Gerald “Gerry” Snyder was born in 1921 in Preston, Minnesota, to Paul and Emma Snyder. He lived in Preston until he graduated high school in 1939, at which point he moved up to Minneapolis. Gerry attended Dunwoody Institute, a technical school, for two years. He then worked at US Air Conditioning for approximately two years, at which point the military draft seemed imminent. Gerry tried to enlist in the Air Corps, but was unable to, and was subsequently drafted into the Army. He still managed to get an assignment in the Army Air Corps. Following Basic Training, Gerry was stationed both in England and on the European continent during 1943-44; he was then posted back to the US. Gerry was discharged in 1945 after three years of active duty.

Following military service, Gerry and his wife Lois moved to Minneapolis, where they raised their family of six children. Gerry worked in the sheet metal trade for forty years, and finally retired in 1984. At the time of this interview (2001), he still resides in the Minneapolis area and enjoys garage sales, repairing engines, and other miscellaneous fix-it projects.
Interview key:
G: Gerald Snyder
L: Lois Snyder, Gerald's wife
DB: Dan Borkenhagen (interviewer)
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

DB: Okay, this is an interview with Gerry Snyder on October 28, 2001. Thank you very much for agreeing to the interview, Gerry.

G: Okay.

DB: I'm just going to start out with some basic biographical information, so readers can know a little bit about your history, where you've been and where you're going. Can you tell me where you were born and when that was?

G: I was born in Preston, MN, in 1921.

DB: Who were your parents?

G: Paul and Emma Snyder.

DB: Did you stay in Preston then until you graduated high school?

G: Yes. Then I went to Minneapolis when I was eighteen.

DB: What did you do in Minneapolis?

G: I went to Dunwoody [Technical Institute] for two years.

DB: So you went to Dunwoody for two years and what after that?

G: Then I went and worked for US Air Conditioning for I don't know, a year a half, two years. Then the Army grabbed me. (laughs)

DB: Okay, so you were in the service for a few years?

G: Three years and twelve days.

DB: Three years and twelve days. So that brought you through ’46?

G: Through ’45.
DB: Then after you were discharged, what did you do?

G: I worked in a factory, doing assembling and various things, for two and a half, three years. Then I went into sheet metal work.

DB: And you worked there for how long?

G: Oh, forty years.

DB: Until your retirement?

G: Yes.

DB: What year did you retire?


DB: And did you get married to Lois then before the war, or after the war?

G: Before the war. In 1942, on April 11.

Lois Snyder (wife): He remembered! *(laughter all)*

DB: How many kids did you have?

G: Six.

DB: Six kids. And a bunch of grandchildren now too?

G: Yes.

DB: What do you do now to keep busy?

G: *(chuckles)* I do everything. We go garage sale-ing, and pick up stuff to repair. I make things. Wood, steel, anything. And if you don’t have enough, somebody will find something for you. Neighbor wants me to overhaul an engine and stuff like that.

DB: I’m sure.

L: Grandpa fix-it for the neighborhood. Little boys would come down with their bicycles to get air in the tires and things like that.

DB: Thanks, this is probably all the biography that I need. Now I’m going directly to the era around World War II. First, December 7th, 1941. Where were you, and what
were you doing when you first heard the news [about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor]? 

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G: I was in Zumbrota, Minnesota, and I was just getting out of bed. (laughs)

DB: So you got out of bed and did your parents say something, or where were you?

G: No, I was with a friend of mine. We stayed overnight. We’d been down to Rochester the night before.

DB: What was the initial reaction there?

G: I don’t really know. We just figured we knew we were going to war then. We were both the same age and both had gone to high school together.

DB: How old were you at that time then?

G: Seventeen.

DB: Did you think about the draft right away?

G: No, I don’t remember what I was... I think I’d signed up for the draft by then. I’m not sure when it started.

DB: Your reaction wasn’t necessarily that you were worried, or were you thinking just about the country going to war?

G: Yes, that’s it. You don’t know right then, immediately, you just don’t know.

DB: How did you feel personally about the fact that the nation was going to war?

G: I’d have been a little excited about it. I wasn’t really worried about it.

DB: Okay, what kind of reactions did you notice of friends and family around you to it?

G: About the same thing. I mean, we were kind of isolated from the rest of the world, in a way, especially at that time. There wasn’t the airlines; we went on ships.

L: Preston is a real small town, too.

DB: So you thought your town was a little bit isolated?

G: No, I lived in Minneapolis, I just went down to see friends.
DB: What year did you actually enter the service?

G: November of –

L: – 1942.

G: It’s ’42, but is it November 3rd or something?

L: November 1st, or maybe in October.

G: No, I think it was November. I have it someplace.

DB: So around November of ’42?

G: Yes, it had to be around the end of October or the 1st of November.

DB: Okay, so previously to that, you had worked for a year?

G: Yes, about a year and a half, I think.

DB: Did you notice changes in the country during that year really?

G: Oh yes, it had been mostly men where I was working, then all of a sudden they started bringing in women. The men were disappearing.

DB: Okay, all the guys were getting drafted and entering the service. What was that like for you, all of a sudden working with a lot of women instead of a lot of guys?

G: Oh, I knew I was going. There was no doubt about that, because I was healthy and the right age and all this and that. Some of the guys, one of the boss’s sons, he was working there and got a deferment, because he was necessary. (sarcastically) He was as necessary as the guy sweeping the floor. (laughs) It gets you kind of mad that way.

DB: Did you see some guys getting out of it that it seemed kind of fishy?

G: Yes. There was a couple of them.

DB: Did you start to see the effects of rationing already that year?

G: No, I don’t think there was any rationing at that point yet.

DB: Okay, none at that point in time. So then in 1942 you were drafted.

G: You’d know a lot about rationing. (towards wife Lois, nearby)
DB: Yes, we interviewed Lois as part of this Oral History Project, and we learned a lot. I was just kind of curious for your perspective.

G: Yes, I don’t think we had rationing up to then.

L: No, because it was pretty much over by the time you came home.

G: No, we’re talking about before the war.

L: Before the war, no, not beforehand. Not then.

DB: So in ’42 you were drafted into the Army. What time did you actually have to head out?

L: Back up just a minute there. It was time for him to be drafted, but he wanted to get into the Air Corps. He went and applied to the Air Force, but he couldn’t quite pass the physical, one eye was 20-30. So then he went into the Army, and then got into the Air Corps from there.

G: I tried for the Navy and Marines both, too! (laughs)

DB: So around that time, you’d tried to enlist, but you weren’t able to enlist.

G: I’d talked to the Navy and they’d accept me for trying to fly. Except I said, “When would I go?” They said, “Tomorrow.” I said, “I’ll wait.” (laughs)

DB: You’d talked to the Army Air Corps and couldn’t get in?

G: No, because you had to have 20-20 eyes, and I had 20-30 in one eye.

DB: And so then you did end up getting drafted and you did end up going into the Army. What date did you enter service, or when were you called up officially?

G: That’s what we were saying, the end of October, around November.

DB: That’s when you had to show up, to head out?

G: Not to head out, we were to Fort Snelling [military induction center, in Minneapolis] and stayed there for a week.

DB: But right after that is when you showed up to Fort Snelling?

G: Yes.

DB: Do you remember the reaction of your family and friends, of Lois and all those people when you had to head out?
G: She was about the only family I had right here. My mother and sisters.

DB: What was it? I’m just curious what you saw of a reaction from Lois, when you headed out?

G: She was probably glad to see me go (laughs).

L: No, it was just it had to be. There was stuff that had to be sold, he had to sell his car before he could go, and I had to move back with my folks. Because by then I was pregnant, so it was just hard. We hadn’t accumulated anything much by way of stuff that had to be moved. So it was just the routine stuff of moving out of a place and going back.

DB: Did your parents react to the situation when you got drafted at all, or did they just kind of accept it?

G: People were accepting it then. It’s almost a year of being drafted, before that you sign up for the draft.

L: His dad had died when he was ten, so it was just his mom and his sisters.

DB: So you went to Fort Snelling for a week. What did you do in that week?

G: Tests. It was just tests. Maybe test to see what you’re good for or how smart you are. All this stuff.

DB: Written tests and physical tests?

G: All written tests. No physical tests. (pauses three seconds) Tests!

DB: After that week of testing where did you end up getting shipped?

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G: I asked for the Air Corps and they just laughed. They said they got everybody they need for the Air Corps. Then I came out [to Ft. Snelling] a week later, and they put in on the bulletin board where you were going. They had a little Air Corps to one side, and I was on it. The rest of them went to Washington and over to the Pacific. I was just lucky there.

DB: Were you almost a little surprised to see that Air Corps?

G: Yes. Anyway, then I went down to Miami Beach. I was down there, oh, I don’t know, three weeks.

DB: For your Basic Training?
G: I was there almost a month, for Basic Training and more tests. *(laughs)*

DB: When you went away for your Basic Training, what was it like going to a completely different part of the country? You’d been in Minnesota for your entire life up to that time, what was it like to go so far away from home from friends and family?

G: Didn’t bother me. Made new friends in the Army. There was guys I met in Fort Snelling, and some went along and some of them went other places.

DB: So there were some Minnesota guys along with you?

G: Oh yes.

DB: When you look back on the Basic Training time, was that a hard rigorous, physical time?

G: Not for us, we were Air Corps. *(laughs)*

DB: Okay, so you didn’t recall it as being too tough on you.

G: I got to swim the ocean, I got to take a row boat with a little horse and a half engine up one of the days and back.

DB: So you look at it as a positive thing almost?

G: Yes it was down there, it was kind of a vacation. They didn’t really bug us that much.

L: By then it was winter up here, you see.

DB: So you were getting out of it, huh.

G: Yes, nice and warm down there.

DB: I don’t know if you saw this at all at this time. Did you start to see different racial groups come into contact at all?

G: No. They were still segregated at that time; there was no mixing.

DB: You didn’t see any of the other minorities at that time then? Or did you see them in another place?

G: No, I didn’t ever really see minorities. We had a French Canadian with us, but he was almost black. And a couple of New Yorkers, you couldn’t hardly understand them. They spoke such Brooklynese.
DB: Some really think accents, huh?

G: Oh yes, speak fast and couldn’t understand them.

DB: Any Southerners then, with that thick drawl?

G: Oh yes. Some in there. We had everything. Some from Pennsylvania, New York, Kansas, but most of them were from Minnesota.

L: You see, Minnesota is kind of (***)

DB: So after your Basic Training there in Florida, where’d you go next?

G: Gulfport, Mississippi.

DB: What did you do there?

G: Studied for A & M school.

DB: A & M school, I’m not sure what that is.

G: A&E rather.

DB: A&E, which is what?

G: Airplane and engine.

DB: Okay. And so you were training to be a mechanic?

G: Yes.

DB: How long were you there?

G: About six months.

DB: About six months, so then it was it had been ’43 for quite some time, huh. Doing a lot of coursework, or what did they have you doing?

G: No. We went to school.

DB: At a formal, was there actually a college there that you were at, that you did, or was there an Army base that you were taking classes at?

G: It was an Army base that we were taking classes at.

L: Was it just book study?
G: Oh no, there was very little book study. We’d work on the airplanes and engines right there.

DB: Dirty hands and elbow grease, huh?

G: Yes. There was classes with it, but mostly hands on.

DB: So you were a bunch of the same guys then, or had you kind of been separated out?

G: No, pretty much the same.

DB: So you spent six months there training for your A&E experience, right. Where’d you go after that?

G: To California, which was Burbank.

DB: Burbank, California?

G: Lockheed Vega plant.

DB: What’s that?

G: Lockheed Vega.

DB: What did they have you doing out there?

G: More airplane studies. That was the, what was it. There was P-38 Lightnings [twin-engine fighter plane] and I’m not sure about the B-17 [four-engine heavy] bombers that we studied on.

DB: And so they just took you out to a point where they were building them and said, “We’ll look at these and teach you how to fix them”?

G: Yes, and there was schooling on the side.

DB: Did you see the guys assembling them then, too?

G: No, we didn’t get into the plants at all.

DB: You were just at the Army base close to there?

G: Yes.

DB: And you were there for how long?
G: Probably six weeks.

DB: So this is still just in ’43 somewhere.

L: Gerry, you were up there until May, when you came home when [our first child] Dickie was born.

DB: So it was right after that that you found out that Lois had had a baby, and you got leave to come home?

G: Yes, that’s when I got down on the Red Cross.

DB: Down on the Red Cross, what do you mean?

G: Well, they claim that they helped you and all this and that. I went to talk with them, and I heard, “Well, we can loan you money to get home.” But that’s all they would say.

DB: Did they help you to get home then or not?

G: No, they didn’t do a thing. Here they’re spouting about all the things they did for the servicemen, well, forget it.

DB: But you did get home for a little while?

G: Yes I had a ten-day pass, with three days on the train one way and three going back. (laughs)

DB: So about four days to see your baby.

G: I guess so. Yes, I was home about four days, I guess.

DB: So after you came back from there, where did you go then?

G: Ah, Denver. No, Salt Lake City.

DB: Is there an army base out there then?

G: That was what they call a repo depot.

DB: What’s that mean?

G: It’s just a staging area, so they, you sit there until they decide where they’re going to put you.

DB: So they keep you busy until they can figure out what they want to do.
G: Well, we were just there a week. Doing nothing. You just sat there and washed your clothes and caught up on things.

DB: Would you describe that as a relaxing time, or were you just impatient with it all?

G: Yes, never even got up to town, never even let us into town. I don’t know, the town, some of these towns didn’t want you in there.

DB: When they guys would go out, they’d just kind of get looked at poorly or…?

G: Oh yes. (laughs) You consider, you got a town, I don’t know how big Salt Lake City is, but you have a couple of thousand men come in there, they get to drinking and stuff, and they get in a little trouble, some of them.

DB: You saw some a little bit of trouble from some of the guys?

G: No, I never really did.

DB: You never saw a lot of guys get into trouble?

G: No, they were pretty good. There was a few wild ones, but most of the guys were pretty good guys.

DB: Did you get out to liberty to a lot of cities while you were in your training or did you?

G: Well, I saw Burbank and Hollywood. And at Gulfport we saw there and we went down to New Orleans.

DB: What kind of memories do you have of those leaves? Did you get to see a lot of new things for the first time?

G: Well, I got to see that street, what’s that street in New Orleans?

DB: Bourbon Street?

G: Bourbon Street. In New Orleans?

DB: That’s the famous one.

G: Yes, we were on that. It was the Army that took us down on a bus.

DB: Oh really, just to show it to you or what?

G: Well, just out of the kindness of their hearts, I guess. (laughs) I don’t know.
D: So you just walked around and saw the sights then?

G: Yes, we went down in the morning and probably stayed until six, seven o’clock at night, and then they brought us back. I don’t know how far it was, it wasn’t that far.

L: Yes, it probably wasn’t very far.

DB: Do you have any favorite memories of those little times while you were over, or on stateside training?

L: There was a crack in the Gulfport camp paper about him and a friend of his; that made a good pair coming home. They’d get drunk and bring each other home. You and Lubie.

DB: What was this?

G: It was a guy from Minnesota that I met waiting to go out to Fort Snelling. This was when we were leaving town, what was it, waiting for the train. We were through with Fort Snelling. He got into the same group that I did.

DB: And you had some fun nights together while you were there?

G: Yes, in Gulfport, I don’t know how big it is now, but then it was just a little burg. The guys would go in town; they’d cater to the soldiers. They had an awful lot of beer joints and stuff.

DB: Any other memories of those liberties? You had that one leave where you came back to see Lois. Was there any other leave that you had while you were over here stateside?

G: Oh yes, but that was later. See, after we were in Salt Lake City, they sent us over to Ypsilanti, Michigan, for B-24 [four-engine heavy] bombers. And then they sent us back to Lincoln, Nebraska. No, not Lincoln, they sent us back to another little, a little tiny town. Grand Island was it?

DB: Grand Island is a little tiny town in Nebraska.

G: Something, anyway. They were building a bomber base there, but they still had to make the runway, which at that time had to be twelve inches thick, they’re thicker now. But they were talking about the... the B-29s, was it? The runway, it had to be extra thick. And we were there about a week and a half or two, and then they decided they weren’t going to get it done. We’d just be sitting there all this time wasted. They’d take us out on twenty mile marches, or anything to keep us busy. Anyway, then they sent us back to Lincoln. We actually worked on B-17 and B-24 bombers then. We were there, I don’t know, maybe three, four weeks.
DB: Okay, so this is all probably still in ’43, getting towards late ’43? All these stops seem relatively short.

G: Yes. And I think I went directly from there overseas.

DB: Directly from Lincoln.

L: Yes, because I was all ready to go down to Lincoln to meet him for a weekend. A friend of mine was going to take care of the baby, my brother took the baby up to St. Paul up to my friend. And I took the train, I was going to take the train from La Crosse [Wisconsin] to Nebraska, and right about that time he got his orders for overseas. Instead of going to Lincoln I went out to...

G: I did come home once, see it’s got four on there (points at map of travels).

L: Yes, you came home.

G: This is when I came from California would be two, the other trip was another time I came home. So I was home once when I was in Lincoln, Nebraska. They gave me a three day weekend pass, and this was only good for 50 miles, so that would take me up to, what is that town on the crossroads there... I can’t think of it. It’s a main terminal; trains go out in all directions.

L: Omaha.

G: Omaha. Anyway I got there, and I was going to take the train to Minneapolis. And they got two MPs on every gate. And I had the three day pass, so I knew they wouldn’t let me through. I was at the limit of my pass then. So I just waited outside for a little bit. Finally two of them took off, I guess the train was ready to leave, and then I ran and made the train.

DB: And you got on up to see Lois.

G: Yes.

DB: And it was just a quick, short one day visit then?

G: Yes, it was a matter of four, five hundred miles.

L: It was the 4th of July when you came.

G: Was it?

L: Yes.

DB: Don’t remember that detail?
G: No.

DB: I’m assuming that all the travel you did around the country then, they sent you by train, correct?

G: Oh yes, you can see where I was (points to map again).

DB: (describing) This is just a route of the entire time Gerry was in the States here.

G: Yes, the ink numbers underneath is all the trips I made on the same line there. That’s why there’s four and two and stuff.

DB: Got to see a lot of the country then, didn’t you?

G: Yes, this is what they call the Southern Route, and this is the Northern Route (points to map again).

L: And the time where we wired him that I was in the hospital, he was between Gulfport Field, Mississippi, and we didn’t know where the hell he was going.

G: Oh no, I was in California by then.

L: He was headed to California, but we didn’t know where he was on the way. So it wasn’t until I knew where he was that I finally had the baby.

DB: You held out, eh?

L: Yes. Yes, somehow I did. (laughs)

DB: So I guess on the story we’re in ‘43. And you’re in Lincoln, and you said it was from there that you ended up heading out.

G: Yes, I was in New Brunswick, New Jersey for almost two weeks. And I wrote a letter to her, she wanted to see me. I was in New Brunswick, New Jersey, get on this –

L: – I think you wired.

G: Well, whatever.

L: Wired for me to come to the –

G: – Circle Motel in New Jersey. Anyway, what they would do every time a ship went out, to keep the civilians from blowing their noses, they would shut down the camp. They wouldn’t let anyone in town. So she was there a couple of days and they shut us down because the ship was leaving. And I wrote her a letter, and I didn’t realize
at the time that they were censoring the letters. And boy, they called me in the office and said, "You got your wife down here?" And I said, "Yes." "How did you get her down here?" I said, "I called her." Or whatever I did. He says, "Send her home, because you're not supposed to have her here."

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DB: So did you follow through with that?

G: No.

(laughter all)

G: It'd just be for two days and then, they'd shut it down again. If you wanted to know who was leaving and what ship, all you had to do was talk to someone in town. Because half of them worked down there at the base. They all knew.

L: That's the only way I knew when he left. The girls that worked at the hotel, they knew who was coming and going.

G: Pretty near all the women in town worked out there.

DB: So do you remember that day exactly that you shipped out?

G: Yes.

DB: What day was that?

G: Oh, where are we here. (points to map again) New York. It was October 27th, 1943.

DB: October 27th, 1943. What were you feeling on that day that you headed out then for overseas duty?

G: I don't know. Anxious to see what it was like over there. I was in the Air Corps, I didn't worry about that stuff. I went over on the [ocean liner] Queen Mary.

DB: Did you go over on the Queen Mary?

G: Yes.

DB: We interviewed another guy that went over on the Queen Mary, too. What was that like, for you trip across the sea? Pretty nice?

G: Three days and we were there.
DB: Three days. That’s a pretty quick trip.

G: And that includes zig-zagging.

L: And that book that I gave you, with stories about cruises, there’s one story that’s very interesting, about the *Queen Mary* making these trips.

G: They tore it all up. It was designed for 1200 people or something like that. Well, they put 22,000 guys on it. The dining room was three stories high, so they put steel poles from the floor to the ceiling, and then every two foot they had a bunk. Four guys on the top, they had to climb up that bunk, and if they every fell they’d kill themselves.

DB: Yes, I heard someone else say there were ten bunks or something like that.

G: I was in a cabin for one person, and there were six of us in there. We just had to slide by each other if you wanted in or out. And then the Germans, I mean the Englishmen, they took care of the ship of course. It was their ship, and they served all the meals. And I think all them guys knew was apricots. It seemed like everything you got was apricots. *(chuckles)*

DB: How did that sit with you on the journey, did you have any trouble getting your sea legs?

G: No, I never got sick at all. The *Queen Mary* was a big, huge ship, and nothing bothered it. But we got nice seas.

DB: Okay, and there weren’t any real worries on the trip over about being sighted by a U-Boat or something like that. You didn’t think about that?

G: No.

DB: So you got over there, it’d be November ‘43, right?

G: On November 2nd, we hit the Firth of Clyde. I was in Scotland.

DB: Did you go from Scotland to somewhere else?

G: Yes, then I went, on the 4th I was down at Sorbridge.

DB: That’s in England?

G: Yes, that’s in England.

DB: Where approximately is that?
G: Wait, I was in Swindon [England] first. I was there for three weeks.

DB: What did you do in Swindon for three weeks?

G: Just sat there. They were sending a mass of people over there, and they don’t know what to do with them.

L: Figure out where to feed them, and where to clean up after them.

G: But then we left to Sorbridge. We were only there four days, then we went to Watersham. We were there for a long time, so that’s where they formed the group that I was in.

DB: What was that group?

G: The 32nd Mobile Repair and Reclamation.

DB: 32nd Mobile Repair and Reclamation. What did that unit do?

G: That means if a plane went down, we went out and got it.

DB: Then it was salvaged?

G: We’d salvage what pieces could be salvaged, that could be used on another plane.

DB: So where did you guys, you operated just around England?

G: Yes, in England we kind of helped the guys repairing planes and stuff. We helped them because there really wasn’t that much for us to do in England.

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DB: There weren’t a lot planes going down in England, were there?

G: If they belly landed, we could salvage them, but if they flipped over and smashed everything, there was no sense in trying. We’d just take the radio and machine guns out of them, and forget it. Just scrap them.

DB: And you were there for quite some time you said?

G: Yes, I was there from December [1943] until March [1944].

DB: What other memories of that time do you have? Was it just work?

G: Yes, just a lot of work.
DB: What was an average day like for you?

G: I’m trying to think. We were there in the winter for a little while. I went out on a couple of pick up jobs, but the rest of it was just helping the other outfits. See, we were attached to another regular squadron of planes.

DB: What was that squadron, do you remember?

G: I’m thinking 362nd, but that doesn’t sound right. 920th Air and Engine Squadron (reads from book). It was an engineering squadron. That was the 502nd Air Service Group.

DB: What was their main purpose, did you know?

G: They had planes that were flying, and they had the crews to repair them. We were helping the crews repair them and get them ready for flight.

DB: Did you see the planes coming back, damaged from battle?

G: Yes, they had bullet holes in them, some of them. We had one plane, one bullet, and it had hit back in the tail. First of all, these were P-39s [Aircobra single-engine fighter plane] they put us on over there. And we had trained on bombers over here. P-39s were a big, fat nosed radio engine plane, fighter bomber. And there was one bullet went through the tail. There was an inter cooler in the back for the turbo super charger, it went through that, hit the rear armor behind the pilot, went through his shoulder, hit the front armor in back of the instrument panel, and I don't know where it went from there. Anywhere it shattered every instrument in that panel. So they scrapped the plane out. It was that bad. One bullet.

I saw planes come back where—it was a radial engine that flew up there—where they had one master cylinder that held the main connecting rod, and the rest of them went off of that. One came back where the Germans had hit the cylinder on one. Broke the bolts loose on it, so this cylinder is popping up and down, hitting the cowlimg. Somehow the guy brought it back.

DB: Still made it back.

G: Another one, the pilot dove to get away from a couple of Germans. The aircraft is designed for not over 400 miles per hour, or something like this. And he dove it down to about 450 miles per hour or something like that. He got back, but they junked it out. He had pulled all the rivets out in the wings and some in the fuselage, from the force of the dive. Vibrated too fast.

DB: Lucky to get back, I’d say.

G: Yes, you’d see a lot of things. You’d see bullet holes. They had what they called cherry rivets, I think they were called. You could put them in the hole and then put a
soldering iron or some special gun in it, and then they’d explode in it and expand. This way we could rivet a patch on an airplane without getting inside it. You couldn’t get inside it.

L: This is interesting, because this is some stuff I’ve never heard.

DB: So you were there for three months or so, working mostly I guess then on repair of planes that came back. I’m not sure, at this stage in the war there probably weren’t any German planes coming over England, were there?

G: No, I think they’d pretty well cleaned them out by then.

DB: Where did you go after this, Gerry?

G: Let’s see. Down there in Bournemouth, near Ringwood. Okay, that’s in March [1944]. Down there in Bournemouth. I don’t know what we were there for.

DB: Bournemouth did you say?

G: Yes, that’s on the southeastern territory then. I got near Ringwood then, so I think we must have moved then. This is where they were bulking up for going into France. We had an awful lot of troops in one little area.

DB: So you saw a lot of the guys gathering around.

G: March, then of course July 6th, they went over. I didn’t. I mean June 6th. Half of us stayed in England, half went over, on probably June 8th or so. Because they went over, and the engineers went and bulldozed some fuel dumps. Planes would go over there and fly out with that fuel in the day and come back to England in the night so they could get serviced. So half of us had to stay there and service them at night, and the other half serviced them during the day in France. I didn’t get over to France until June 29th.

DB: So June 29th, 1944, you came over to France. Was there a more established air base there then?

G: Yes, at Ste-Mare-Eglise [site of paratroop landings during the D-Day invasion]. They showed that on movies, where a paratrooper got caught on the bell tower of a church. That’s where we were. I went to church in that little church. We were just outside of town in an apple orchard. They bulldozed down a big part of the orchard and put down steel plates [for the runways].

DB: For the air strips?

G: Yes, they were heavy. The planes weighed nine tons when they were loaded.
DB: What planes were these, the bombers?

G: The P-39s. Right at one end of where our tents were, there was a German tank. I don’t know what happened to it, we couldn’t see anything wrong with it. They must have just abandoned it for some reason or other.

DB: So at this time, were you guys actually doing more reclamation?

G: That’s when we started.

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DB: What did your unit do in that regard?

G: When a plane come in damaged, we’d try and fix it. We were still helping out on the other outfit, the bomber group. We were still acting as mechanics, we’d change engines and stuff like that. These planes happened to have an awfully big propeller on them, they were high powered engines. And they’d go up just a little too high, the propeller would tip, and the Air Force said, if a propeller were hit, you changed the engine, because it could break something, when they’re up in the air, if something broke, then it’s too bad. So we helped to change a lot of engines, and repaired them and stuff like that.

DB: Did you guys ever have to travel very far to go after planes that had gone down?

G: Oh yes. Well, see, when we were in, when we first hit France, we were on the peninsula. They were fighting on both sides of us, and we were in the middle. In fact, we were in front of the artillery, because every time the artillery would go off, (*** in and out.

DB: What was it like at that point in time? You weren’t directly in combat, but did you see combat around you to some degree?

G: No, we, of course the end of the peninsula there, you could see a curtain of fire.

DB: Where the artillery was going back and forth?

G: No, it was machine guns. Tracer bullets. The other end was Cherbourg [France]. They were still fighting in there. One day four of us went down there, and they kicked us out. They told us they were still fighting there, and to get out.

DB: You guys headed down there to get a plane or something?

G: No, just to look. Then after that, it was quite a while, once they got started out of the peninsula or Cherbourg, they really went to town. They started going across France and, let’s see... we stayed there quite a while. June 30th, September 18th
before we went up to St. Nazaire [France]. I don’t know what that was for, because September 26th we went up to Dol [Dol-de-Bretagne].

DB: [Dol-de-Bretagne] was where in France?

G: It’s up in the northern part [actually more west].

DB: So during this whole time, you’re just kind of following where they tell you to do some more work, in your group?

G: Yes, we bypassed Paris. We went right around Paris.

DB: So you never got to see Paris?

G: No, not at that time, no, but I saw it later. On June 4th, wait a minute, I don’t know where we’re going here… okay, this is 1945. We stayed a long time at [Dol-de-Bretagne]. June 4th of ’45 I was in Luneville [France].

DB: So you were in [Dol-de-Bretagne] for quite a few months then?

G: Oh yes. Yes, we used to go out and pick up planes then. We’d go out and they had one big machine shop truck, we had a smaller truck and a jeep. And I think five, six guys would go out. Then when we got the plane all torn apart, we’d call in the engineers, and they would come in a big flatbed trailer and a tractor, and a crane. They’d go right up on the flatbed and haul it into the airbase.

DB: It would be scrapped out or whatever?

G: Well, if they needed a wing or something, say one was shot too bad, just take it off and put on another one that we’d salvaged.

DB: Did you guys ever see German fighters, too, that you looked at, or did you just dealt strictly with your own planes?

G: We just dealt strictly with our own. There was a, you’d see one once in a while that had crashed or something, but it was usually burned. But somebody picked those up, too, so they couldn’t use them again, I don’t know what. I knew one sergeant who used to go out and… Germany was short of babbit, which is a bearing material, and they started using silver. He used to go out and find a German plane, and he’d smash the engine all to pieces and get the bearings out of it. Then he’d find somebody, a French jeweler, and have them make all kinds of jewelry out of it, and send it back to his wife. I guess he was selling some, too. One of these guys was an operator.

DB: He found some ways to make money during the war as well.
G: I don't really know what he did.

DB: So that last place, [Dol-de-Bretagne], ended up taking you all the way up until '45 you said. And from there you went where?

G: We went to Stuttgart [Germany].

DB: What month was that that you ended up in Stuttgart, Gerry?

G: On May 3rd. Okay, Stuttgart, we stayed there until we were ready to go home.

DB: So Stuttgart was your final stop?

G: The war was over with in May. Wait a minute, was it August? No, that was the war with Japan.

DB: On the 8th of May 1945 was the end of the war in Europe.

G: Okay, something is wrong here, I must have my figures wrong. Because the Battle of the Bulge was in winter [1944-45].

DB: Correct. It was right around Christmas [1944].

G: Right. I remember, they took all the non-essential men in the outfit, radio men, hydraulic men and sent them to the combat outfits. And the rest of us had to stand guard all around.

DB: So you were deemed an essential person? You had to guard duty, while other able bodied fighter were sent –

G: Well, they weren’t fighters.

L: He was a sergeant by then.

G: Yes, I was a sergeant then. The guys they didn’t consider essential or, whatever, they’d send them out and they’d give them, tell them how to load a machine gun or how to load a rifle and up to the line they went. They needed people.

DB: So did you see some guys you knew that were sent?

G: Yes, I knew most of them in the outfit. There were only a hundred men or so.

**End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.**

DB: Was it tough to see guys that you’d gotten to know heading out towards the front?
G: It was war, and you knew that. You didn’t see them shot in front of you or on the sides like the infantry did. As far as I know, I only got shot at once, and I didn’t know from where or when. All we know is we heard the crack of a rifle, and the engineers told us to get out of there.

DB: Where was this?

G: Some place in Germany. Wherever we went, we had to check in with the engineers. They would come and tell us what’s going on and where everybody was and all this and that. They would come out and tell us to get out of there if somebody was coming our way.

DB: For example, if there were military formations coming your way?

G: Yes.

DB: So because of these guys, you never came into close contact with Germans, other than one time when a sniper was around or something?

G: The only guy in our outfit I knew that got hurt was when we were still in England. This happened to be right before lunch. One of the pilots came over and he accidentally tripped his machine gun as he was coming into land. And they landed, came right over our camp. We were out on the airfield and they had these few guys, you know office guys, and a few cat cleaners or whatever you want to call them. Not too bright of guys, but they were used for various things. He was walking down the center of the tents, and this guy tripped his machine gun accidentally. The bullet hit him in here, hit his bone and bounced off, because it was already pretty well spent. I don’t think he had an IQ much over 20. *(laughs)* He thought he was really something.

DB: Where were you when the war ended?

G: Well, –

L: – you said you were in London for something.

G: Oh yes. They sent us back to north of London about thirty miles for a turbo supercharger school. This was two weeks before the war ended, in April [1945]. So the war ended as we were coming home. There were six or seven or eight of us, and the sergeant in charge of us, in charge of getting us lined up to go back over—I think we flew back over, I’m not sure—anyway he lined us all up and takes a good look at us and says, “I’ll meet you here in three days.” So we all just took off wherever we wanted to go. This was in London.

DB: Where did you go then?
G: I don’t remember. I remember Piccadilly Square, and some big buildings. I was at Versailles, too. But that was in Paris.

DB: No, that’s actually outside of Paris.

G: Yes, I saw that, too. But anyway, we got to, we all went back there, I think we flew back over to France, to right outside of Paris. We all met in Paris and took a couple more days off. Then we got on a train, got up just about to where we were, and then took a truck there. Nobody was there. They’d moved on. They’d moved on to, I don’t know, Reims [France].

DB: So you had to go find your unit?

G: We had to go find our unit. (laughs)

DB: There was no anger that you hadn’t gotten there in time was there?

G: No, they didn’t know.

DB: They had no idea that you guys had been gallivanting around the French countryside.

G: They probably didn’t much care, because the war was over.

DB: Okay, so this after the war in Europe was over, or after the whole war was over?

G: No, in Europe. That’s another story.

DB: Okay, let’s keep going then. What did you do in this next period?

G: I should have said Reims. Because Reims was in the northern part, the northwestern part. We went up there to come home, and sat there for over a month. This was September [1945], yes. We sat there for over a month waiting for a ship. It was a point system. The guys with a high amount of points had been over there and got a bunch of stars and all this and that, they could fly home. Some of them flew home with the planes that went back. I happened to be right in the middle, so I had to wait for a ship. The guys with the low points were going back to the States, to retrain, then go to Japan. Well, what happens, they’re sending all these guys with the low points on the ships back, so they could retrain and send them to Japan. In the meantime, the war in Japan is over, so they’re sitting there, they’re home. All the guys wrote to me, “Oh, he’s out, he’s sitting there.” (laughs)

DB: So finally, you did get a ship in Reims?

G: Not in Reims, no. They finally sent us down to Marseilles [in southern France]. And we were there, I don’t know, two three weeks, and then they sent us out.
DB: Now during all this time they had you sitting, what did sitting mean for you guys? Did they have you doing some jobs yet?

G: They didn’t have us do a thing, you just had to stay in camp. Just in case. Because they never knew, if a ship came available they’d put you on it and send you. At that time, they wanted to get Japan over with. While we were in Reims it got over with.

DB: So, it was just a lot of boredom?

G: Yes, pretty much. There wasn’t anything to do. You weren’t really near a town. I say Marseilles, but that was the area, we were probably thirty or forty miles away from it. You can’t...

DB: Were there any other trips besides this time around Paris that you remember while you were over on the continent?

G: I went back to Paris on a three day pass one time, but I can’t even remember what that was. What the deal was or anything.

L: *(laughs)* He was in a beer fog.

G: Yes, well, I remember the Champs Elysees and how nice that was.

DB: Are there any other experiences in Europe that really stick out in your mind, meeting people or seeing some area that really stuck out?

G: Saw Marlene Dietrich.

DB: Who?

G: Marlene Dietrich.

DB: Not a name I know.

*(Lois and Gerry laugh)*

DB: Something that’ll date me, I see. *(laughs)*

G: It sure will.

DB: Who was Marlene Dietrich?

L: She was a superstar, back years ago.

G: She was a German, in Germany she started.
DB: Was she a movie star or something?

G: Oh yes. She defected and came to this country. She got her big name over in this country and she went back entertaining the troops.

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DB: Okay, so she was over for a USO show or something?

G: Yes. It was a USO show.

DB: So you were at that USO show?

G: Yes.

DB: What do you remember about those USO shows, were those a big deal?

G: I saw very few of them. I only saw a couple of them. When we were in England, we used to go to little theater plays. I used to like to go to them. Those English were good at those little plays.

DB: Little plays and stuff, Shakespeare and whatnot.

G: Not Shakespeare, no. (laughs) Well, when I was little here in the States I went to the same thing.

L: It was vaudeville. You wouldn't know what the old Alvin was like.

G: No, this was not vaudeville. Just comedies.

DB: Gerry, do you remember the day that Victory in Japan was achieved, so victory for the entire world? The 15th of August 1945.

G: I don't remember that day at all.

DB: So that day didn't sort of stick in your mind, as in you were just sitting there waiting for a ship to go home.

G: Right, that's all there was!

DB: The guys that got sent home to fight in Japan actually ended up home before you?

G: That's what made you mad. These guys are home and out of the Army because the war's over with and you're sitting there. And you knew you were going to get out when you got home. And that's the same, they sent us back, I went out of
Marseilles, and I got to Camp Shanks. We were there three days, and they said they had such a backlog it would take another week or two to get us out. So they sent us to Fort Knox, Kentucky, and we were out the next day. Of course, there’s no way of getting anywhere from Fort Knox. So one of the guys chartered a bus, and they all chipped and took the bus to Chicago. Of course from Chicago you can go anywhere. So the guys that went east, went east. We went to Minneapolis, and the guys that went west, went way out.

DB: So you and a few of the guys from Minneapolis ended up heading back together on a train or something.

G: Yes, from there we took a train. That’s all there was, buses and trains. There were no airplanes in those years.

DB: In this time you were heading back, whether it was on the ship or on the buses and stuff, what were your feelings at that time? I mean you knew you were out, you were heading back. Was it excitement to get home finally, was it just impatience, or sick of the war, or all those things?

G: All those things. *(Lois and Gerry laugh)* All of it. Everything. Now we came back on a liberty ship, if you ever heard of those.

DB: Did you go over on a liberty ship?

G: Just coming home. And that, it was a little rough, they were a little small compared to the Queen Mary. And I was on CQ, that’s Charge of Quarters. I had to go around to see, they still had a few guards and stuff, you had to check up and see if anybody was dying or whatever. And you’d find the guys in the front of the ship and the back of the ship were seasick. I forget where I was, but I never got seasick on that thing. Even though that thing was rolling and porpoising.

DB: You took to the seas well, then?

L: The further down you are and the closer to the middle of the ship that you are, the less you’re likely to be bothered.

G: I think you want to be at waterline. Anyway, that was quite a bit longer; that was five or six days it took to get home.

DB: Well, you finally got home then, to Minneapolis. Do you remember what day that was?

G: Was it November 15th? I didn’t put that down. November 4th was in Fort Knox, so it was probably two or three days after that. I’m thinking on November 3rd I got home for some reason.
DB: So what was the first reaction when you got home and got to see Lois and your child?

L: Food! *(laughs)*

DB: So you were just excited to eat regular food again?

G: I guess so. Pork chops and apple pie.

DB: *(to Lois)* Is that the meal you had for him?

L: That’s it.

DB: So did you get to see the rest of your family, or your mom then, relatively soon thereafter or?

G: Yes, she didn’t live too far away.

L: Mom just lived across campus.

G: She was on one side of the University of Minnesota and we were on the other side. It wasn’t near as big as it is now.

DB: Was it just good to get home and see people then?

G: Yes.

L: Get a car so he could find a job.

G: Yes, I just stayed around and laid around for a month, because they gave you a month’s pay.

L: I think you were looking for work before then even.

G: Was I?

DB: So for the next month or so, you didn’t work, you took time to relax, to be with your wife and child?

G: Yes, and I looked for a car.

DB: Was it kind of hard getting back to the civilian life after spending so long in the army and being regimented?

G: No. Well, you’re were young, you adapt to Army life in a hurry.
DB: Couple questions to look back on that time, during the war, just to look back on it as a whole. Were there any buddies, individuals, or officers that made an impact on you during the war? Good friends or good officers that you remember well?

G: Not really, I didn't really form that good of friendships. There's Loobie, he's my best friend, I still see him through the years once in a while. I haven't seen him for about ten years now. He was in the paper, they had a big article on him. (pauses three seconds) Outside of that, I saw a few of them after the war, but not for many, many years.

DB: Were there any officers that you remember being real important to you?

G: Oh no, we didn't have much for officers. Our CO was a drunk and the second in command, the executive officer, he was a dime store manager. He was running the outfit. The CO was a rich guy, his parents were rich or whatever, but he was just a drunk. He was drunk all the time he was there.

There were several guys, they got in because they had college educations and... They wanted me to go through officer school, because I did good on the tests. Down in Fort Snelling and then down in Miami Beach, both places. Then when I got to California, they called me in and said, “Do you want to go to officer school?” And I said, “No way.” I didn't want that.

DB: You didn't want the responsibility, some of it, or you just wanted to work on the planes.

G: I enjoyed working on the planes. (pauses three seconds) I don't know, I just didn't want to.

DB: Didn't want to deal with men instead.

G: No.

L: This is the guy that had worked on motors and stuff with dirty hands from the time he was a little kid. Taking bicycles apart, taking motors apart. He tried to fix welders and stuff. The idea of sitting in school was...

G: It was only ninety days, they called [those young officers] “ninety day wonders” in those days.

DB: Those were the guys who were...

G: The guys who were converted into officers. They preferred somebody who could pass the test or had some knowledge of, like the dime store manager, or one of the guys had a real good education, his folks were millionaires. Which was really something in those days. He was completely and absolutely worthless and unfit to
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be an officer. He didn’t want to do anything, he didn’t want to tell anyone anything. Or anything like that.

DB: He didn’t know how to be a good officer?

G: No he didn’t, well, he probably knew, but he didn’t want to do it. He was a nice guy to talk to, but he just didn’t want to really be an officer. I suppose he got pushed into it because of his education.

DB: So you said you still do see a couple of these guys every once in a while?

G: No, I haven’t seen any for years and years.

DB: But you did see some of them a little after the war?

G: Yes.

DB: Did you make an effort to, like you wrote letters to them, or was it just you run into them?

G: Just accidentally run into them.

DB: Did you ever go to reunions or anything like that?

G: No. We were from too many different places. I mean there was only a few, me and a few from Minnesota. There was an awful lot of them from the East, from New York and Pennsylvania and so on. And some from, I don’t know, they were down South someplace. We had a complete mixture.

L: He wasn’t a social butterfly, he really wasn’t. He belonged to the American Legion for years, and he never attended the meetings.

DB: How was it staying in touch during the war? I mean you had a wife and a child over here...

L: He was good about writing.

G: I was?

DB: Do you remember writing him much?

L: I sent him packages.

DB: Gerry, what was it like getting those packages, and what did she send? Do you remember?
(laughs) Candy bars. You don’t even see them anymore, they don’t make them big. They were big, a pound, a pound and a half.

L: It just seemed like it. Big Hersheys and...

G: They were that long. *(holds hands a foot apart)*

L: No, they couldn’t be that long.

G: Yes, they were.

L: I only sent a little box like this *(makes figure in air much smaller than his)*.

G: You sent a box that square a lot of times. *(with hands repeats original, larger figure)*

L: Gerry, I could only send five pounds. That’s all it could be. I tried to get as much in there for that five pounds. I think in those days I was living with his mom for a while. I’d take it downstairs to the Post Office and weigh the box. Then come back and fill it up or take some out, to make it right on the nose. They used to tease me that the stamp would make it too heavy!

DB: Was it always exciting to get those packages then?

G: Yes. Well I forgot now, when I was supposed to come home, they sent three or four of us out on a jeep to an airbase to fix up some planes. Nothing shot up about them, just to fix them up. We went out to this airbase and it was an old Piper Cub. This one had some fabric ripped out. Outside of that, we didn’t know what else was wrong. And they had another plane, I think we fixed that one, I don’t even remember what that was. Then they had a B-25, which was a light bomber. We fixed that up, and the next day I was supposed to go up on this bomber as a crew chief, with a Colonel who was a pilot; he was a nice guy.

In the meantime, during the night, we went and fixed up this Cub. He was going to fly that for us the next day. That night, I’m washing up, it’s about 7:00 at night, and the lieutenant from our outfit comes in, and he says, “Get your clothes, get your gear, you’re going.” This is 7:00 and I got everything ready, probably 7:30 by then. We went back, I got back to the base by about 12:00, and had to wake up all these guys and get the stuff checked in that I had to return to the Army. Guns and all this stuff and got a lot of bad people. But anyway, I was going home, I had to be ready on the next morning 6:00 on a truck. It was about 2:00, I got to bed. Next morning at 6:00 we get in the back of a truck waiting to go someplace, this was when I went up to Reims. Sat there for over two hours, waiting for that truck to move.

DB: So it was all this hassle, for no reason.
G: I didn’t get my flying time. I just sat there for two hours in a flatbed for two hours.

DB: You missed going up in a bomber and a Piper and all that stuff. New theme: Do you remember getting information about the war while you were there, like *Stars and Stripes* newspaper and stuff like that?

G: Yes, we got that.

DB: How important was it to you to get that?

G: Oh, that was real important. They’d tell you what they’re doing, where they’re going. As much as they could. They couldn’t say, we’re going to go here, or something. They’d just tell you that they’d gone through this town and were headed for the next one or something.

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DB: Do you remember feeling limited in what you could say to your wife when you were writing to her?

G: Everything was censored; you couldn’t say anything. You couldn’t say where you were, or what was going on, or anything.

D: Did you try to push it at all?

G: No.

DB: Or try to communicate anything to her?

G: They just blanked it out if you did. I’m sure you got some stuff that was blanked out.

L: There wasn’t too much blanked out, because he just didn’t say much. They were just little short letters.

G: They had the V Mail, the Victory Mail, real little. It was a little sheet.

DB: I’m guessing what you mean, you’d write a letter, they’d take photographs of it and send it to the US.

G: They’d send it in a little paper.

L: They’d photograph it and make it very small so they could send a whole lot of them. We’d get a, get it blown up again to the written size.
DB: Yes, I’ve seen one of those; my grandma had one of those she showed to me.

G: I sent home a crate. Remember the crate I sent home with the rifle, pistol, and helmet.

DB: This was German stuff?

G: I don’t know what I did with that helmet. Sword, I still got the sword.

DB: Where’d you get this stuff?

G: In Germany.

L: The thing was, he made a nice wooden box, crate for them. But it had broken open completely, they had used the rifle strap and it, they had used that to tie up the package. It had illegal stuff in it, too! *(chuckles)*

DB: Well, this was stuff you’d found in Germany while you were over there?

G: Liberated. *(laughs)* Sort of, yes. The Germans had to turn in all their guns, any kind, whatever. This usually went into some big room someplace, and the French would guard it. There were a couple of us riding around one day. We got a warrant officer. He was a scrounger, he had everything under the sun. He’d go out every day with a jeep until they stopped him. Anyway, he was telling us about this place where there were guns, so we went there. There was this big room, heaped up probably six, eight foot high with guns. Big mound of guns, and two Frenchmen guarding it. Every jeep had a five gallon can of gas in the back of it. So we went in. He spoke a couple words of French, they spoke a couple of words of English. We were trying to say, what did they want for this gun or that gun. I had a beautiful shotgun and a beautiful rifle, sporting rifle picked out, and an air rifle, and a German Mauser [pistol]. And a sword.

L: The Luger [German pistol].

G: No, I didn’t get the Luger there.

L: There was a Luger.

G: I know, but I didn’t get that there. Anyway, I got all this stuff all picked out, over to one side and we were going to trade it for a five gallon can of gas. And their officer walked in. He took one look at all the stuff we had, and I mean this is a beautiful rifle, a beautiful shotgun. Goes back. I still got the air rifle. I sold the Mauser. I don’t know what I did with the Luger. I sold that. Oh, I sold that to a sporting goods store. I had a French .32 [caliber], and I sold that to somebody. I still got the sword, and the air rifle, and several bayonets.
DB: So you sent that home and shipped that to Lois.

G: I can’t remember what happened to that helmet.

L: I don’t remember a helmet.

G: Then it just must have disappeared, that’s all. *(a bit exasperated)* We weren’t supposed to send pistols home, so I wrapped the pistol in newspaper and put it inside the helmet. Because they claimed they x-rayed all the packages. I know they didn’t, I finally found that out. Hell, the helmet must have disappeared when the box got broken open. I don’t remember it being home.

L: Well, I don’t remember the helmet at all.

G: And then they had these Ghurkas, Indians, they were from India, a hill tribe of some sort. All had beards and they were dark colored and they were mean looking. The Germans hated them, because they’d take knives and go after the Germans. They were real fierce fighters. Someplace we were at, they had thirty or forty of them just camping out alongside of us. One of the guys went over and talked to them, and they had a lot of pistols they’d liberated from the Germans. And they sold them. So I went over and talked to one of the guys. I got a little French .32 [caliber pistol] out of him. I brought that home with me.

Now when we got home, this sergeant that’s briefing us, or debriefing us or whatever you want to call it, he said, “Now if any of you guys got any pistols or ammunition with you?” Nobody said a word. He says, “If you have, you can throw them over that little wall in the back of the tent and nobody will say anything. But if you’re caught with them, you’re in trouble.” Nobody threw anything over that wall. We all knew it was a scam. I brought the thing home. Nobody checked me or nothing.

DB: Did a lot of guys get a lot of things, little trinkets, memories from the war?

L: He sent me a beautiful purse from France, and a pretty little bracelet.

G: That purse was from Frankfurt [Germany], wasn’t it?

G: Yes, this was in Frankfurt Germany. I don’t know why we were there, to pick up a plane or something. They put us in a hotel at night. And I didn’t think anything of it, but in the middle of the night, things started creaking and groaning like the place was going to fall down. We went out in the hall and walked down the hall a ways. And here right in the middle of it, a bomb had fell, and it had just torn this whole place up. And here’s all this wood hanging and everything else, creaking away.

DB: A live bomb?
G: No, one that had blown. Boy, that was something else. All that creaking and groaning. I guess it was safe enough. Right in the middle of the hotel, it was a good sized hotel. We were back a ways from the edge, from the hole. They figured it was safe, I guess.

L: Yes, he sent me the purse and some perfume. This was a big purse. And one day, we had to register the pistols; they had to be registered. I took them down, put them in the big purse, and took them down to the police department. There was an old soldier sitting over there, and I was talking to the desk sergeant to show him I had these purses. I opened the purse and started pulling out guns. And the old soldier was laughing, because here was the policeman going, “Oh my!” (laughter all)

G: You disassembled it, didn’t you?

L: Yes, I showed him how to, how the Luger came apart, to use it, it had a smaller barrel.

G: It had a .22 barrel in it.

L: Used .22 rounds in it.

G: There was a new breech block, a new clip, and a barrel that fit inside the other barrel. It was .22 caliber. They used it for target practice or something. I sold that whole mess for $25, and it’d be worth five, six, seven hundred now.

L: I remember the guy came, to the door and I said –

G: That wasn’t the pistol.

L: – you have to have a permit to buy it, before I can sell it to you. Because they told me that at the police department. Well, he was a big wig in someplace; he didn’t need to have a permit. I said, “Oh yes you do.” He went and left and got the information then, because he wanted the gun.

G: I don’t know who you were talking to, because I only had two pistols. I sold the one to the place on Lake Street, the Luger.

L: It might have been the berretta that I sold.

G: Yes, it was a berretta, that little .32. I thought that guy said he was from Wisconsin, that he didn’t have a Minnesota permit.

L: Yes, he said he was a deputy sheriff or something and was making a big noise. I wasn’t taking anything from anything. The man [at the police department] told me this, and that’s the way it’s going to be. But I’ll never forget the look on that old soldier’s face, the old soldier that was laughing at the expression on the policeman’s
face when I started pulling these guns out of my purse. I knew they were completely unloaded, but he didn’t. He didn’t know what was up.

DB: So when you got back home, Gerry, you said you made the readjustment okay, did you notice that your community had changed at all during the time of the war?

G: The only thing I knew was that I couldn’t get [automobile] tires.

DB: You couldn’t get tires because of the lack of rubber products.

G: I had to buy an old car. They were practically junk because they couldn’t fix them during the war. Everybody knew the guys were coming home and they were getting rid of their junk. I got this old ’36 Chevy, there was no spare tire or wheel on it. The tires were bald. I’d had a ’36 before the war and I had some tires that had blown out on me down at my mother’s house, down in southeastern Minnesota. Anyway, I had to recycle these tires, put boots on them and stuff and use them for tires. I tried to get new ones, but you couldn’t get them. One day they had in the paper, sale on tires. I went around there, the place was, people waiting outside, people inside. I finally got one tire.

DB: You got one tire?

G: I got one tire. That was it.

L: What was this for?

G: The old ’36 Chevy. Remember that time it took me three hours to get home because it had the butyl inner tubes in it? And I’d fix it, blow it up, go two blocks and it would blow on me again, and I’d fix it and go two blocks and blow.

L: That’s the kind of guy he is. He’s not a “call AAA and wait” guy.

G: Well, I finally stopped at a filling station. He had an old rubber tube that had 99 patches on it. I don’t know what, I think I gave him $.75 for it or something, which was pretty good sized in those days, and put it in, and then never had any trouble after that.

DB: So that was the only real big change that you noticed then when you came home. Did you notice the people, the community had changed at all, do you think?

G: I don’t think so.

L: Everybody’s looking for work, everybody’s looking for starting, and taking care of their families and stuff, and women coming to stay home and take care of things instead of having to go to work.
G: I went down to the unemployment office and there’s an awful lot of people there. They give me a place to go to, and I went there, and they just laughed. “That was a month or two ago that we turned that in. We’ve already filled that job.” At the unemployment office they gave me another one, and I went out, “Yes, a couple weeks ago we filled that job.” It was just, they really didn’t call in and say it was filled, or whatever. Finally I got one and it was six days a week, ten hours a day. I was doing pretty good on that for three, four months. Then they cut back down to forty hours.

DB: Then you ended up moving on to a number of different jobs after that.

G: Well, no, I stayed with that one for about two and half years.

L: The box factory?

G: No, the loaders, the machine loaders. Farm machinery loaders.

L: They had you making boxes, until you had boxes way ahead of [the production needs].

G: No, they had a guy making boxes, I filled the boxes.

DB: Gerry, the last couple questions are ones that ask you to look back on the war as a whole experience. What did the war mean for you personally at the time? In other words, what did you look on the war as? What did you think about it and feel about it when you were actually involved in it?

G: I really don’t know. Kind of an interruption in my life, but it was something that I liked at the time. I mean, going to various places and seeing various things I would never see otherwise. Get to do things I wouldn’t get to do otherwise.

DB: So there was almost an adventure element to it?

G: Yes.

DB: When you look back on it now, do you feel the same way or differently?

G: About the same. I mean it’s... look, I wasn’t in an outfit, getting shot at it or worrying about anything. I mean if I was in the infantry, or something like that, you know somebody’s over there shooting at you.

DB: Do you think the war changed you at all, spending all that time away from home and going to different places, seeing new things? Or do you think it was kind of like you said, an interruption, and you just went on?

G: (turns to Lois) Lois would be the one to answer that. Did I change any?
L: He was always awfully quiet, it's only been the last few years that he's opened up and talked about stuff like this. There's things here that I've never heard. And next year we will have been married sixty years.

DB: Why do you think that at first you just didn't want to talk about it?

G: I didn't think anybody was interested. Most guys don't talk about it, except the mouthy ones you find in a bar, a drunk or something. Then you begin to wonder, if you talked to them long enough, you find out most of what they say is a bunch of crap. (laughs)

DB: That's the last question I have, but I do want to open up this time now to ask if there's any personal memories, or any favorite stories you think should be included in this history that we haven't talked about yet.

G: (pauses three seconds) Well, we found a motorcycle in the middle of a wheat field one time and tried to start it, and it wouldn't start. I checked it over and found the pipes were burned in it or something, so I cleaned them up. There was a guy, a great big guy from Utah, he was a Mormon. He was my best buddy at that time. He was the one that got home and wrote me that he was out, and I was sitting there yet. Anyway, we'd ride this thing all over. It was a little one, two cycle thing, one cylinder. Well, it'd go forty, fifty miles per hour. And we rode all over in this thing.

Then we came, this in Germany, we came to a real steep hill one time. I don't know why we were going up it. I guess we were on some back roads, just wondering where we were. We went partway up the hill. He must have weighed 250 pounds or so. I was just a little skinny thing then. I got halfway up the hill and had to shift into second gear, a little further and it started slowing down again. I shifted into first gear and the chain broke. We were three quarters of the way up the hill. And a whole bunch of little German kids came around us. Probably around eight, ten years old. All of them chattering away in English. Perfect English. There was a little village right up the top of the hill. The whole country over there is little villages. It's not like here where they're mostly towns. There's a little village of farmers and then they go out to their fields.

DB: What were the kids saying?

G: They were just curious, wanted to know what was happening.

L: Did you have any candy for them or anything like that?

G: No, we didn't know we were stopping anyplace.

(laughter all)

L: But did they ask for anything?
G: No. They weren't little beggars, they were better than the French kids.

DB: The French kids asked a lot?

G: Some of them would. Well, the GIs were good that way, we'd get rations, we'd get so much each month. And they'd pass out. Like this guy from Utah, he didn't smoke and I smoked. So I'd get his cigarettes. If you had any left over you could sell them. But he was a Mormon, so he couldn't drink, he couldn't smoke, he couldn't do anything much. It didn't bother him a bit. After this, the motorcycle got stolen on us.

We had to leave it back, there was a woods right alongside of camp. We tried to hide it by putting branches over it and everything. But it wasn't far from where it had been in the wheat field, and evidently somebody found the tracks and took it back again. But anyway, they had three or four of them. This was an old German Army base we were in at the time. In one of the storage sheds they had three or four motorcycles. I kind of looked them over, and one looked fairly good, so we wheeled it right down in broad daylight, and down to our barracks, and into the basement. I worked on it down in there and got it running. It was going good, we had a lot of fun on that thing, riding around in the country. We hid that a little better. He was still there when I left to go up to Reims, to go home. And he was going to sell the thing. That's when he wrote me when I got home. He said it got stolen again. I didn't see it. He said it got stolen and he was home and all this and that.

There was also a car we had. I don't know if you ever saw pictures of Hitler's car. It was a Mercedes Benz. It's a big, six passenger car, and it had jump seats on it and everything. And a removable top on it, a convertible top. And what we got was, it looked just like it. It had two side mounts, had the two jumper seats, and the front and the rear seat. When you raised the hood, there was a little hydraulic pump there with bells on, you could raise any wheel you wanted for changing tires. It had a straight, eight cylinder engine, and all the wires had nice braid around them. I don't know all what it had in it, but it was a real fancy car. Now I can't remember how we got a hold of that thing. It was abandoned or something, and we got a hold of it.

Anyway, I got it running. We were out picking up a plane at that time, and for some reason we were there for a week. Whether we took our time or what. (laughs) Anyhow, we drove this thing all the way to the place. It had something on the steering wheel that you could turn. We finally found out that it said mountain gear or something like this, you could turn it, and it would get better up the mountains. You couldn't hear the engine change speed or anything. It was something with a lower gear.

Anyway, I remember we were going down a road one time. And we had the thing, six or seven guys in it, and a deer jumped across the road in front of us. The deer over there are small, only the size of goats. The driver he swerved off the road, across the field, and everybody's shooting at that poor deer. Nobody hit it. (laughs) We came to a ditch and had to stop. Then somebody came out, I don't know what they had... to pick up our mail and bring us mail, and find out something. A letter from the main base. He saw what we had on the car and he went back and blew his
mouth off. And pretty soon, an officer comes up. “You’re not supposed to have the
car.” And he took it. We found out he drove it around, for a couple of weeks, and he
burned out the clutch on it.

I fixed up another car for another officer. It was a French car, a Peugeot. This
was where the Germans had confiscated cars. They had a great big area there, and
they stripped them. So this was the one, I went over all of them. I found this one
had just the wheels missing, but everything else seemed to be all right. We found
out jeep wheels fit it. This is the warrant officer, the one that gathered stuff.
(laughs) Stuff clung to him. Anyway, he got a hold of four jeep wheels, put them on.
I took the car out and ran it around for a little while, found it was in good shape. He
took it over, and he was going to make me a staff sergeant for doing that. Then he
come around and said, “Oh we got too much rank now, we can’t get you to be a staff
sergeant.” Which was a bunch of b.s.

DB: What rank did you end up as, Gerry?

G: Just a buck sergeant. We had too much rank in our outfit, because some place
overseas we picked up a whole bunch of guys that were Regular Army [enlistees, as
opposed to draftees]. They were due to get out when the war started. So some of
them had close to twenty years in. They were due to get out and here they were all
sergeants, or master sergeants, or something. And that just kept the rest of us down,
we couldn’t go anyplace. We had one master sergeant there –

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

G: – he was a master sergeant just because he’d been in so long, except he wasn’t
very bright. He was going to try to be a warrant officer, which is kind of in between.
They’re an officer, but not a true officer. And he went and took the test, and I guess
he failed miserably. He couldn’t do a thing. These regular Army guys, they didn’t
want to do anything. They were mad because they were supposed to be out, and
here they’re caught in another war. There were several of them that came from
Hawaii.

DB: From Pearl Harbor?

G: No, they weren’t at Pearl Harbor. I know one of them said he was a gunner. At
that time they had these biplanes with the two seats in the rear, gun that swung
around. He said he was a rear gunner. When the war started he was up in the air.
But he wasn’t at Pearl Harbor. One of the other guys was from Panama. They were
from all over. Regular Army and had been in so many years. I guess in peacetime
they didn’t really do that much.

DB: Did you think most of the guys were okay with their place in the war? Or were a
lot of guys kind of upset that they were over there do you think?
G: Most of the guys seemed to take it all right. Something you had to do. I mean, what choice did you have? You were there, and that’s the way it was.

DB: Were most of the guys you were with drafted, or some of them guys that had enlisted too?

G: Mostly they were drafted. In fact we had guys that shouldn’t have been in the Army. We had one guy in our barracks, or in our tent rather I should say, that had one eye. He was from New York, he was approximately forty years old. He had this patch on his eye. He said when he was young, he got in a fight one time, a bottle broke on the floor, and he got knocked down and the bottle, the glass in his eye, and took it out.

And when I went in, we had another guy from a little town up here in Minnesota. He went down, I guess he was down in Florida with us, and then we went someplace else. He was still there. He was forty-four years old, then they started this law that at forty-two or over you could get out. This guy had a club foot, he couldn’t march, he was over forty-two, and I figured something else was wrong with him. Now he thought he could get out automatically, but you had to ask for it. Anyway, the last thing he stayed in the camp, and then he moved. They said, as long as he didn’t ask for it, he had to stay in the Army. He said he couldn’t march or do anything. They said, “Well, clean latrines or something.” That gets you mad, something like that.

DB: They kept a lot of people in, then?

G: A lot of guys they did. And even when I went off to Fort Snelling, to get in the Air Force. Right in front of me was a guy, his whole backbone was flipped from one end to the other, just a big raw mass there, where he’d been operated on in the last year. And he was walking kind of leaned back, and just staggering walking, and they actually put him through the whole physical. Should have booted him out right away. It was pitiful what they did. This guy didn’t get in, I know that, but...

DB: Interesting. Are there any other little pieces that you wanted to add?

G: Well, there would be other things I’d remember, but not right now.

DB: I guess I’ll bring the interview to the end and thank you very much for doing this with me. I enjoyed it.

G: Well, another time, we were in a barracks at one place, and this was a concrete barracks, it was a German barracks. And something had blown off the end of it. I don’t know how far it went from there. But it had just blown off the ends, we were right on the end of it, it didn’t bother us any. It was concrete and it was safe.

DB: Never knew where you were going to end up one night to the next, huh?
G: There was nothing that was going to fall down or anything. That’s where we had an electrician in the outfit. He was a radio man, an electrician. He was one of them, I guess they call them geeks or whatever. He knew his radios upside down and backwards and everything else. And the Germans used, we got sixty cycle current, and they used 400 cycle, which our things can’t operate on. Anyway, he took this great big searchlight generator, had a big six cylinder engine on it, and a huge generator, and he rewired that thing until we could operate all our stuff on it, our lights and everything else. We towed that generator around with us afterward. Besides that, we just had a little thing, and if you overloaded it, the lights blew.

There’s a lot of little things, like when we hit France, you know those gliders that came in [with the Allied invasion of France in June 44]. We had so much junk that we had trouble in the trucks, packing it in. We went and made a couple of trailers using the wheels from the gliders. We had a lot of guys that were mechanics, and electricians, and machinists.

Also, we used to take the English coin, the schilling. I don’t know what it was, ten schilling or what, it was a little bigger than a half dollar. They used to sit there and tap those things all day long with a little hammer. They would curl out, and they’d put them in the lathe and cut the center out. And here you have this genuine pure sliver ring, with all the words and letters and everything else on the rim of it. They had a lot of those. And all the .50 caliber cartridges, I still got one someplace, we’d make lighters out of those.

DB: So you have lots of little trinkets sitting around the house someplace.

G: I know I got one of those lighters. I don’t know where it is.

DB: Well thank you, thank you very much for all those stories.

G: You’re welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW