

JN: When you say group, how many do you mean?

DF: Thirty-six aircraft.

JN: So our thirty-six aircraft got shot at by 400 to 500 fighters?

DF: Right. Messerschmitt's and FWs. That was the technique they used. It happened at other times and I actually saw this and was involved. In this case, we had just turned to leave when they got hit. We had fighters to protect us, we came on home without being jumped. But the group lost thirteen aircraft out of the thirty-six. And in my squad of twelve, we lost six. We had a 50% loss on my squad and as a result, I was asked if I would be willing to move over and take command of a crew myself. Turned out I didn't have a crew. I was a bastard co-pilot and then kind of a pilot of a bastard crew. That meant guys who didn't have a regular crew would collect together and fly. And I was asked to do that earlier. My pilot had broken his ear drums and was grounded for a while. We didn't fly in pressurized aircraft. He had a cold or something and coming down from high altitude, 35,000 feet…

JN: Wait a minute, you flew at 30,000 feet without pressurized aircraft?

DF: Yeah. I flew a B-17 that can go up to 40,000. But not in combat.

JN: With oxygen tanks and all that?

DF: Yes.

JN: You guys must have froze your tushes off!

DF: We had electric flying suits. They plugged in just like you would plug in an electric blanket. That's how we kept from freezing.

JN: Really? I can't get over that.

DF: You need oxygen and electric flying suits or you'd be a dead duck. I've seen guys jump that didn't carry their oxygen or let open their chutes too quick and they just froze up like a board. You shouldn't do that obviously.

Anyway, to get back to this particular raid, when we got back, we were suspect for coming back when they had such high losses and we got back in one piece. So the next day, I was required, not the pilot- they wouldn't let the pilot leave but they took another pilot- and had me go with him. We took the airplane up to wring it out. We had a little piece of flak go through one of the turbo super charger billows, its like a little translucent control. When the turbo charger kicked in at a certain altitude, this was controlled by the atmospheric pressure. It had a little bellow system on it. It had been punctured, so when we got to a certain altitude it failed and we lost the engine. And we couldn't keep up with the group. Well, when we got back to normal altitude, it kicked back on again. They thought we were faking it, I guess. In fact, we never got credit for that mission even though we dropped our bombs in the middle of Germany. And even though the group had its highest losses. I was looking at my log here after the war and they didn't give us credit for going on a mission because of an abort. Even though we had flak damage.

JN: You had flak damage and you dropped your bombs. Do you know where you dropped your bombs?

DF: Yeah, I think we were in Freiberg or Nuremberg.

JN: I spent some time in Nuremberg, of course this was in the 1960s. It was beautiful county. When you dropped your bombs, did you drop them indiscriminately? Let's just drop them and get out of here…

DF: No. When we were coming back that time, we tried to figure out what we thought was a reasonable target. Had our bombardier go through his routine and drop the bombs on what we thought... It was a town anyway.

JN: Let me ask you a question. You as a pilot, you have to turn your aircraft over to the bombardier during the final stages. What went through your mind at that point? Your plane was at the mercy of flak coming from below. How long did it take to release the bombs? How many bombs were on there? What was the time to target? What was going through your mind at this time?

DF: It varied. I want to point out something you might not have been aware of. By the time we were flying, they no longer allowed individual bombardiers to select their targets and drop. It was dropped by a group. They had staggered formations, elements of twelve. And then the lead ships dropped smoke bombs, and all the other bombardiers dropped on their smoke bombs. So they didn't have to select or determine anything other than the sequencing devices. We did have one occasion- it was a weird thing that happened and maybe why I'm not sure how many I had because they wiped it off the books. But we were on a mission toward the end of my period there. We were flying down in southern Germany. And we were flying as a deputy lead as I recall. As such we had smoke bombs on our plane. And inadvertently, there was a problem. And the bombardier was having trouble setting up the panel or something or other. I don't remember exactly what was going on. But the bombardier and the pilot got into a discussion and before it was over, the pilot pulled a salvo rod and the bomb released. We had a salvo system in case the bombardier got wiped out, we could still salvo the bombs from the cockpit. And he inadvertently pulled it- as far as I know. And dropped these bombs. They were smoke bombs and the whole group dropped on that. The whole group missed the target by 50 miles.

JN: What did you hit? Do you know?

DF: I talked to a gentleman on my HAM radio a few months ago. This was a grad student and he's over there in the U.S. Air Force. He was in the same area and the people there, often wondered why people had dropped a whole bunch of bombs on their vineyards. They were in the vineyard area. This is where we were at. And they couldn't figure out why they had been bombed because all they were doing was just growing wine. And I think, but I'm not positive, that that's where we dropped them- right there in the middle of those vineyards. SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force] had an investigation right after that and we were told they were going to wipe that right off the books. And I can't find any record of that mission in my record. So that very well may have happened. They just said that never happened. It didn't exist. We never got credit for it.

JN: Can you imagine the Germans: "Was ist das?" Those Americans!

DF: That was an accident. One of the weird things that do happen. But back to this other mission, as a result of our high losses, they asked if I would become a pilot. They checked me out in the B-17 in one day and I was a first pilot after that. But I had flown quite a few missions and was very familiar with the aircraft by then. So I started flying with my own crew. But there were different people almost every time. I didn't have a regular crew. I was always flying pick-ups. Before that, I had done that with a lot of flying with different crews to help them get started. New crews when they'd arrive, I'd fly with a new crew. Because they weren't familiar with some of the terminology and systems we were using. I would try to get them over the hump. I did that quite a few times.

JN: That had to be tough on you. You get used to one bunch of guys and then they're gone.

DF: Yes, it was. You kind of lost your hold on…

JN: Any fellowship you'd built up. You knew what to expect from these other guys, and here you get a new crew.

DF: Well, I did that for, I'd say half of my missions, were that kind of situation.

JN: How many missions did you go on?

DF: I thought it was 27, but it looks like it was 26.

JN: So for half of these, you were going out with a different crew?

DF: Yes, about that.

JN: That would drive me nuts.

DF: You get used to it. The whole place is nuts anyway. Everyone's a basket case after you've been there and go through this. It's a terrible strain to be put in that position day after day.

JN: Did you remember Twelve O'clock High? We used to watch that on TV.

DF: Yes, that's written from the Command point of view. How tough it was for the guys sitting at the base. It wasn't written for the guys going out there.

JN: The thing that impressed me as a kid growing up, watching that, I could see the B-17s took off with fighter escorts. How many times did you come into flak and how many times were you attacked by Messerschmitt's?

DF: Very few times with the Messerschmitts. I think maybe three or four times at the most did we actually confront fighters. Now there were fighters out there, but they always collected as a group and attacked only a portion of what we called the Bomber Stream. When I was there, they had set up a system that they used throughout the war, where they formed a long stream of bombers, one group after another would go to a selected target and drop in sequence. And they'd have a patrol of fighters, above, below and to the sides. Now the fighters didn't stay with you. They just went up and down the stream, more or less, en route. Well the Germans would pick out one portion, that normally the fighters weren't around at the time, and hit that one group. They concentrate their forces and try to wipe out as many B-17s as they could.

JN: Would they hit from the rear?

DF: It didn't have to be from the rear, but most of the time it was from the rear when I was there. Earlier, they'd come from side attacks or frontal attacks. But most of the time. One particular one that I specifically remember, about 250 fighters hit us from behind. As a matter of fact, our crew shot down a couple of them and we got credit for those kills. But they just poured through. There was too many of them that you couldn't knock them all down. You could tell that some of them were very experienced and some were relatively new at the game. The real experienced ones would get in real quick, roll over on their belly and they had an armored plate

on the bottom of the airplane, then the 50-caliber bullets would just bounce off the armor plate as they went underneath. They'd be shooting at you while they were upside down as they split out from under the group. These were very experienced pilots. Some of the other guys came in slow and steady and took good aim. And of course, they were good targets too. It was that kind of a fight but it only lasted a few minutes.

JN: On a B-17 you have eleven different guns?

DF: Thirteen gunmen, I think. Forgive me if I get carried away. When we start getting involved in a lot of this, it starts to make you excited again.

JN: No problem! I love it. You can go right on. [reads] "Armaments: 11 machine guns, 16,000-pound bomb load." Everybody was expected, except for the pilots who had to fly the plane, the radio man, the flight engineer, everybody was expected to fire a 50-caliber. Is that right?

DF: Right. Now the chin turret had twin-50s and the bombardier had…

JN: Who fired twin 50s?

DF: The chin turret.

JN: Where is that at?

DF: Right in the nose. That's what we called it. Then there was a top turret that had twin 50s. And the flight engineer fired that. The navigator- and sometimes they didn't have it in there but originally, they did and some of the planes we flew still had it in there- had a single gun off the side he could fire from his side. He sat up in the front and fired out the left side with a single 50. And then there was a ball turret with twin 50s. That was about half way back on the bottom of the plane. The radio operator had a gun that he could fire from the top window here. And each side window had a gun and there was a gunner on each side to fire out the side windows. The tail

turret that was twin 50s. It was set up mainly to try to survive. It was a gun platform with bombs. That's what it was.

JN: The cruising speed was 160 miles per hour.

DF: We flew everything at 150 indicated. We took off at 135 to 140 and flew it at 150. With a full bomb load, it had to get up over 135 to get off the ground.

JN: What was the stall speed on that aircraft?

DF: About 90-95 miles an hour. Not with a full bomb load though. It had to be around 130. We couldn't get off the ground below that. But straight and level, without any turrets- we had some that were target pulling aircraft where they stripped down- those would do about 225 or 230 indicated. But 150 at 30,000 feet is about 300 miles an hour when you can compensate for altitude. You're indicating on the airspeed indicator 150 but over the ground you're doing about 305. They flew 150 because that turned out to the best speed for formation. When you were in a large formation, and making a turn, the inside elements had to slow way down and the outside elements had to go as fast as they could. So if you've got an inside element turning too slow, they'd stall out and the outside guys can't keep up. They found that about 150 miles an hour in a large 36 airplane formation, they could maneuver and still maintain position and elevation.

JN: One thing I want to clear up- my notes say time over target. The bombardier got his cue off the guys who released the smoke bombs. But you didn't have command of the plane at that point, did you?

DF: No. We turned it over to the bombardier. He was in charge during that period. Now, we could, independently from the formation, like I said, if we were by ourselves, select a target and turn it over to the bombardier.

JN: Let's say you were fully loaded. How long did it take for a load to drop and get out of there? How long were you over the target?

DF: Seemed like an eternity, but it was probably a couple of minutes over the target area. But the IP to the initial drop might be five to ten minutes. The IP is the initial point of the bomb. That's where everybody got lined up and made sure you were all tracking down the same track heading for the target.

JN: Do you have Berlin on here?

DF: That's where I got shot down.

JN: That was the last… That was your first and last time over Berlin. What did it feel like to get shot down? Was your plane on fire?

DF: There was some fire. What happened, as I was briefed and you always went to a briefing earlier…

JN: I want to ask you about that. You guys went into a briefing, what were your plans like? Did you plan your own route or did the Air Force plan it for you?

DF: It was planned for you at SHAEF- the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, or some other upper-level decision-makers. But there was an Air Force commander there and he would bring it down through this chain of command. By the time it got to us, its all cut and dry. Where you were flying, where you were in the bomb stream and all that. Everything was predicated on this- This was one of things I was going to show you. On the briefing boards, we would get a start time. This is engine time. And taxi. Take off. Every morning, you were given this as part of the briefing. They'd tell you when you were expected to be back. Total distance, that sort of thing. This was part of your briefing. They had maps and they'd show you the position of the Allied front, so you had a general idea of where the front lines were. That was in case you had to abort or something went wrong. You'd know about where the lines were at the time. Also so you wouldn't be dropping bombs indiscriminately where our troops were. The group of the formation were plotted on these very large maps of Europe. We took off in England

at a certain time and formed into a bomb group. We'd take off even in bad weather, completely fogged in so you couldn't even see the runway! We'd take off on instruments and climb up out of the fog and then we'd have a first plane flying up there in a circle. And the second plane would come up and fly on his wing and then the third plane. And we continue one after another until we're all up there and formed a group. And then we'd go from there and fit into the bomb stream, which is the long line of groups that were flying into Germany. It was all timed, a nice sequence and it worked very well. Occasionally we had a problem, it happened to us several times, where our plane malfunctioned after take-off and we had to go back. Well that didn't mean you were finished. You had to get another airplane, get into the plane and fly up. And if you couldn't catch your group, you had to join another group that was going and go with them where ever they were going- which we did several times.

JN: How would you get briefed in the air then? Here you are joining another group…

DF: You just hope for the best! You just went with them.

JN: You just asked them "Where we going guys?" They told you and followed along?

DF: You didn't ask them, you just went with them. You just tagged in. That was it. That was routine. Also, on occasion, in fact on the last mission I was on, that your guns weren't working. We had three or four positions where the guns malfunctioned, which didn't make a difference. If your guns weren't working, tough. Just keep on going. On the last mission we were on, three of our positions were malfunctioning. That happened quite often, much more than it should have where the ammunition we were getting wasn't as good as it ought to be. They were jamming in the guns for some reason or another. That happened, not every time, but a lot more often you'd like.

JN: Often enough to be aggravating. That would have a tendency to make you want to think about going up nine, that the ammunition would jam on you.

DF: Well, like I said, that was not a reason for turning around. Occasionally, we took delayed action bombs. They had chemical fuses on them and once they were activated you couldn't bring them back.

JN: Now those delayed action bombs, they would bury themselves in the ground? Is that correct?

DF: Yes, but you had to get rid of them. You could not bring them back.

JN: Did they activate them back on the base?

DF: Yes.

JN: So they'd be aboard the aircraft and you better…

DF: You'd be a cooked son of a gun! You couldn't bring them back. If you couldn't get rid of them, you'd have to bail out. I never saw that happen. You had to take it out with a channel and jump if you couldn't get them out or whatever. You couldn't land the aircraft with them on.

JN: What was the purpose of the delayed action bomb?

DF: So that the Germans would have no way of knowing when they were going off. They might last for a week or they might last for an hour.

JN: What kind of timer was it then?

DF: Chemical. Two chemicals that were eating through a piece of metal. When they come together, they'd create a fusion… Then on occasion, we took propaganda leaflets too, which was another thing. We dropped leaflets telling people to get of town because tomorrow we're coming back. And then we'd come back and they'd be waiting on us!

JN: You'd actually tell the Germans we're coming back tomorrow and here's all these guys with these cannons striking up your throat?

DF: The most causalities while I was there was due to flak. We got shot down by flak. And the target we were going on, as I mentioned earlier on that last mission, they told us was a flak gun factory. And going in on the target, there was very heavy and very large shells going off right in front of us and we flew right straight into it and got hit. There was no evasive action taken on the part of the lead bombardier, who was a new guy doing it for the first time as I remember. Most of the time, we would take some evasive action if we had time. And we had time that day to do that. He could have moved the group around a little bit but he just went straight in.

JN: What do you figure he thought "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" or what?

DF: I don't think he knew any better. He as new at the job.

JN: How did that make you feel? Knowing you had a rookie up there.

DF: Very bad. Especially when we got it. We had a direct hit on the number 3 engine.

JN: What was racing through your mind- other than I have get out of here!

DF: It wasn't that. It was just a realization that we were in deep trouble- serious trouble. It wasn't panic at all, it was more like a resignation. There wasn't anything you could do about it. This is it. And try salvage what you could. After surveying the situation, we had actually lost three engines. We had one blown off, we had one windmilling, and one running away. And the control systems that controlled those had all gotten blown away. Because when the number three engine got hit, it came up through the fuselage and, as far as I know, killed the bombardier. We threw him out of the airplane on a static line. I didn't see him, but I think he was dead and he never showed up again. And the navigator was wounded. There were two guys up front. All the controls in front of us were malfunctioning except for the one engine. The number one engine was still controllable so I was running that. The bottom of the airplane was just completely

ripped apart. It looked like a colander where you scrape lettuce or cabbage. It was just those things came up through the fuselage in the front where the bombardier and navigator where sitting, just sprouted holes all of a sudden right in front of you. And the windshields were cracked. The bombardier was out of it, but the flight engineer got out on the bombs. We couldn't drop the bombs because all that was gone- all those controls. He got out there and was trying to drop them with a screwdriver and a crow bar. He couldn't get them out. I finally told him to get back in. I got the crew alerted that we were in serious trouble. Got the ball turret up out the wall and told everyone to stand by. We surveyed one more time, and decided there was no way. We got the bombardier out on the static line and told the rest of the crew I'd give them one minute to get out. The copilot was stunned. He was right beside me. He acted like he'd been hit with a ball bat or something. He was really punchy. I had them get on their chutes and jump. I called back to see if they were all cleared. I watched my clock and after one minute I checked and there was still one guy back in the back. I told him I'll give him one more minute. I didn't think it was going to hang together that much longer. I gave him another minute. I had to stand with both feet on the left rudder pedal because I only had the one engine and I had to run it full power just to try to maintain anything. There was tremendous torque. I was in real misery but I gave him another minute. I called back and he didn't answer so then I went ahead and jumped. I went out through the front escape hatch. I'd released the controls and took a dive through the front. I got hung up in the thing with the chute I was wearing. But I got back in and rejumped and got through it that second time.

JN: What do you mean "rejumped"?

DF: I pulled myself back in with my feet.

JN: You were hanging out of the airplane?

DF: Half of me was. I was using a special chute. If you look at the chutes that are out there now, they have backpacks, right? That's what I was wearing and I was one of the very few bomber pilots that was wearing that. The reason I was wearing that, I had had some buddies that were flying right next to me that exploded right in midair while I was watching. And that made me

nervous. We weren't wearing chutes. We had chutes stuck off the side someplace and we were just wearing our harnesses. If we got into trouble, we were to reach for our chutes and put them on. Well after seeing that happen a couple of times….

JN: What do you mean "exploded"?

DF: They had a direct hit and blew… Their airplane blew all to hell right beside me. That left a lasting impression! So, to at least make sure I had a chute on, I went down to the supply office and said is there was any kind of a chute that you might be able wear while you're sitting in one of the B-17s with all this gear we wore. I assume you're familiar with all the gear we had to wear besides.

JN: Yeah, I saw some.

DF: So they came up with this English fighter pilot's suit. It was made by Sweatlick. But the flaw was that the backpack pulled apart like this. They didn't have any cloth between this harness and where the backpack pulled apart. I noticed one time when I was out here recently that they put a cloth in there. But when I went out like that, the chute pulled away from the back and caught on the escape hatch itself. So I've got my arms, shoulders, and head out, but my chute was caught. I had to pull back in. Then I grabbed the chute like this and jumped, rolled out that way- by pulling the chute down on my shoulders I could clear it. But all this happened so fast and it was almost methodical. There was no panic, no hysteria. I was just doing my job.

JN: What happened to the tail gunner? He just went down with the aircraft then?

DF: Never found him. The airplane almost hit me coming down. And then it hit right underneath me. I was coming down through clouds. There was a cloud layer below me. And it hit and blew all to hell. The Germans showed me later a piece of flag that was in the raft- the dingy we used to call it- in case you went out into the water. You had a raft and, on it, they had a flag in there for identification. And that was all they found. We never did find the other….

JN: What about the rest of the crew?

DF: The other guys were all rounded up and we all ended up in a jail in a town called Templin, which is up north.

JN: Who picked you up? The Germans?

DF: The German civilians originally.

JN: And they transported you over to the jail?

DF: Not originally. I got a messy situation for a while with some of the civilians. But a local constable took me away from the civilians. Then they called I guess it was the Gestapo.

JN: Wait, what was the messy situation with the civilians? What were they trying to do?

[new tape 48:59- 49:30]

DF: Before we had gone on this mission, just a few weeks before, we'd been briefed by a guy who returned from Europe. He'd gotten out through the underground. He told about his experience. One of the things he said was to make sure you didn't open your chute too soon, which I mentioned earlier was dangerous. And one of the things you could do was experiment. So I tried- like, stick an arm out and see which way it rotates. Do those things to keep yourself occupied. I did that through several layers of clouds. I probably bailed out at about 15,000 feet when I jumped. And I got down through the clouds, I was still in control of my altitude fairly well. I was able to keep myself from tumbling drastically. As I got through the lower layer of the clouds, I saw quite a bit of fighter activity flying around in the area- FW 190s in particular. Underneath me was a woods with a small clearing. I could see it off to the side. I never had any experience with the chutes before, but I saw other people do it. So I pulled on the shroud lines to make the thing slip and I could slip it toward the clearing. And was slipping at a faster rate than I realized, but I got it over to the clearing but was descending faster than I thought. I hit the last

tree, caught the chute at the top of it and it threw me into the bottom of the tree. It knocked me cold. When I came to, I'd dislocated both knees and my ankles were shot. I was able to push my knees back in place. I had a 45 I was carrying, and I threw that as far away as I could. We weren't supposed to carry them, but I did in case we went down between the lines. (They didn't want us carrying them when we went deep into Germany because it produced more of a hazard. But I thought there was always a chance you might go down between the lines and you'd need something. So I always carried mine.) I threw the 45 away and tried to hide the sheath as best I could. I started limping up through the trail in the heavy woods. Around the corner there was another trail with about half a dozen civilians with shot guns and pitchforks. They got me back into this little village. While I was there, a guy came up on a wagon and a horse and a rope. You could see him make a noose with the rope, put it around his neck. He threw it over the limb of a tree and started jerking on it and talking in German. Of course, I understood what I he was saying! I was getting extremely nervous. Just a little bit later, around the side of this village building, came the local constable. He was armed and he put a gun on the brute and forced him to submit. Then he took me over to his house. Then, not long later, the car came up with what I think was the Gestapo or the local police. They took me down to the village itself, Templin. And put me in the jail.

JN: Did anyone speak English while this was going on?

DF: There was one guy who could speak a little English. The only thing he talked about was I had a handkerchief. He was going through to see what I had in my clothes. They brought this handkerchief out and he wanted to know what that was. I told him it was to blow my nose. And they laughed! They never heard of anyone having a handkerchief to blow their nose- at least those people up there didn't. And that's the only thing I remember. He'd been over here and could speak very little English. He asked me and I told him and everybody thought that was a riot. That was before the guy came with the horse and wagon and rope.
After that I was in more stable hands. The police turned us over to the military and we went then through the regular routine. We went down to Berlin. Spent a couple nights in Berlin. That was all blown to hell. There was nothing there but wreckage. Then from Berlin they took us to Frankfurt.

JN: If I could interrupt. I saw some of the work you guys did at the Berlin Museum back in 1968/69 when I was there. You could go into this little museum and they had all these pictures of World War II to remind the Germans what it was like. You guys did blow the hell of out if it!

DF: We did! There were a lot of walls standing but all the floors were down. They took us out to Tempelhof, I believe it was, and we were down two or three levels underground. There were some air raids while we were there and you could hear the bombing. They kept us there overnight or maybe two nights. Then they took us out to the station and put us on train to Frankfurt for interrogation. There's an interrogation center down there for POWs down there. It's in a little town called Oberursel, up north of Frankfurt.

JN: When you say interrogation, the first thing that goes through my mind is whips and stuff. Did they do that?

DF: No, but I was in solitary confinement for about two weeks. In a little tiny room with no lights and for all intents and purposes, no food. They threatened you. They'd call us in and interrogate us and while we were there, they'd have guys in SS uniforms with berg guns threaten you. Threaten to take you out and shoot you if you didn't answer the questions. I didn't believe them. I assumed that they were trying to scare me, so I didn't give them anything besides my name, rank, and serial number. We pretty much went through that routine three or four different times while I was there for two weeks. There was, I think he was a [German] coronel, and at the last session he asked me when do you think the war would be over. I said, "I expected in about a year or so." He laughed at me and said "hell, we can't last more than six months at the most." And he was about right. He said we're not going to make it. You guys have got us. He said we're going to let you go through the system and send you up to an internment camp. We did. He was very honest about it at that point. Again, I thought he's just trying to lead me on. I really couldn't tell him anything. I didn't know anything other than what any other flyboy would know at the time. You never know what they're trying to find out. Most of the guys went through that system, but not all went through the solitary confinement. A lot of them were held as groups.

JN: After that they took you out to a place they called a Stalag?

DF: Yes, we went to place called Winseler for a day or two. It was right behind the Battle of the Bulge. Very close. We could hear the firing of the guns at the Battle of the Bulge. We were very close. At least it sounded like it. I thought we were going to be relieved here shortly. Then the Germans pointed out that, no the guns were firing and they were going the other way. We were put on a train. We circumvented some of the towns, but and we ended up north of Berlin on a peninsula in a town called Barth. We were at Stalag Luft I. It was an old, World War I camp that had been rejuvenated. And it was the last camp left at the end of the war. So, all the people who could still march ended up there. We ended up being overwhelmed with people by the end of the war. The Russians liberated us. We ended up in what is now East Germany. But the Russians came.

JN: I've heard stories before that because your Luftwaffe, you're Air Force, the Germans took care of you. That they treated you better than someone who was in the infantry or something. I don't mean any disrespect.

DF: Now its hard to say. The civilians hated us for obvious reasons. And going through some of the towns, I remember they threw rocks at us and spit at us and swore at us. The military treated you more by rank than by function. While we were there, they wouldn't let any air crew out of these camps. Whereas, having gotten involved with some POW people who were non-flying types lately, I found out a lot of those guys were working on farms. They weren't kept in pens or anything. We were never allowed out of that camp to do any kind of work detail or anything. We were always locked up.

JN: Why was that do you think?

DF: Well they thought we could have access to an airbase and escape easier than someone else perhaps? I don't know. That's what I heard someone say. They never told us why. There were airplanes around us. There was an airbase not too far from where we were. There was a little concentration camp close by where they had civilian people that they let die before the end of the

war. They locked them up and walked away from them. They were pretty well gone by the time we found them. I didn't personally get involved, but I saw the camp and heard some of the guys talk about it.

JN: How long were you in the concentration camp?

DF: Well, I was there about six months total, from the time I got shot down.

JN: What did you guys do to keep yourself from going insane? Did you form groups within the camp and play cards or something like that?

DF: Well, there was some of that. You were in a room not much bigger than this with 24 guys.

JN: This room has got to be about 10 feet by 20 feet.

DF: Yes, it was probably about this size. Maybe a little larger than this. It was 24 guys to start with, by the time the war was over, we had about 40 guys in the room.

JN: 40 guys? In a 10 by 24 room?

DF: We had one wall that was shelves-like. Those shelves were just slats. And three or four levels.

JN: Don't tell me those are where you slept.

DF: That's the beds. They gave us a mattress cover and you filled it full of shaving the first day you got there and that's all you ever got. That was your mattress and you laid on the shelf every day.

JN: So the prison scenes of Stalag 17 in Hogan's Heroes are all BS?

DF: As far I know. They didn't beat us or stomp us to death while I was there. They did shoot a guy that I recall. He was walking by a window during an air raid and that kind of thing. He violated a rule or something of that nature. But before the guys got there, at this particular location, some of them got very badly beaten up, brutalized.

JN: Why was that do you think?

DF: It depends who got you. Some of the guys on a march who were coming near the end at been bayonetted very badly. One of the guys who was in the room with me from the beginning was an ex-policeman from Los Angles- a motorcycle cop. He landed on an air raid bunker in Berlin the day that I got shot down. The people beat him up and then the Gestapo took him and beat him up. His face was all beat out of shape by the time he got to the camp. They didn't do anything to help you. My navigator had been wounded. He had shrapnel in his arm and shoulder. They didn't do anything for him. By the time he got to the camp, there was a local intern surgeon there. He was part of some bridge flank group. He removed the shrapnel but there was no anesthetics or anything. They did the best they could. But they didn't take you up against the wall and beat you with sticks- that sort of thing. That wasn't going on. There was no food to speak of. That was the worst thing. Gradually, as the food supply dropped down and down and down, everybody's energies… and you didn't really do anything after a while. You just tried to hang in there.

JN: What did you guys live on? What did they feed you?

DF: In the beginning, I think they were supposed to be giving us a Red Cross package. You were supposed to get one a week. We got six for the 24 guys at first. Then we finally didn't get any of those. They'd give us rutabagas. If they shot a horse, they might make a big pot of stew out of the horse. We'd do it ourselves. We had our own guys cooking this stuff. They'd bring their own bowls of this stew. And occasionally we'd get cottage cheese. I really don't go for that, but I ate it anyways. They also brought bread, but the bread was this real heavy, dark stuff. It was probably about half wood. And they brought it on these dirty old wagons and they just threw it

out at you. It was a bad scene. It was not at all like what you might imagine. There wasn't any brutality as such, it was just that you were starved and confined.

JN: It was just day to day inhumane treatment.

DF: Right. Now at night, they locked you into these rooms and they turned these dogs loose in the compound so that you wouldn't dare go outside. They had these Dobermans. They guys would play games with it. We had stoves where you could boil water. The stoves were really heating units. We saved some of it so that we could cook with it at the same time. They'd boil water and pour it down through the cracks in the floor on these dogs. Things like that to torment them. But the dogs were vicious as hell.

JN: The cracks in the floor- the floors were raised above the ground?

DF: Yes, and the dogs would go underneath. And there were cracks. We were there in the winter time. It was the worst winter they'd had in Europe for many years. So during that period, you weren't going out that much. They'd force you to go out for roll call most every morning. But that was it. I never heard of anyone escaping from that place. We were out in the peninsula in the Baltic. If you dug down two or three feet, you'd hit water because you're out there.

JN: So you couldn't do any tunneling.

DF: And the weather was so severe during that winter that you couldn't do much outside anyway.

JN: Geez. I remember the German winters and some of them were bitter cold!

DF: I got a bad… Hold on, I got another problem here. I broke my arch I think and if I'm not careful and put pressure on the thing, I get a pinched nerve. So I've got to be careful.

JN: Do your knees give you problems?

DF: Yeah, they do. They lock up. I get a pension from the VA [Veteran's Administration] for the injuries I got.

JN: What did it feel like to finally get liberated? How did you feel about being liberated by the Russians?

DF: I didn't care! We weren't sure. When they did come in, they were coming over the ground by the thousands. They were like locusts- riding the backs of cows, riding on tanks, riding on trucks. They even had dog sleds with half a dozen dogs pulling a bunch of guys riding on a sled. They had little wooden wheels pegged onto the runners and these dogs would be pulling these guys over the bare ground. Half a dozen guys on a sled with a bunch of dogs pulling them. They just came right up. Just swarms and they were almost all the Mongolian type. They looked like Dr. Fu Manchu. Now the officer group was what you might say white Russians, the European Russian. But the GI was all Mongolian types and looked the part. They were kinda wild. They did some goofy things by our standards. Like herding cattle in a forced pack- if a cow got out of line, they shot the thing. And they ate soap. Guys traded what soap they had because they called it sweet lard. And they'd get a hold of a German car and they'd run thing until they ran it into a tree. This occurred many times. But they'd also shot you at the drop of a hat. Some of the guys we were told, weren't able to be identified quick enough and they'd shoot them. They didn't care. I went with one guy across the bay one time. I wanted to do some souvenir hunting. The war was over. We were kept there by the Russians for quite a while after the war was actually over.

JN: Why?

DF: I don't know. But we were actually liberated by force from the Russians.

JN: So first you were liberated from the Germans by the Russians, and then you had to be liberated from the Russians? How?

DF: Yes. Well, it was the 8th Air Force. They flew in armed B-17s and put a fighter cover over this base. Fifty-ones and forty-sevens. We'd all been assembled two or three different days, set to march back into Russia. They were going to march us out of there and down through Russia, to the Black Sea or something. That's the way they were going to take us out they said. To prevent that from happening finally, they brought in the 8th Air Force. And as a matter of fact, I rode back out of there in one of the airplanes from my own group. But they were all armed, prepared to shoot if they had to. They came in there and put a fighter cover over the area. Let the B-17s in to load up. It took 3 or 4 days to get us all out of there.

JN: How long were you liberated by the Russian before the Americans came in?

DF: I can't be sure. I think was probably a couple of weeks. Maybe not that long, but I think it was about that long.

JN: Did you start to ask "What's going on here?"

DF: Oh sure! But as I was telling you, I was right across this boat across with this Russian. This is one of the funny things they did. I was out there souvenir hunting a little and this guy brought me back in a little canoe. He got up and fired his gun. I was just getting out of the boat. The boat tipped over from the recoil and he thought that was funny. He got back up and fired his gun again! They were just crazy. It was a wild time. But we were flown back to France.

JN: Did they debrief you then in France?

DF: A little bit. We were in a tent-city type situation where there were no real facilities and it was muddy and messy. So I got a ride. We got orders to get ourselves seven days leave. But there was no date on the orders. But they were cut and given to us and they permitted us to meet in Paris or London. So we went to London and spent another month or so over there goofing off.

JN: What did you guys do when you hit freedom? When you got to London?

DF: Well the gang of it was that those of us who knew each other in the camp all got together in London after we'd gotten back to our base. The base had closed down there was just a few other guys all shipping back to the States. The planes were all gone except for a few of them. There was nothing there. But the Paymaster was still there so I got some back pay. We went to London and partied for a month.

JN: I spent some time in London. It's a hell of town. If I may ask, what kind of parties did you guys get into?

DF: The worst kind! [laughs]

JN: You had some good times, did you?

DF: We did. Of course, we'd been confined for a long time. We were all young. We did a lot of drinking and girl chasing. It was fun.

JN: How long did you stay in London?

DF: Thirty days. Well, actually… Before we were able to turn ourselves back in, it was thirty days. We went down to South Hampton and Bournemouth and things like that.

JN: South Hampton? That brings back memories. I had a little number myself in South Hampton. Did they still roll up the bars at that time at 10:00 or 11:00 or something like that?

DF: Not that I remember. At least- we knew our way around and you could go all night. We hung around down in the entertainment area- Regent Palace, that was kind of a hang out. I stayed there a few times. Then it got to be a little rough for me in those days. Then I started staying out in Kensington.

JN: It wasn't a bad place when I was there. They must have cleaned it up.

DF: The last time I saw it there was a thousand of those girls out there being rounded up into paddy wagons and military police and all. Thrown in paddy wagons and driving away. The girls were out there for one last chance at the guys who came home. It was just a great big cat house is what it turned into before the war was over.

JN: I remember the Regent as being a nice hotel.

DF: It was nice. They had a fence across the lobby and you weren't allowed to take anyone across that fence. But the cocktail lounges and the other part of the lobby, the girls worked that as a regular meeting place. After having been exposed to that a little bit earlier, I didn't consider that a quiet place to stay, so I stayed around Kensington some. I was with a guy who knew his way around pretty good. One of the guys in our crew was the son of a very well-to-do New York business man. His uncle, I think was the guy who was head of the A.E.C. [Atomic Energy Commission] after the war. His name was Lewis Strauss. I don't know if you ever heard of the Strauss family?

JN: Strauss family- sure.

DF: Well, he was one of the sons. He was a navigator and bombardier on our crew. He did both functions at one time when I went overseas. We paled around quite a bit at the time.

JN: You know, thanks to you guys, not to knock anyone, but when I went there, the English people loved the Air Force. I stayed with this one girl, and was eventually introduced to her mother. She really loved you guys.

DF: Well, some of them did. That's for sure.

JN: She really loved you guys. She had a deep respect for the American Air Force. And I had a time.

DF: When were there, in the latter part of 1944, it was off limits to anybody but flying personnel. Because of the buzz bombs and B52s. We were the only ones. As I understood, they figured that the casualty risk for flying crews was so high anyways, that going to London wasn't a big deal to the guys. So they let the Air Force personnel go, but they did put it off limits for a lot of the ground. At last that's what they told us. We were down there, about 40 miles away even though we were near Cambridge. So must of my livery time was spent on…

JN: When you got back to London, did you have to stay in a military hospital for your knees or anything?

DF: No.

JN: When did you finally make it back to the United States?

DF: In late July. I was home on a 60-day leave when the war was over.

JN: Glad it was over?

DF: I still had to go back. I didn't get out until December. But I was here in Warren when the atom bomb was dropped. Then I went down to that place in Girard- the Blue Crystal. They closed all the bars around here.

JN: Why did they do that?

DF: I don't know why- because the preachers all want everyone to go to church? I don't know! But I got a hold of my buddy who happened to be home on leave at the same time. He was a fighter pilot, right over there beside me. Lucky ducks, we got to be home at the same time. So I dragged him down to the Blue Crystal. We got in there and they closed the doors. And whoever was in there when the place closed, stayed. And we drank the place dry. The next morning it was empty. Everybody was plowed. We had a wonderful time. We were there until daylight the next

morning. And it was on the house. Management just- let it rip. You couldn't beat that. They had a lot of people there.

JN: That's a good deal!

DF: At least as I remember it, they did. I think they did. So I missed V-E Day. We were sitting there in that P.O.W. camp on V-E Day and it was weeks later before we got out.

JN: Unbelievable! When you were in England, before you got hit, did you do anything with the British Air Force at anytime?

DF: Some. I had nothing but the highest respect for any of the guys I ran into. I thought they were the best. I didn't fly with any of them, but I had the chance to get a drink with them or sit around and talk a little bit with them. I had the highest regard for them as far as I was concerned. Of course, I'd heard about the Battle of Britain and stuff. Some of those guys were still around. Some of the guys that had been injured during all that were very visible. I thought they were good people. Once or twice, we came around their bases and they treated me fine too, as I recall.

JN: Thanks to you guys, the English Air Force had the deepest respect. We say we're American Air Force and we could practically run the place. There was a lot of that still left over from World War II. A lot of the people had the deepest respect for the American Air Force. Fortunately for me, and the guys I was with, we rode on your coattails in that respect.

DF: I think we overwhelmed them with our money in that regard.

JN: We were treated like kings because of you guys.

DF: They didn't like us to some extent. I recall on occasion going into some town and the pub would open up at 2:00 in the afternoon and close at 2:30 because it was out of booze. The Americans had come in and drunk them dry in a half an hour! And they were used to having it all afternoon and then opening up again in the evening.

JN: Sure! You don't do that. One must sip at the pub.

DF: That's not the way American GIs did it. That was one of the problems we ran into.

JN: I remember the English pubs.

DF: The ladies had to stay on one side and gents on the other.

JN: Oh, really?

DF: At that time, they did. They enforced it. Married couples and ladies were on one side. Single gentlemen were on the other. That's the way the pub was set up. t was even like that in Canada after the war.

JN: Married couples were on one side, with single ladies. How did you get together with the single girls then?

DF: Holler across or go outside. It wasn't like that in downtown London in the bars.

JN: One expected you to be prim and proper.

DF: The village pubs. Like in Cambridge, there were these inns downtown where people sat around in the lobby, like a hotel. They'd have their bitters and beer and ale. And they'd mix there. It wasn't segregated. But in the pubs, the sexes were set separate. Tradition. It was routine in Canada. I know it was in the 1950s from experience when I was up there.

JN: That gets me thinking, you used to see in the old movies where they had phones on the tables. Pick up the phone and talk to someone. Dial their table number. Do you remember that?

DF: Yeah, I don't think that started there.

JN: No, I don't think so. Probably in the States.

DF: Is there any other specifics you can think of that we've wandered away from?

JN: Well my last question was going to be if there was anything you'd like to add that we didn't cover already? Anything that pops into your mind?

DF: So many different incidents it would be difficult to do it in this period of time. Scary things weren't necessarily fighter planes and that sort of thing. We had one occasion I saw several mid-air collisions. You know, the complete loss of the crew. I remember one time, coming back from a mission, we were flying below the cloud level which meant that the upper man in the formation was just into the clouds and trying to stay out of it. And the bottom man, which was us, was just staying over the top of trees and fence rows and stuff. Because as the clouds went up and down and the hills went up and down, the formation would have to squeeze together. We were coming along side of a rather large hill. We were going around it and as we came around this hill, a whole flight of B-26s was coming around the other way. And they flew right through us. There was 36 of us and there must have been at least 25 of them. And they flew right between us. Everyone held positions and went right through. In five seconds, it was all over. It was one of the most frightening experiences I can recall. To have twenty-five airplanes coming right at you and go between you.

JN: They weren't fighters?

DF: No, they were the twin engine bombers.

JN: Twin engine bombers were flying in between you guys then?

DF: It was just a freak thing that happened instantaneously.

JN: What happened to radar control?

DF: There wasn't any of that. We had some remarkable innovations, but they didn't have any at that time on airplanes. We had radar and I flew in some of the aircraft with radar, but they were strictly for searching for targets on the ground. I looked through some of them. They were pretty dog-gone accurate. You could make out the Cooks lines and rivers and cities with them very well. But there wasn't anything on the airplane to scan for other aircraft. And besides, you were right on the deck. You wouldn't see anything anyways.

JN: Yes, you guys were flying low. There was some limitations. And you can't begin to compare it to what we've got today. Was it accurate?

DF: It was surprising good. We had radio altimeters, which we didn't really rely on. We had gyroscopes of course… Sperry types and Jack & Heintz type instrumentation. So we had an artificial horizon- the turning ball indicator. We had the flight slope systems. The flight slope indicator- so two needles, one going up and down and one going this way. And then they had lights along the runway as you were coming in. Visually, you could look at the lights along the runway and tell if you were high or low because if you were in the green, you were just right. If you were in the yellow, you were too high. If you were in the red, you were too low. These would allow you to visually assess as you come in. They weren't up too high. They were shrouded so you could only look at them from a certain angle. So if you weren't at the right angle, you wouldn't see them. We had approach systems. They were strobe lights. And they also had lights that, at night, would lead you right around the airport and right into the runway. Very high, intense lighting. If the fog was terrible, and you had to come in, in emergency situations, they used these oil pots. They were able to raise a quarter. They had one runway in particular set up for that. They were able to raise the fog up off the runway for about 10,000 feet so you could come in. They did have radar that they could use to observe you. If you got involved, or got lost or needed directions, they'd use searchlights on the clouds. You'd give them your identification and they would shine a search light on the clouds. You could see it and then they'd direct it toward you. They'd direct you around until you were at the right approach, then you'd come down out of the clouds. I don't think they do that over here, today.

JN: No, I don't think so.

DF: They had those types of techniques. We had identification- friend or foe type systems- so they could identify whether you were a friendly aircraft or not, with their radar. We had radar jamming devices we carried, which were electronic devices out on the wings that were supposedly to prevent radar from locking in on us. Of course, we dropped chaff all the time on our bomb runs to divert their systems. But we had no pressurized cabins, and we were using oxygen masks.

JN: What was your overall impression of the B-17?

DF: It was a truck.

JN: Steered like one too, huh?

DF: Yes, pretty much. It was a big heavy.

JN: You know, I was in one. I was surprised at the lack of space you had to work in. You had tight quarters. That had to have been a pain.

DF: I didn't mind at the time. You sat there and flew the thing. You didn't get up and walk around very much. At least in combat. In non-combat situations, I could go back to the radio and sack out or something.

JN: When you pre-flighted your aircraft, when you finally got into it, what were some of the pre-flight checks you had to go through? Was it a long list or was it basically "Lets get in and get out of here"?

DF: No, we'd go around and check the control surfaces, the tires, look at the manifold, the turbo type wheels, the turbine blades in other words. Things like that. Of course, the one I told you about that was damaged, it was internal and you can't see that. That was up inside.

JN: Were there any peculiarities about the aircraft that you said, Boy, I gotta watch this? Something that was a like a design flaw that you had to be careful of?

DF: Not that I recall.

JN: Any type of quirks?

DF: By the time they got over to where we were, they had the very latest equipment, latest technology. We were right there at the front of the whole operation. So any of the bugs and flaws that might have been in the aircraft earlier, we had them all worked out. We had the latest model at the time. We were flying with some different types of navigational devices. Do you know what the LORAN is?

JN: Yeah, it's the radio signal you guys fly in on.

DF: Well LORAN was a grid type set up that they were able to transmit signals. You could look on a scope and get a blip on the scope. You could pinpoint where you were rather accurately over the continent. Now the ships that use it today are dead for navigation over the water. But we were using it over in Europe too as a navigation thing.

JN: Yeah it's a radio signal they send out.

DF: Yes, from several different antennas. They cross, and where they cross you get a blip. You can determine by the frequency and size it up I guess, about where you are. They have charts set up that you can follow. You can tell your location within a few hundred yards. I don't know exactly. We had that system.

JN: Any other particular incidents that pop into your mind that you thought were unusual?

DF: I can think of another air raid. One of those times I missed our formation, and I had to go back and get another airplane. We were trying to catch up. We flew through a cloud. I wasn't flying. The pilot was flying. But I looked over and I saw another airplane coming in the cloud from the other direction. We flew into the cloud and there was a bunch of airplanes in that cloud! Another formation had just gone through it. We flew right through them, at 90 degrees to their direction. We just flew above one and below another. Right through. You'd look up and see the bottom of one and look down and see the top of another. That was hair- raising!
Another occasion we did something dumb was, we were flying a practice mission in the weather- some kind of overcast. We decided to go down to see what was underneath us because we weren't quite sure where we were. Rather than go through the trouble doing high-powered navigation. I don't even know if we had a navigator with us at the time. We dropped down through the overcast and there was a wall all around us. We dropped down in a bowl. The surrounding terrain was all higher than the clouds. We threw the throttles all the way forward and we prayed. We came out of there. God knows how!

JN: Where were you?

DF: I don't know! Neither one of us told anyone about it at the time. But those are the kind of weird things that happen and you survive. I'm sure it happens to other guys, too. I was just a fat, dumb co-pilot at the time. I did spend the last few missions as a pilot.

JN: How long did you stay in the military after that?

DF: I got out as soon as they let me. It was December. I went to college then. January 1, 1946 at Ohio State.

JN: What field?

DF: I started in Electrical Engineering because that's kind of thing we just do. For several reasons, I switched over to Industrial Engineering.

JN: Didn't want to go into flying in commercial airlines?

DF: I thought about it. In fact, I went to a couple airlines and tried to get interviews and they told me they weren't interested in combat pilots. As simple as that. The type of flying we did was not conducive to commercial aircraft type operations, and we'd get lost.

JN: They probably figured you'd developed some pretty bad habits. That kind of stuff.

DF: I don't know. Their reasoning didn't make sense to me, but I wasn't going to fight them. I was already set to go to school anyway. They weren't interested. I tried to stay on active flying status, but I wasn't able to do that either. I wrote to the secretary of the Air Force, as a matter of fact, and got a letter back that advised me to go to the nearest Flying Evaluation Board and request being put back on flying status. And could you believe I couldn't find a Flying Evaluation Board? I went to Wright Patterson. I went to Cleveland. I went to Lockborne. I didn't know where else to go, so I just gave up on it. I sandbagged with friend of mine down at Lockborne a few times. Lockborne was an active base at the time. So I never really flew again in the military. I would have, if they would have let me.

JN: Do you miss it at all?

DF: Not really. I would have done it if I had the opportunity. But I was kind of burned out.

JN: Yes, I could see that. Going through what you did and coming back…

DF: I had nothing against…. I would have done private flying if I'd been able to afford it. I didn't want to spend my money doing it. I'd rather do something else. I'd rather do the things I did. I got involved with aircraft and aerospace afterwards. I worked for North American Aviation which is a super company.

JN: What did you do with them?

DF: I got into the rocket motor portion of it. I was a test engineer with them. I went with a group down to Cape Canaveral for a while when they were doing the initial military rockets like the Jupiter. I was a base manager for that part of the company for a while. I got into the marketing side later. I was their head marketeer down in Huntsville, about 7 or 8 years. There's a NASA/ Army facility there. The arsenal and NASA are the same facility. I stayed with them until aerospace went down the tubes then I switched to a company over in San Francisco.

JN: Did you travel in the United States?

DF: I traveled a lot.

JN: How did you get back to Warren? Was it job related?

DF: Well, we were faced with a dilemma when the aerospace thing went bust. My wife didn't want to go back to Los Angles. I didn't a job as such and it would be pretty hard to find one. There were 100,000 engineers they said on the street at the time.

JN: When was this?

DF: 1969-1970. I left in December of 1969. A friend of mine suggested we come back up here. He had a little sales operation going. So I came here. That didn't work out. I was with him for a short time. Then I went with a company out in San Francisco. I worked for them for about 9 or 10 years afterwards. That was a good company. But I travelled all the time with them, and finally it was too much. So I had enough of that. I piddled around with a couple of local guys until I retired. For the San Francisco job, I was traveling very intensively all over the central part of the country. In fact, up into Canada and southern USA.

JN: You have a few kids?

DF: Two.

JN: Boys?

DF: One boy, one girl.

JN: Rich man's family!

DF: I don't know. That was all we could afford.

JN: That's what they call it the Rich Man's family: boy, girl, then stop.

DF: [laughs] That's what the wife says, stop.

JN: Well the library is getting ready to close on us. They said make sure you're out of there by quarter to nine.

DF: I ran and ran with this. I don't know if there's any value to any of this. There's a lot of detail. I thought you wanted to know what we did before we got on the airplane, all those terms of facilities before the briefing. We never got into any of that. We got off on…

JN: Real quick, we got about four or five minutes. Let's talk a little about that. What types of briefings did you get? What did you do prior to getting in the airplane?

DF: Well, we normally got…

[*1:38:39 tape cuts off to previous recording with Mr. Filkhorn (Oral History 1284), who was also a POW. This 20-minute portion of the interview discusses his imprisonment in Bucharest and liberation by the US B-17s in "Project R" in September 1945. He was taken to Naples and returned to the United States on a Liberty Ship to Brooklyn Army Base.*]